

# Sculptural narratives



Sculptor Xanthe Somers creates vessels that draw inspiration from Zimbabwean postcolonial culture. In discussion with *Annie Le Santo*, she explores the undercurrents behind her brightly coloured work



**LEFT:** Somers with *In Bad Taste* **ABOVE:** *The hand that rocks the cradle* (detail)



ABOVE LEFT: *The Carpet Shop* ABOVE RIGHT: *Woven Tales Stand Tall* RIGHT: *In Bad Taste*

At first glance the large-scale sculptures of artist Xanthe Somers extend a light-hearted and playful greeting to their viewer. They demand attention through their exaggerated size, looping woven sections, and use of found materials such as stones and textiles. However, once they have sparked your curiosity, upon further inspection they reveal inner depths, subtle undercurrents of the greater issues they have been made to tackle.

Postcolonial theory is the central pillar of Somers' work. Having grown up in suburban Harare, the capital city of Zimbabwe, she describes themes encountered during her childhood as pivotal to her future creative practice. Her mother is a biology teacher, and her late father owned an internet company. 'I had a lovely upbringing and probably grew up in quite an affluent bubble,' she explains. 'However, I also lived in Harare under a dictatorship and during a time of hyperinflation. There were ideas about society back then that still exist now. Trying to understand my identity and colonial ancestry has informed the way I work today.'

Somers speaks of the lack of industry and high rates of unemployment in Zimbabwe during her childhood. She was a creative child; interested in ballet, making clothes, taking photographs and drawing. But without mass examples of people leading traditional career paths, she felt left to imagine what kind of jobs were a possibility.

Encouraged to pursue her passions by her family, Somers studied Fine Art at Michaelis University in Cape Town and majored in printmaking. 'I was at university during the *Rhodes Must Fall* protest, which was extremely influential to me,' she says. 'People were reassessing everything; how the textbooks were all written by white colonists and how there were sculptures of Cecil Rhodes (English mining magnate and former Prime Minister of the Cape Colony) around the university. A huge shift began in people's thinking regarding decolonising academia and the country.'

#### KNOWLEDGE & CREATIVITY

Her passion for art started to be imbued with these concepts, intertwining in a way that would shape and solidify her creative endeavours into her work that we see today. Fuelled with the momentum of her time studying in Cape Town, Somers moved to London to expand her knowledge at Goldsmiths University, where she enrolled on a Master's degree in Postcolonial Culture. She has lived in London since, returning to Zimbabwe around once a year, occasionally for artist residencies.

At Goldsmiths, Somers immersed herself in theoretical studies, finding them enriching and rewarding in new ways. Before long though, she began to yearn for a creative outlet in her life again. 'I was living in Peckham at the



*Trying to understand my identity and colonial ancestry has informed the way I work today*

time, down the road from the open-access ceramics studio the Kiln Rooms. It was there I first encountered clay,' she says. 'I loved it. It was so freeing to be amongst other makers and create whatever I liked outside of academia.'

Alongside her studies, Somers was also employed at an art gallery. In 2019, her degree approached its end and she found herself at a crossroads, contemplating whether to persist in her gallery work or pursue her own creative career. Upon consideration, she recognised that the activity she most enjoyed during that time was sculpting with clay at the Kiln Rooms. 'The ceramic sculptures I was creating were not constructed in a traditional manner, and they became so large that they were too dangerous to fire in the kilns within a shared studio,' Somers explains. 'As a result, I decided to start my own studio in Peckham with my own kiln and I haven't looked back since then.'

She is entirely self-taught, making her swift success in the five years that followed even more impressive. Today she works full-time as a sculptor, creating striking ceramic vessels that have garnered attention at renowned global art fairs such as *Collect*. In 2023, the V&A Museum acquired one of them (*Fruits of our Forefathers*) for its permanent collection. 'I think being self-taught has been beneficial to me because I didn't begin with preconceived notions of my medium's limitations,' she says. 'Some professionals may look at my work and the temperatures I fire at, and think: "Gosh, this isn't right!". But for me the journey of trial and error has been the best way to learn.'

### THOUGHTFUL PERSPECTIVES

Somers' goal with ceramics has always been to create work that is 'big and brash' but embedded with meaning. She purposefully chooses 'happy' colours and shapes to draw viewers in, with the hope that their attention will be held a little bit longer. 'The concepts I hope people see behind my work stem from my identity as a female Zimbabwean artist with a colonial heritage, interrogating the legacy of colonialism in Southern Africa,' she says. 'I am interested in how many of the notions introduced during the colonial era persist in contemporary society. In Zimbabwe, there is still an ideal of sophistication and refinement, viewed through a Christian colonial lens. I am intrigued by how this shapes perceptions of beauty and value.'

The timing of her discovery of clay, which coincided with being immersed in these ideas at Goldsmiths, certainly impacted Somers' own aesthetic approach. She has never been drawn to creating functional pieces or following traditional ceramics traditions. From the beginning, her intention has always been to continue examining the politics and culture of her home country. 'I was taken in by the malleability of clay, which makes it such an incredible medium to express things,' she says. 'It made complete sense for me to adopt it as my chosen material.'

Somers cleverly employs iconography, patterns and text on the surface of her work. She incorporates a weaving technique to evoke the appearance of woven baskets, and

often combines the ceramic elements with various found materials. Using stoneware and cranks, she meticulously hand-coils her pieces, subjecting them to multiple firings depending on her use of underglazes. Despite the complexity of the messages conveyed through her work, Somers' creative process remains organic and relatively spontaneous. She forgoes preliminary sketching, instead beginning with a concept that is in her mind only.

'Take the piece featuring cherries, *Fruits of our Forefathers*, for instance,' she says. 'It addresses the perpetuation of prejudice across generations.' Delving deeper, she explains her inclusion of green wax fabric, commonly associated with Zimbabwe but originally of Dutch origin, igniting a discourse on colonial legacies. 'I was considering how post-independence, a significant portion of Zimbabwean land remained in the hands of white farmers. It raises questions about the selective adoption – or "cherry picking" – of societal ideals and who holds the power to make such choices.'

### CLAY CONDUIT

Each of Somers' creations contain profound layers of insight into the subjects she passionately explores. When she discusses her work, it is evident that she is wholly immersed in her field of study, dedicated to channelling her thoughts through clay.

Having accomplished significant career milestones in a relatively short time frame, Somers is always contemplating her next steps. Her focus remains on scale, as she is drawn to the masculinity associated with larger works. Explaining her reasoning, she elaborates on additional themes prevalent in her work, which often revolve around gender-based labour, mending, weaving, fixing, and childcare. Presenting these themes within a traditionally masculine context creates a thought-provoking juxtaposition.

As she continues to push boundaries, both in scale and thematic depth, Somers remains committed to challenging perspectives and sparking meaningful conversations. For the immediate future, she is working on an exciting upcoming project involving showcasing her pieces at Harewood House in Leeds. The building's rich history, steeped in the legacy of both the sugar trade and the slave trade, with its opulent, gold-gilded interiors, is bound to provide a compelling backdrop for her work.

Somers' dedicated journey through the intricate landscapes of postcolonial identity and her personal artistic expression unfolds within each of her vibrant pieces. From her upbringing in Zimbabwe to her self-taught success in ceramics, her work demonstrates how clay can serve as a poignant medium for the profound exploration of cultural legacies and societal narratives...

For more details visit [xanthesomers.com](http://xanthesomers.com) Harewood Biennial 2024: Create/Elevate, Harewood House,

Images: courtesy of the artist

