

The rise of the south

African Art | The Cape Town-based gallery

Southern Guild is exhibiting 16 South

African sculptors and designers at its first

London outing. *By Emma Crichton-Miller*

South African artists are in focus in London this autumn, with a solo exhibition of the sculptor and painter Mary Sibande at Somerset House in October and the imminent arrival of the Johannesburg-based Goodman Gallery in London's Cork Street. And PAD London fair is welcoming South Africa's foremost design gallery, Southern Guild.

Founded in 2008 by Trevyn and Julian McGowan, it is Africa's only gallery for homegrown collectable design. From its smart space in Cape Town's Silo district, near the Thomas Heatherwick-designed Zeitz Museum of Contemporary Art Africa (MOCAA), the gallery has supported some of the most inventive limited edition and one-off craft and design on the continent.

Since 2011, Southern Guild has exhibited at the Design Miami and Design Miami/Basel fairs, as well as at the Salon Art + Design in New York. It has collaborated with international museums and commercial galleries, and first contributed works to Christie's annual design auction in London in 2015. This, however, is the gallery's first formal outing in the UK capital.

"We thought that this was the ideal moment," Trevyn McGowan says. "As things become so conflicted in the northern hemisphere" she suggests that "people are more open-minded about other cultures." She adds that Cape Town has seen unparalleled influxes of foreign collectors, dealers and curators over the past two years, drawn by the opening of Zeitz MOCAA, in 2017, and the Norval Foundation, in 2018; these visitors have discovered the city's well-established galleries and boosted "the global contextualisation of the work".

For McGowan, "The change is very tangible." About Southern Guild, in particular, she explains, "For 10 years we have been mentoring, developing, exploring things with over 100 artists, architects and jewellers. Now, we are very clear about our mandate."

The gallery has 25 artists and 13 with whom they work more loosely; 16 will have work on show with the gallery at PAD London. "[Our artists] produce work that is very personal, very visceral," McGowan continues. "Everything is handmade. Each object can be plumbed deep." She cites the Cape Town blacksmith Conrad Hicks's quirky



Clockwise from above: Justine Mahoney's 'Sleeping Samurai'; Dokter and Misses' 'Kassena Isibheqe' server; Andile Dyalvane



Jaw dropping: the South African designer Porky Hefer's surreal leather bull has a nestlike space for a human to curl up inside its mouth — Hayden Phipps

"Toolmaker's-Server", made of hand-hammered cast iron, copper, brass and high-carbon steel — "a very anthropological, experimental work".

Many of the Southern Guild pieces that will be shown at PAD are new. The South African designer Porky Hefer will show a striking, surreal black, white and red leather bull, which is part of his series of sculptural seating pods. It has a nestlike space for a human to curl up inside the bull's red mouth. The Kenyan-born sculptor and designer Stanislaw Trzebinski's spiky, bronze "Archeoflavus Tripartitus (Turin Pattern Coffee Table — Large)", inspired by exotic sea creatures, will contrast with the sleek, sexy "Nwa-Mulamula" chaise, the first furniture piece created by Rich Mnsi, one of South Africa's rising talents in the fashion world.

The Cape Town-based artist Justine Mahoney will show her latest bronze figure, "Sleeping Samurai". It was created, she explains, "to explore that in-between stage between being a child and being an adult". As a white woman who grew up in a rapidly changing Africa, she draws both on African myths and imagery and on other cultures.

The multidisciplinary design company Dokter and Misses, run by husband-and-wife team Adriaan Hugo and Katy Taplin, will show their subtle "Kassena Isibheqe" server, inspired by the adobe structures of the Kassena people of Burkina Faso, but covered in poems written by Johannesburg-based poet, Kgotsa Pieter David Maphalla, in the pan-southern African writing system, Isibheqe Sohlamvu. "Johannesburg has always been part of our work," Taplin says, "and mostly we thrive in this sometimes difficult environment."

The ceramic artist Andile Dyalvane is

known for his terracotta stools, vessels and objects, in inventive forms that recall the animals, people and architecture of the amaXhosa, glazed in striking primary coloured patterns inspired by ritual face painting and body scarification. Born in 1978 in a village in the rural Eastern Cape province, Andile grew up farming. He remembers sliding down the eroded river banks into the muddy river when he was supposed to be herding cattle, and using the clay to make



models of his cows. A gift for drawing won him a place at art college in Cape Town, before he gained a National Diploma in Ceramic Design from Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University in Port Elizabeth.

"As soon as I touch clay, I have these crazy emotions which take me back to when I was a child," he says. "But at university I was able also to study deeply the artefacts and objects in museums, which I had not encountered as a child."

This combination of his powerful connection with his Xhosa culture — which is reflected in the titles of his works — with a studied understanding of ceramic history, offers some explanation for his pots' expressive vitality. He will be showing a series of four vessels made during a recent residency at the Leach pottery in St Ives, Cornwall. There, he says, he had time to explore the long-

held idea of making work directly about those eroded river banks of his childhood, sheer walls of cracked and layered clay. Partly inspired also by the Cornish landscape, with its "enchanted coastal rock formations", and partly by the red stoneware clay and traditional Tenmoku and Shino glazes used in St Ives, he has produced a series of whirling, cracked and wrapped pots that have a wild, dynamic energy.

One piece nearly got away: "As I was making this pot, I had a desired form but the clay and the unfamiliar environment (the cold, the wooden floor) meant I lost control, and it developed these beautiful crags. I was astonished by these movements." Dyalvane has called it "Umwonyo", meaning a deep crevice in isiXhosa. While it was born from his memories of Africa, he tells me, "it shows the landscape of Cornwall."