

# COURTESANS, COO-COO CLOCKS, DANCERS AND ANGELS

Joy Savage reviews Ceramics and Paintings by Tania Babb

*Lady and brown dog painting and ceramic figurine.*



*3 Women and houses painting and ceramic figurines.*



It was the rabbi-turned-author, Chaim Potok, who once alleged that Life is much too serious not to laugh at it. In a world where we are constantly beset with Aids, crime statistics, rocketing prices and the shenanigans of politicians, one has to lean on one's sense of humour more and more.

Probably, many of us are no strangers to the delightful little sculptures of Tania Babb - mature ladies with child-bearing hips and fish-net stockings, riding on the backs of elephants and seeming to cry: "Wheeeee! Aint life a gas!"

Many have made acquaintance with these figurines and found their merriment and joie de vivre most attractive. Their small scale makes them very accessible to the general public, and their appeal is reflected in the number of 'red dots' that are on display. Tania's exhibition at Art.B, which was opened by Jo-Anne Duggan on 23rd July 2008, in the Bellville Library complex, is no exception.

There is a whimsicality in the mixed media pieces, where a small sculpture is inset in an alcove in acrylic-on-board wall pieces. The sculptures echo, in three-dimensional miniature, the theme of the paintings into which they are set. The spirit and style of these works recall Marc Chagall, and more recently, some of the lithographs of Pieter van der Westhuizen, as well as certain Eastern European art. The themes are those of a woman in her domestic arena, e.g. "Lady and Brown Dog", where a small dog of indeterminate breed (probably brought home by a child saying "Mummy-mummy-Debbie's-dog's-had-puppies-and-can-we-have-one-pleeeeeeeeee?") is jumping up and down demanding to be fed or patted. Likewise there is a frequently depicted somnolent cat which distils the essence of the domestic feline so succinctly.

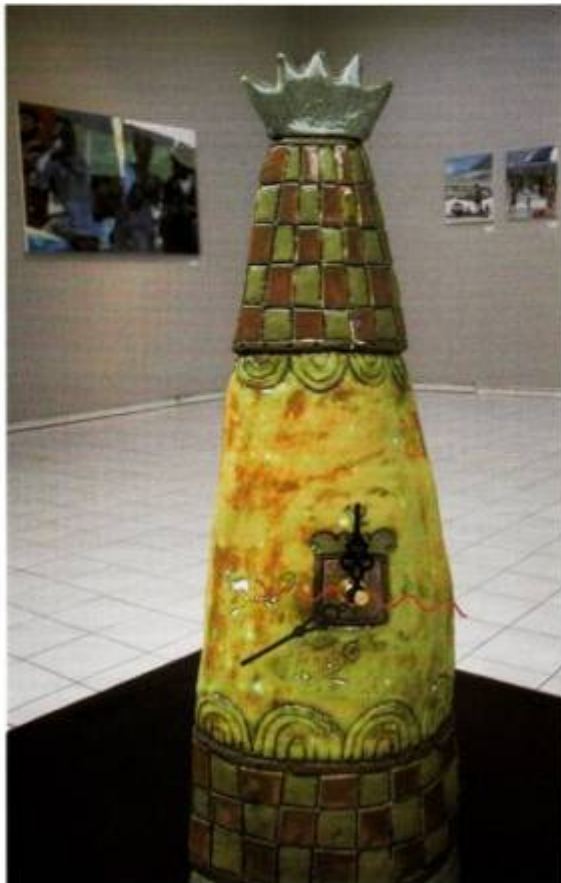
As a single parent, Tania is very aware of the importance of her women friends, who are similarly balancing PTA meetings, school milk-runs, supervising a household, nursing babies, feeding the goldfish and trying to earn a living - motherly, mature women who yet can transcend the dross and have fun - as depicted in "Women and Houses" and "Amanda and Eve" - other mixed-media pieces.

Every artwork is something of a self-portrait, and meeting with Tania Babb thoroughly endorses one's view - the flowing red hair, the ebullient demeanor, the essential lightness of being and the all-encompassing matriarch - her eager willingness to make time for my visit, prefaced with: "We'll have to hurry, I've got to take my daughter to ballet". This is the spirit of the earth-mother which so infuses Tania's work.

Apparently, Tania was very athletic at school, and this energy is now funneled into her creativity, and the little dancing figures on exhibition reflect the spirit of big-hearted women worldwide, who can apply themselves to living a joyous and energetic life, despite being beyond the first flush of youth.

Environmental issues might be touched upon, as in "Lady and Blue Whale", but this does not become heavily-laden.

Amanda and Eve  
painting and ceramic figurines.



This is the camaraderie of nature's creatures as partners, not their endangerment by humanity.

The sculptures have a sinuous balance, where the stripes on fabric, flowing hair and the markings on the tabby cat endorse each other within their domestic context, as well as supporting the form. The "Window Women", being small free-standing sculptures, are also appealing, yet reflect how box-framed and circumscribed a mother's life can be.

I felt a little uneasy about the tall clocks, despite Tania's explaining to me how the concept of Time impinges itself strongly on her life. Unfortunately for ceramicists, the medium of clay is often chained, in the public mind, to its utilitarian origins. I understand the attempt to render these sculptures 'useful' with the addition of a timepiece in their midriffs, but it sometimes struck me as a little arbitrary. The pitfall ceramic artists often fall into is the feeling that they have to make their works useful as well as decorative. The small, chunky little alarm clocks were better integrated, as their whole form followed their function.

On the other hand, the fish candelabra combine practicality with aesthetics very well. The row of little receptacles for the tea-lights along the back of the long narrow structure of the fish render the sculpture ideal as a central table decoration, and would grace any festival feast.

It was warming to see a display of works by Tania's students, Lindiwe Sotashe and Akhona Nqenqa, and although one expects works at this stage to be derivative, it is a wonderful opportunity for students to breathe in the heady air of exhibitions and stimulate their own creativity. These students, very wisely, have drawn on their own cultural experience to produce some truly delightful little figures.

Also exhibited at Art.B is a group of oil paintings – "Spirit" by Benjamin Mitchley and the water-colours of Andrew Wyeth.



Above, Fish candelabra  
Below, Dancing figures,  
Left, Clock

