

Cameron Platter: *Hell Was Full So I Came Back*, May 6 – June 17, 2023

Lundgren Gallery, Palma de Mallorca, Spain

Lundgren Gallery is pleased to present *Hell Was Full So I Came Back*, a new solo exhibition of tapestries and ceramics by internationally renowned South African artist Cameron Platter. The starting point for the exhibition, his first solo with the gallery, is a series of terse and sometimes jokey slogans that Platter appropriated from vinyl bumper stickers. Appropriation, along with collage, has been central to Platter's methodology as an artist both interested in, and committed to, translating everyday ciphers of global consumer society into an enigmatic personal language.

For this new body of work, the artist has migrated found words and symbols onto his meticulously crafted ceramics and collaboratively produced tapestries. His vibrantly coloured designs often retain the vernacular typefaces of his source material. Platter's interest in bumper stickers especially dates back more than a decade, to a road trip he made from Cape Town, where he studied fine art, to his current home in the Indian Ocean port city of Durban. He began to assemble a personal archive of examples. "They are a very direct way of communicating," says Platter of this uniquely twentieth-century visual argot.

Bumper stickers are a by-product of advances in WW2 military printing and communication strategies. As a messaging device, bumper stickers have proven useful in conveying a range of social, religious, political and lifestyle allegiances. For this reason they have frequently infuriated authorities. In 1987, in response to the apartheid government's detention of vast numbers of black youths under the age of 18, bumper stickers reading "Free the Children" started to appear on cars. They were promptly banned. Apartheid censors were thoroughly humourless and outlawed many bumper stickers, including ones reading, "Save gas, fart in a jar" and "When God made men drivers she was only joking".

This social history, while important, is not what motivates Platter's transformative practice using bumper stickers as reference material. As is evident in the phrases appearing on his tapestries and ceramics, the artist is drawn to speech that attempts to

establish connection through laughter or inspiration. Although posed in declaratory language, his tapestries also ask questions of the viewer. Can mawkish and degraded words wrested from the agitation of traffic – for instance, “love” or “magic” – communicate something beyond mere sloganeering? Can their essence be recovered? Platter holds this drive in tension with other, less earnest enthusiasms. Why, one is prompted to ask following an encounter with two of his new works, are Italian pastas innately funny? Is it the absurdity of reading “cannelloni” on a ceramic vessels and “lasagne” on a tapestry?

The five tapestries on view in *Hell Was Full So I Came Back* were made in collaboration with weavers at the ELC Art and Craft Centre at Rorke’s Drift. This pioneering school for black artists was founded in 1962 in rural KwaZulu-Natal and is located about 250km northwest of Platter’s home in Durban. Swedish artists Peder and Ulla Gowenius were instrumental in determining the school’s early programme, which from the outset incorporated weaving. Platter has been collaborating with the rural women who currently head up the weaving studio for nearly 15 years. His first collaborations involved producing tapestries referencing the covers of inter-racial porn films distributed by DVD.

The production of a tapestry can take up to three months. Platter will provide the basic cartoon for his tapestry, as well as specify the exact colours to be used – he keeps an archive of dyed wools from the weaving studio at Rorke’s Drift in his Durban studio. Each work is the labour of one weaver. While the design of the tapestries is prescribed, and partly resembles the raucous desktop-publishing language of South Africa’s high street, the process of individual making allows for a measure of interpretation. Platter, who grew up with Rorke’s Drift textiles and prints in his family home, speaks appreciatively of the freeform narratives created by weavers from the art centre.

Platter’s pervasive use of coarse humour might be at odds with the rural and Christian parables that have historically been the stock in trade of Rorke’s Drift artists, but it also recovers a foundational ambition. “For people that are oppressed, it is important to find words to express what you want,” said Peder Gowenius in 2018 interview

recalling his time in the 1960s at Rorke's Drift. "It is the same with laughter – you must never lose your laughter."

The title of Platter's exhibition, *Hell Was Full So I Came Back*, derives from one of the 12 ceramic vessels on view. The words and slogans appearing on the surface of his clay forms also derive from bumper stickers. Platter started working with clay while still a resident of Cape Town in the early 2000s. He took private lessons with rich white housewives. "The class was super relaxing," he says. "It was a complete tonic and antidote to the contemporary art world. As in my tapestries, there is substantial evidence of the hand in my ceramics. I coil, glaze and fire each ceramic piece. It is a slow process of reveal, and the outcome is often very primitive and crude. The thread throughout my work is that of an amateur gone crazy."

Sean O'Toole