

# Jennings Kerr

Maricelle Olivier  
*Quiet Company*

## *Somewhere Deep Inside*

There is a storied history of basketry and woven textile in African countries. These skills and processes have been passed down generations from mother to daughter in different tribes and are integral to these cultures for their symbolic meaning as well as their utility value. The contemporary baskets still possess the same significance however they have also become a means of income, social empowerment for woman in the community and have garnered an appreciation for the skill and technique required to produce such beautiful vessels. The processes involved in weaving these objects are sometimes carried out by multiple generations of a family and this experience ties these families histories into the objects. Working with repeated hand gestures has enabled Maricelle Olivier to contemplate her place in the world, unpack her cultural identity and to fold periods of time in her life together. The surfaces are intricate and highly detailed in a medium that requires great skill and control through the various firing, and glazing stages. These technical proficiencies are a wonder, however the beauty for me lies in how this sculpting and glazing is able to create work that brings the rich traditions of ceramic and woven basketry together in a conversation of geographic dislocation. These crafts are bound with each other and bridge the Australian landscape and the artist's South African heritage. I feel the lines trace around the globe like pots and plot her journey, they act as portals to her homeland. This process reflects a childhood spent searching for sea urchins in rock pools, exploring the vibrancy of the marketplaces and visiting family members in other parts of her homeland.

'Quiet Company' as a show looks at the importance of family and companionship, the ceramic vessels contain stories of the past and seek to help the artist with dislocation and self-identification. Continuing to speak Afrikaans with her family as well as using it as a title system in her art practice, creates a means of remaining actively connected to the Afrikaans culture. The artist emigrated to Australia in 2007 and has since remained in contact with many family members still in South Africa while also establishing a new life and culture in Australia. At a younger age while in South Africa, Olivier would frequently visit the Kruger National Park and explore the patterns and colour found in the wild. Many years later and in the Australian landscape, Olivier began to notice similarities with these earlier experiences in South Africa and this flared up nostalgia for her childhood. These ceramics are a means of exploring this connection and a literal representation of her multi-cultural identity. The work *A Dazzle*, 2021 is a brilliant optical experience that mimics the movement and pattern of a herd of zebras in their confusing camouflage. This piece is able to sign personal history while exploring notions of companionship in nature. Here the pattern is by necessity and in repetition works in order to disorient predators on the plains. The grouping of *Groen Pamboentjies (Green Sea Urchins)*, 2021 is connected to the artist surveying rock pools with her family as a kid. The hand glazed and etched vessels once again mirror the surface patterning while the hand coiled ceramic speaks to the complex plate formed protective shell. Olivier would spend many hours trying to find intact shells and these memories are deeply rooted.

Whether it is pots, carved timber fertility figures, or the great ceremonial masks that inspired Picasso, Matisse and many others, it is clear that modern art has a connection with African artefact. The objects were part of the daily lives, rituals and ceremonial practices of African tribes and it is this utility and story telling that charges them with their significance. Maricelle Olivier's contemporary ceramic works are more complex in the way they draw from personal history and memory as well as offering a commentary of one craft medium through another. Olivier is able to pull the viewer into these objects through both form and surface treatment. The intricate lace like slip glazing is laborious and has developed through the use of a slip trail tool that allows the artist to lay very fine line work that is intentionally varied in order to give the patterns a dynamic energy. The vibrancy and consistencies in palette across groupings of works shows the skill and confidence of Olivier in the surface treatment of the work. There is an elegance and simplicity of form that allows for the skins of the sculptures to voice themselves. This contrast of form and surface is at the core of what makes these works so sophisticated. Colour and adornment are difficult to operate within sculpture and can often interrupt form. Here the artist is able to successfully marry them with equal significance.

As a child Maricelle Olivier would explore market places with her family and she was bowled over by the vibrancy, the colours and smell, the history and representation of culture. These places were magical for her and helped build her own associations and cultural identity. The memories ingrained in her have helped to shape the woman and artist she has become. I think this gallery room in her mind can be stripped bare of its geography and transported in time back to her childhood. The wondrous ceramics placed on plinths with their companions can be her story to connect to loved ones and her homeland. These hand worked surfaces are beautiful and intricate but their interest for me lies in how they are able to look to the past and to bind mediums together while helping build a future and a new cultural identity.