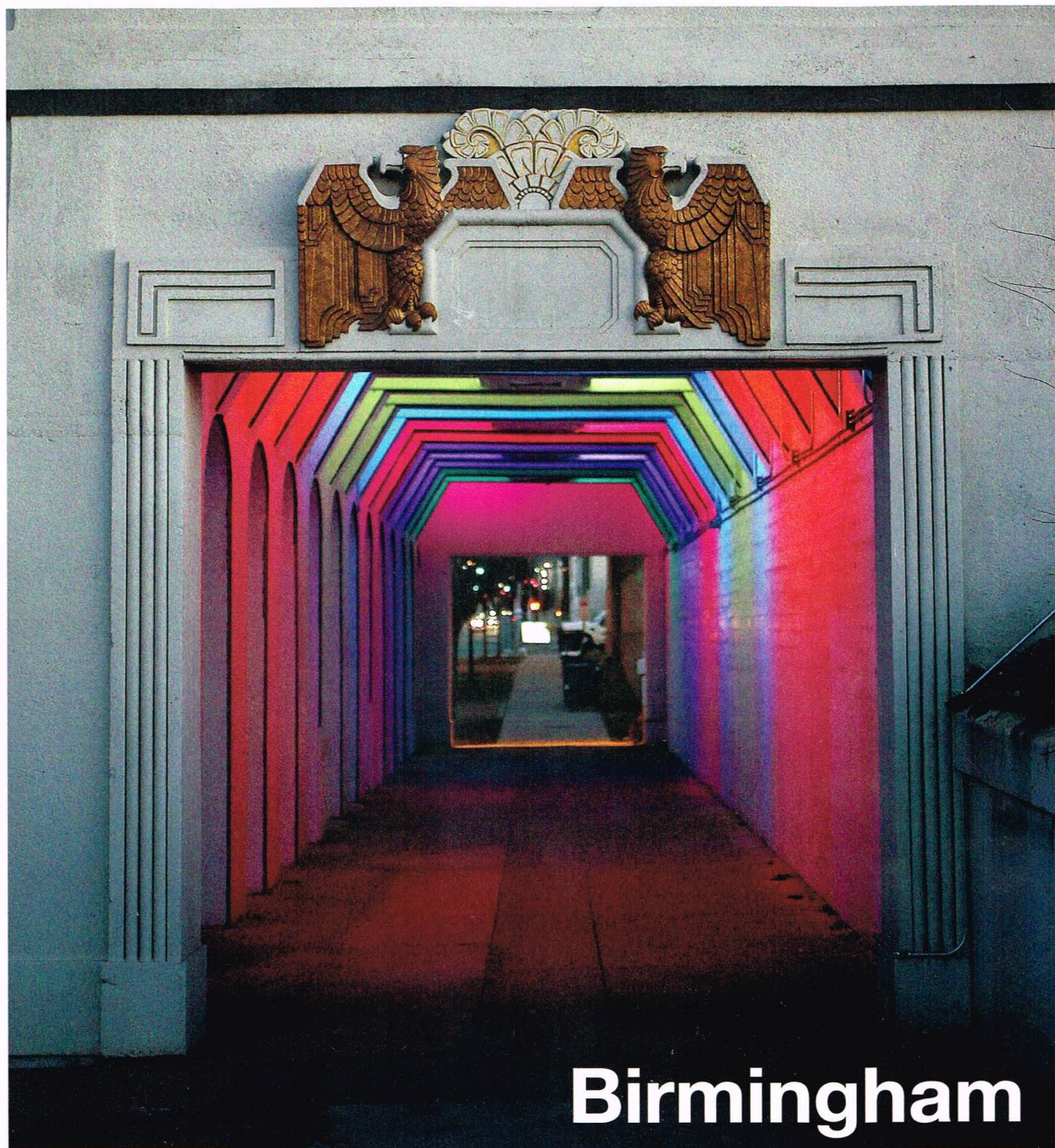


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R ROOTS & ENOWN

Antoinette Badenhorst left her home in South Africa to put down roots in Mississippi. In the process, she became recognized as one of the top ceramic artists in the country.

By Natalie Richardson

Fudge is to cooking as porcelain is to ceramics. It's not exactly the first analogy that comes to mind when thinking of clay, but for Antoinette Badenhorst it's an apt description of what she calls the "dance of the diva."

For over 30 years, Antoinette has worked as a potter. For much

of that time, she has worked with porcelain, a material and ceramic style considered by many to be one of the most difficult. But for Antoinette, it's simply a relationship of give and take. Like fudge, you have to know the exact time to take it off the stove, or else it will fall apart.

"The Diva is demanding," she said. "She wants what she wants at the right time."

But if you learn her demands, the results can be breathtaking, and for the Badenhorsts in particular, the result can also be a new home.

Antoinette and Koos Badenhorst moved from South Africa to Saltillo, Mississippi, in 1999, with nothing but their three daughters and a few boxes.

"On the first night, we literally slept on just mattresses, and the TV box became our coffee table," she said.





While Koos worked at Lane Furniture in the I.T. department, Antoinette traded her pottery skills for space to continue the art she had learned in South Africa. To stay in the United States, they were faced with the task of obtaining a green card.

The application process is long, difficult and expensive. Many immigrants use their employers to apply, but the Badenhorsts took a unique approach. As their immigration lawyer explained, if they could prove Antoinette was among

the top 10 percent of ceramic artists in the country, the government would grant permanent residency to her and her family.

After two applications, she obtained permanent residency for herself and her family for her “extraordinary ability in the field of ceramics.” It was an achievement she never thought was within reach, she said. But since then, Antoinette’s work has continued to make a name for itself.

She has gone on to be featured in shows and exhibits across the world,

win awards, teach workshops at home and abroad, and most recently, be nominated for the prestigious International Design Award in 2014.

She says it’s her passion that makes her art and teaching career so successful. Creating porcelain is about energy and movement, she said. In South Africa and during the early years in the United States, she drew inspiration from the rhythms of Africa. The running of a giraffe or the tapping of an elephant’s foot became the lines and shapes for her porcelain.

Gradually, the movement of Africa in her work simply became the movement of nature. And with her shift in inspiration came a huge shift in technique. In 2005, Antoinette switched from pit-fired porcelain to translucent porcelain.

As an established artist, the change was risky, she said. It was like a woman cutting her long, beautiful hair off, or a well-known opera singer switching to the world of country, she said. There was a chance the skill and name she had acquired as a pit fire artist would not translate over to translucency.

But the risk has been worth it, she said. The higher difficulty of translucent porcelain has pushed her skills as an artist. In return, she's pushed the limits of the medium.

Many professional artists the Badenhorsts come in contact with don't believe what Antoinette does is possible, Koos said. But the secret is simple. She has just mastered porcelain. She knows when the clay needs more water and when it should be allowed to dry. In the higher temperatures required for translucent porcelain firing, a deft hand is needed to keep the vessel from falling over.

Fond of analogies, the artist compares the molding process to keeping an alcoholic in check. Porcelain is addicted to water, she said. But if you give her too much, she becomes drunk and starts to topple over. The molding of porcelain is made even more difficult by the fact that in order to achieve the beautiful translucency of Badenhorst's pieces, she must make the vessels' sides very thin.

The glazes of color, ranging from light grass greens to bright peaches, glow from the inside out whenever light hits the ceramics. Her recent work resembles the delicate petals of an upturned lily or tulip. But in actuality, the shapes represent something more precious.

If you look closely, she said, the gentle curves and arches are arms reaching out to one another. They are people supporting and touching other people. In an abstract way, it's a tribute to the home they have found in Mississippi.

Last year, they became citizens



of America. But immigrating to a new country was an unsettling and sometimes humiliating experience, she said. You leave your home language, culture and family. Even the difference in food is disturbing. But the biggest thing they take away from the experience is the kindness and hospitality they found in Mississippi. At every step of the way, they had support from the people they met in Mississippi.

Sometimes it takes moving halfway across the world to find your home.

But when you find it, you know it fits. "Mississippi became home for us," she said. ●

Handiwork

Antoinette and Koos Badenhorst work in their Saltillo home to produce and promote Antoinette's pottery. *Photos by Lauren Wood*