



# Strauss & Co



**JOHANNESBURG AUCTION WEEK  
A CENTURY OF CHANGE**

**PERFECTLY IMPERFECT**  
Ceramic Sculpture by Hylton Nel  
and Nico Masemola

Tuesday, 9 November 2021, 3:00 pm  
Strauss & Co, Johannesburg

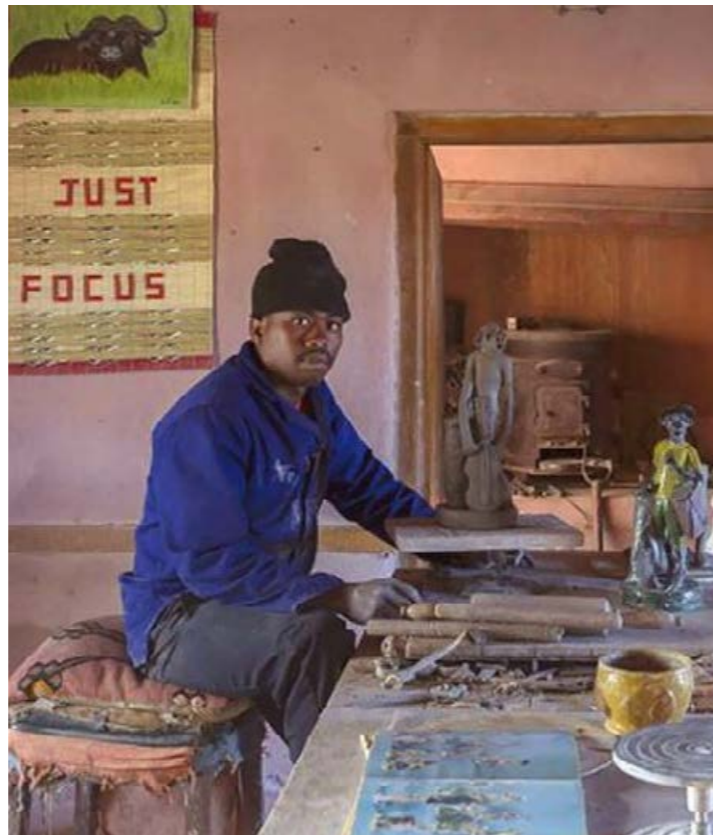
Live Virtual Auction  
[www.straussart.co.za](http://www.straussart.co.za)

Lots 221–271

LEFT  
Lot 239 Hylton Nel *Male and Female Green Cats* (detail)



Hylton Nel



Nico Masemola



## PERFECTLY IMPERFECT

### Ceramic Sculpture by Hylton Nel and Nico Masemola

The ceramic sculptures by Hylton Nel and his mentee, Nico Masemola, that appear on the Strauss *Perfectly Imperfect* auction in Johannesburg on 9 November, attest to each artist/potter's individual genius, and the way they are both able to achieve phenomenal results when working in what was traditionally considered a 'lesser' medium in the hierarchy of Western fine art mediums. The story of their association is a joyful success story and a testament to a fruitful mentorship in what might have seemed an unlikely setting.

As a Fine Art student at Rhodes University, Nel once drifted into the studio of Jürgen Hamburger, a well-known ceramist who ran a studio in Grahamstown from 1947 to 1986. This encounter seems to have stimulated Nel's life-long love of ceramics. He recalls that:

'The art teacher at school had arranged for me to do evening classes on Monday evenings while I was at school, and those were very, very primitive and inadequate – strange sort of old lady affairs – but it was just an introduction. And then Grahamstown! There was a very nice man, Mr. Hamburger, I think a German refugee, who'd come to South Africa probably in the mid-1930s. He made stuff and provided buckets of glaze and things like that. A group of us used to experiment – we looked at Bernard Leach's potter's book without actually understanding anything – we knew nothing about the chemical component, but we would read and get fired up and make mixes and put them on things. Mr. Hamburger wouldn't fire things if they looked funny, because he was scared they would damage the kiln, so we'd put stuff on, and then a layer of his glaze that he provided over that, and in that way they'd get fired. We subsequently learned how to operate the kiln ourselves, and even used it for cooking food.'

The Head of the department of Fine Arts was Brian Bradshaw:

'[He] was a romantic and extremely passionate person, and this pushed me out to some sort of edge, a more-or-less unbearable

edge. It wasn't – it didn't feel tame in any way. The art school had a big cabinet with a very interesting collection of things, bits of Greek terracotta figures, and Chinese things – some American foundation I think had given money long ago – 1920s or something – for them to buy beautiful things for our art school. I don't know who bought these things but they were there. There was a Tang dynasty horse, and a Song brush pot.'

Small wonder then Nel went on to assemble his own collection of 'beautiful things', and make phenomenal quirky and colourful ceramic 'things' as well.

Nel's interest in Eastern ceramic art led him to an in-depth study of the subject:

'In my reading of things around Chinese ceramics, (and they have a long history, a very rich history – they discovered porcelain and all those kinds of things, and various glazes and things) there were different categories of stuff. There's stuff for kitchen use, there's stuff for reception rooms, stuff for a scholar's study, and then there's stuff in what's called Imperial taste. That often, especially in later periods, can become dry and boring – I mean very perfect, but in terms of the patterns they could use on that, you know, very restricted. And then you get peasant-ware, for the poor people, and you get stuff for the vulgar rich. I find all these categories interesting, you see, and I've never considered that I was working in the area of Imperial ware – but occasionally I privately venture into scholar's ware.'

Nico Masemola drifted into Hylton Nel's studio, then in Bethulie in the southern Free State, as a thirteen-year-old boy. He began to learn the science and art of clay and glazes at the master's knee:

'To keep him busy, I told him to make green ceramic cups, but Nico said, no, he wanted to do something different and that was the beginning of the emergence of a distinctive personality. And the rest is history.'



Hylton Nel's studio, Calitzdorp.

*'I think the term I would use to describe myself would be artist/potter – I think that's an exact term. This use of the word ceramicist, or ceramist, which is the only one in my dictionary – maybe they've added the other syllable ... The original meaning was someone who was versed in the technology of the clay, someone working in a factory or something, but it was when potters, people working with clay, wanted to be taken more seriously, they coined these other words. People use the word potter then correct themselves – I suppose you don't want to be called a potter – but I think artist/potter is an exact description, and I think it's never actually bothered me, that sort of things because I've always known if the thing's nice, it's nice, and it's some form of art. There is the hierarchy of material – we know oil on canvas is serious, or bronze is serious, but I've always been quite content to work in this area which is not sort of serious in the way that oil on canvas and bronze are.'*

HYLTON NEL



Hylton Nel's journals.

## Timelines

### HYLTON NEL

- 1941 Born in N'Kana, Zambia
- 1950s Grows up on a cattle farm in the Karoo, schooled in Beaufort West and Kimberley
- 1963 Graduates with a BA in Fine Arts from Rhodes University, Grahamstown
- 1964 Moves to Cape Town
- 1965 First exhibition, Cape Town
- 1967–68 Completes Diploma in Ceramics at the Royal Academy of Fine Arts, Antwerp, Belgium
- 1969–73 Moves to England – works as an artist and runs an antiques shop with his partner
- 1974 Moves to Port Elizabeth – takes a post lecturing in ceramics in the art department at the Technikon
- 1985 Participates in Cape Town Triennale
- 1987 Moves to Cape Town – takes a post lecturing at Michaelis School of Fine Art, UCT
- 1991 Moves to Bethulie, Free State
- 2001 *Hylton Nel: Retrospective Exhibition*, Standard Bank National Arts Festival, Grahamstown
- 2002 Moves to Calitzdorp, Klein Karoo
- 2021 *Hylton Nel at 80*, Fine Art Society, London

### NICO MASEMOLA

- 1987 Born in Aliwal North, Eastern Cape
- 1990s As a child, watches Nel at work in his Bethulie studio and begins to learn the process and art of pottery
- 2002 Moves with Hylton Nel to Calitzdorp, Klein Karoo
- 2015 Work published in *World of Interiors* magazine
- 2015 Tragically dies at the age of 28 in Calitzdorp





221

**Nico Masemola**

SOUTH AFRICAN 1987–2015

*Spotted Dog with Rabbit*

signed with the artist's  
initials and dated 2011 on the  
underside  
painted and glazed ceramic  
height: 28 cm; length: 21 cm;  
width: 11,5 cm

R14 000 – 18 000



[MORE VIEWS](#)

222

**Hylton Nel**

SOUTH AFRICAN 1941–

*White-Eyed Green Cat*

signed with the artist's initials  
and dated 2010 and 6,5.10 on  
the base  
painted and glazed ceramic  
height: 40 cm; width: 20 cm;  
depth: 19 cm

R15 000 – 20 000



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223

**Hylton Nel**

SOUTH AFRICAN 1941–

*A Pair of Turquoise Vases with Text, two*

each signed and dated 1.4.15  
painted and glazed ceramic  
each height: 32 cm; width: 12,5 cm;  
depth: 11 cm

R18 000 – 24 000

*‘There are plenty of precedents for this writing on ceramics – it goes all the way back to Greek things, Greek vases have such writing on them, Chinese things have got such writing on them – you know, English things, Continental – it’s always happening ... I’ve always hoped that whoever’s words I’m using – most of them could be dead – wouldn’t take it as disrespectful that I don’t say where they come from, because the words themselves have impressed me, and so I like to just put the words there, so that you have a straight response to the words. Maybe some people could find out if they really wanted to or I would tell them where the words come from, but ...*

HYLTON NEL



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224

**Hylton Nel**

SOUTH AFRICAN 1941–

*Vase with Checked Pattern*

signed and dated 14.4.2000  
painted and glazed ceramic  
height: 26 cm; diameter: 16,5 cm

R10 000 – 15 000



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225

**Nico Masemola**

SOUTH AFRICAN 1987–2015

*White Cow*

signed with the artist's initials  
and dated 2009 on the underside  
painted and glazed ceramic  
height: 17 cm; length: 25 cm;  
width: 12 cm

R10 000 – 15 000



[MORE VIEWS](#)

226

**Nico Masemola**

SOUTH AFRICAN 1987–2015

*Seated Couple*

signed with the artist's initials  
and dated 2011 on the underside;  
inscribed with the artist's name on  
a Knysna Fine Art label adhered to  
the underside  
painted and glazed ceramic  
height: 31 cm; width: 27,5 cm;  
depth: 14 cm

R6 000 – 8 000



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227

**Nico Masemola**

SOUTH AFRICAN 1987–2015

***Two Spotted Dogs***

signed with the artist's initials  
and dated 2013 on the underside  
painted and glazed ceramic  
height: 20 cm; length: 31 cm;  
width: 20 cm

**R16 000 – 20 000**

**ITEM NOTES**

Process cracking in areas and  
minor craquelure in areas,  
otherwise good.

*'A master of the ceramic tradition himself, the subjects of Hylton's ceramic work know no bounds. His passion for the manipulation of clay has extended not just around the world to find themselves in important collections, but this spirit has also been handed down, and encouraged, in a small circle of local artists who live in his dusty, arid town. Melvin, Basie, Jacobus, Mexicano and Reuben have become members of the unofficial 'School of Nel' where each artist has channeled and transferred the bold beauty of Hylton's work into their own vision and interpretation. It is worth remembering the late Nico Masemola who too was instructed by Nel in his studio, and who went on to have enormous success as an artist in his own right.'*

ISAAC BENIGSON



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228

**Hylton Nel**

SOUTH AFRICAN 1941–

***Blue Philomela Vase***

signed and dated 24.2.04  
painted and glazed ceramic  
height: 39,5 cm; width: 19 cm;  
depth: 15 cm

**R15 000 – 20 000**



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229

**Nico Masemola**

SOUTH AFRICAN 1987–2015

*Yellow Cottage*

signed with the artist's initials and dated 2012 on the underside  
painted and glazed ceramic  
height: 29 cm; width: 20 cm; depth: 12 cm

**R4 000 – 6 000**

This item is a pastille burner in the tradition of those made by Staffordshire potteries in the mid-19th century. A small pellet of perfume is burned to fragrance the air.



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230

**Nico Masemola**

SOUTH AFRICAN 1987–2015

*Yellow Boy*

signed with the artist's initials and dated 2009 on the underside;  
inscribed with the artist's name on a Knysna Fine Art label adhered to the underside  
painted and glazed ceramic  
height: 25 cm; diameter: 12 cm

**R6 000 – 8 000**



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231

**Hylton Nel**

SOUTH AFRICAN 1941–

*Yellow Vase with Bumps*

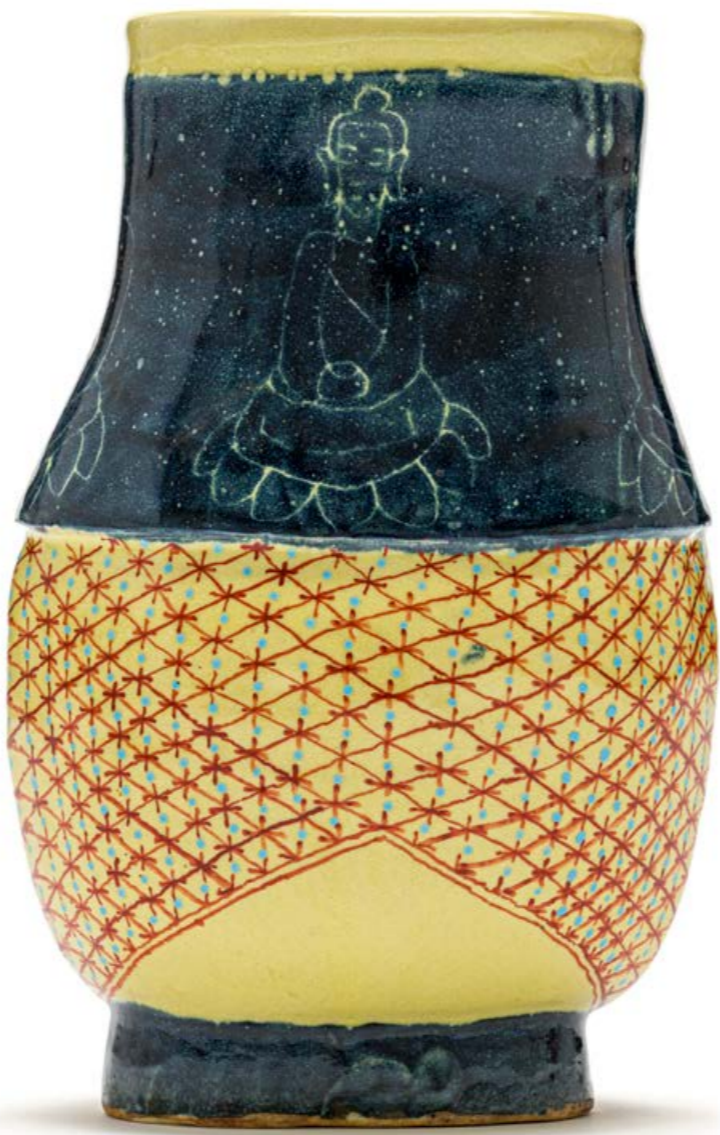
signed with the artist's initials

and dated 2-6-16

painted and glazed ceramic

height: 20 cm; diameter: 15 cm

R6 000 – 8 000



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232

**Hylton Nel**

SOUTH AFRICAN 1941–

*Buddha Vase*

signed with the artist's initials and

dated 13-10-16 on the underside

painted and glazed ceramic

height: 26 cm; width: 17 cm;

depth 11 cm

R8 000 – 12 000

*'One of the interesting things about ceramics is that traditions have always borrowed from each other quite freely – when a new pattern sort of comes – it's also another aspect of the freedom I feel with it. And these things, hatched or zigzag or whatever, they are just so ancient and basic, and so you use them, and sometimes they work better than other times, and sometimes the line thicker, and sometimes the line thinner, and they're just things that you use. You just keep doing it over and over again, and sometimes it works better than other times – sometimes doesn't work at all.'*

HYLTON NEL



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233

**Hylton Nel**

SOUTH AFRICAN 1941–

*Two-Handled Yellow Vase*

signed with the artist's initials and

dated 3-2-94

glazed ceramic

height: 22 cm; diameter: 11 cm

R3 000 – 4 000





234

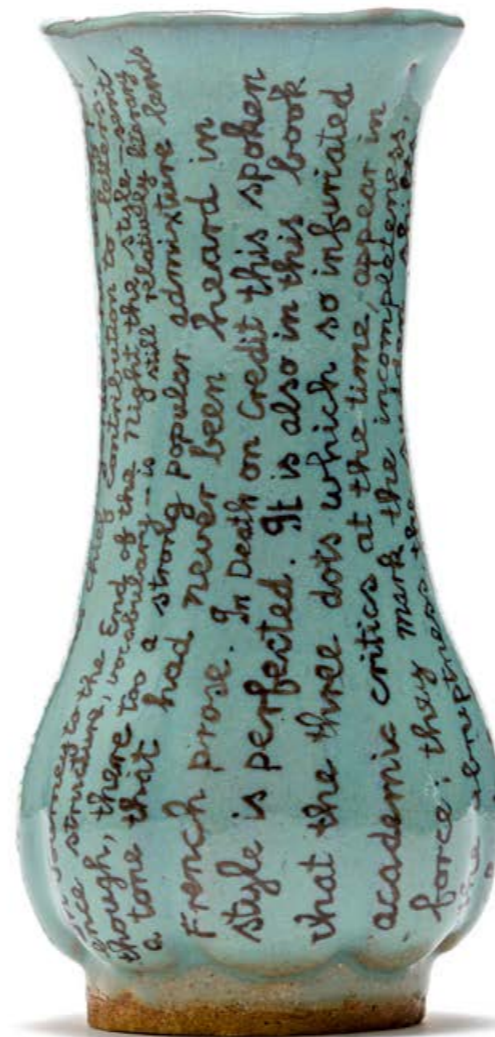
**Hylton Nel**

SOUTH AFRICAN 1941–

*Two-Handled  
Turquoise Vase*

signed with the artist's  
initials and dated 9-5-15  
glazed ceramic  
height: 22,5 cm;  
diameter: 12,5 cm

R3 000 – 4 000



235

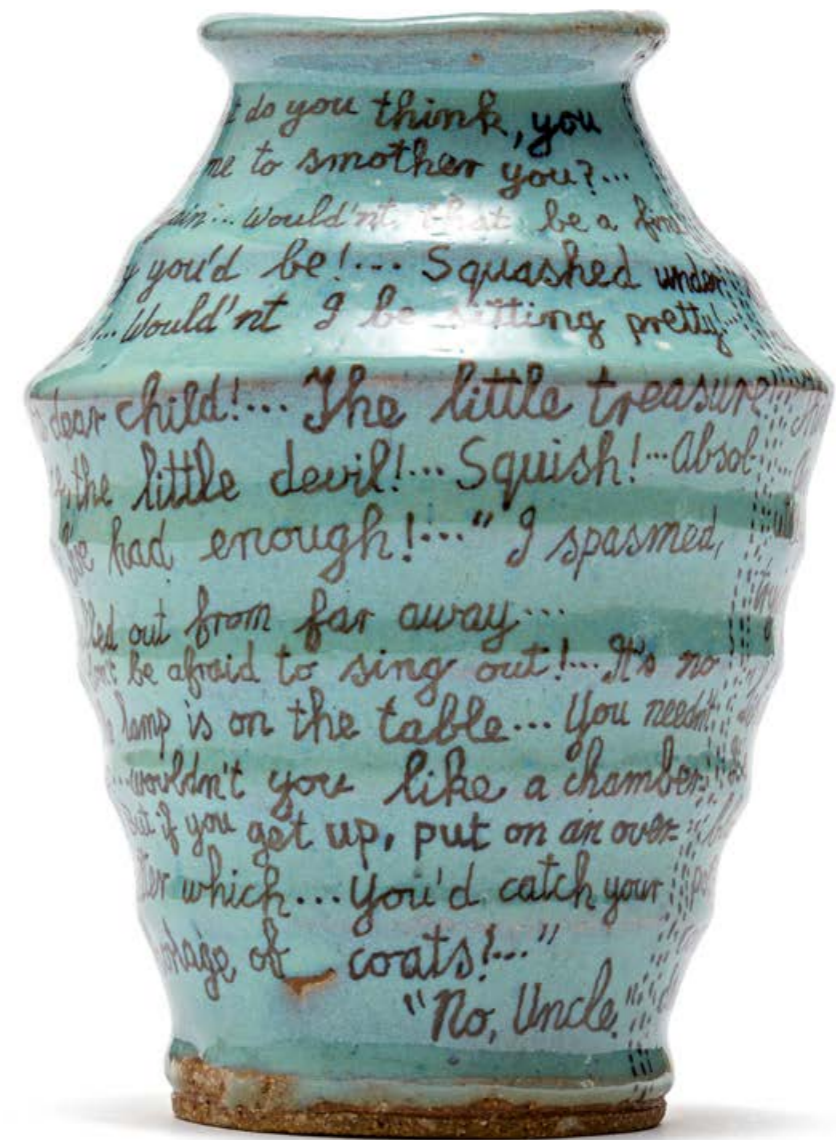
**Hylton Nel**

SOUTH AFRICAN 1941–

*Slender Vase with Text*

signed and dated 5.2.16  
painted and glazed ceramic  
height: 22 cm; width: 11 cm;  
depth: 11 cm

R6 000 – 8 000



236

**Hylton Nel**

SOUTH AFRICAN 1941–

*Ribbed Vase with Text*

signed and dated 5.2.16  
painted and glazed ceramic  
height: 19,5 cm; width: 13,5 cm;  
depth: 13,5 cm

R6 000 – 8 000

237

**Nico Masemola**

SOUTH AFRICAN 1987–2015

*Dog with a Bone  
(Looking Left)*

signed and dated 2012  
painted and glazed ceramic  
height: 34 cm; length: 29 cm;  
width: 12 cm

R10 000 – 15 000



238

**Nico Masemola**

SOUTH AFRICAN 1987–2015

*Dog with a Bone  
(Looking Right)*

signed and dated 2012  
painted and glazed ceramic  
height: 34 cm; length: 29 cm;  
width: 12 cm

R10 000 – 15 000



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239

**Hylton Nel**

SOUTH AFRICAN 1941–

*Male and Female  
Green Cats*

signed, dated 8.3.13 and  
numbered 6/6 on the base  
painted and glazed ceramic  
height: 39 cm; width: 29 cm;  
depth: 13 cm

R30 000 – 50 000

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240

**Hylton Nel**

SOUTH AFRICAN 1941–

*Patchy Yellow Cat*

signed and dated 21.11.12  
painted and glazed ceramic  
height: 37 cm; width: 16 cm;  
depth: 16 cm

R15 000 – 20 000

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241

**Hylton Nel**

SOUTH AFRICAN 1941–

***A Pair of Green and Yellow Vases, two***

each signed and dated 28.7.11

painted and glazed ceramic

the first, height: 35,5 cm;

width: 12 cm; depth: 13,5 cm;

the second, height: 35 cm;

width: 12 cm; depth: 13 cm

**R18 000 – 24 000**

*'I look at and have looked at a lot of pottery stuff in books, and in reality, mostly made by anonymous people, but coming from particular cultures, and made for particular purposes. I try to make objects as real as I can, and from my understanding of what I see, there has been the long tradition of this. I look at pots in detail, the bones, the flesh, the skin ... I not only try to make it real, I believe it is real, you see, and so I don't think of it in terms of art which you put on some sort of pedestal and label it.'*

HYLTON NEL





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242

**Hylton Nel**

SOUTH AFRICAN 1941–

*Sphinx*

signed with the artist's initials  
and dated 14.12.09 and 18.5.10  
on the underside  
painted and glazed ceramic  
height: 25,5 cm; length: 30 cm;  
depth: 15 cm

R12 000 – 16 000



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243

**Nico Masemola**

SOUTH AFRICAN 1987–2015

*Nativity Scene (Green)*

signed with the artist's initials  
and dated 2011 on the underside;  
inscribed with the artist's name  
on a Knysna Fine Art label  
adhered to the underside  
painted and glazed ceramic  
height: 25 cm; width: 27 cm;  
depth: 13,5 cm

R6 000 – 8 000





244

**Hylton Nel**

SOUTH AFRICAN 1941–

*Large Vase with  
Checked Pattern*

signed with the artist's initials  
and dated 26.2.14 and 1.10.18  
painted and glazed ceramic  
height: 35,5 cm; width: 24 cm;  
depth: 14,5 cm

R10 000 – 15 000

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245

**Hylton Nel**

SOUTH AFRICAN 1941–

*Yellow Slab Figure*

signed with the artist's initials  
and dated 19.01.09  
glazed ceramic  
height: 40 cm; width: 16 cm;  
depth: 12 cm

R7 000 – 10 000

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246

**Hylton Nel**

SOUTH AFRICAN 1941–

*Turquoise Slab Figure*

signed with the artist's  
initials and dated 1987 on  
the underside  
glazed ceramic  
height: 34 cm; width: 15 cm;  
depth: 11 cm

R7 000 – 10 000

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247

**Hylton Nel**

SOUTH AFRICAN 1941–

*Green Spotted Vase with  
Flowers and Leaves*

signed with the artist's initials and  
dated 11-12-98

painted and glazed ceramic  
height: 26 cm; diameter: 11,5 cm

R7 000 – 9 000



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248

**Hylton Nel**

SOUTH AFRICAN 1941–

*Vase with Flowers, Leaves  
and Centipedes*

signed with the artist's initials and  
dated 30-12-98

painted and glazed ceramic  
height: 26 cm; diameter: 11,5 cm

R7 000 – 9 000

249

**Nico Masemola**

SOUTH AFRICAN 1987–2015

*Grey Dog with Rabbit*

signed with the artist's initials  
and dated 2015 on the underside  
painted and glazed ceramic  
height: 27 cm; length: 24 cm;  
width: 17 cm

R18 000 – 24 000



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250

**Nico Masemola**

SOUTH AFRICAN 1987–2015

*White Cottage*

signed with the artist's initials and dated 2011

painted and glazed ceramic

height: 18 cm; width: 16,5 cm; depth: 11 cm

**R3 000 – 5 000**

This item is a pastille burner in the tradition of those made by Staffordshire potteries in the mid-19th century. A small pellet of perfume is burned to fragrance the air.



251

**Hylton Nel**

SOUTH AFRICAN 1941–

*Antique Subject (Girl)*

signed with the artist's initials,

dated 1-2-12 and inscribed with the title on the base

painted and glazed ceramic

height: 38 cm; width: 20 cm; depth: 11 cm

**R8 000 – 12 000**

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‘Well I just couldn’t, can’t make perfect things and if I try, you know, it’s a form of torture, and I’m not going to get it right anyway, so that is what I mean by getting used to your own hand-writing – just, you know, I couldn’t make them perfect, but I still wanted to make them, and so I make them – not deliberately distorted, they just come out that way. My old teacher Brian Bradshaw used to say, “Make what you want to make. At first it won’t be very good, but with practice it will get better”. That is the opposite to the Bauhaus-style exercises.’

HYLTON NEL

252

**Hylton Nel**

SOUTH AFRICAN 1941–

*Two-Handled Vase*

dated 21-11-13 on the underside  
painted and glazed ceramic  
height: 29 cm; width: 15 cm;  
depth: 9 cm

R6 000 – 8 000



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253

**Hylton Nel**

SOUTH AFRICAN 1941–

*Vase with Merpeople*

signed and dated 11.11.13 and 4.5.16  
painted and glazed ceramic  
height: 24 cm; width: 13,5 cm;  
depth: 9 cm

R8 000 – 10 000



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254

**Hylton Nel**

SOUTH AFRICAN 1941–

*Two-Handled Vase with  
Blue Checked Pattern*

signed and dated 5.11.13  
painted and glazed ceramic  
height: 24 cm; width: 13,5 cm;  
depth: 9 cm

R6 000 – 8 000



255

**Nico Masemola**

SOUTH AFRICAN 1987–2015

*Medici Lion (Looking Left)*

signed with the artist's initials  
and dated 2015 on the underside  
painted and glazed ceramic  
height: 23 cm; length: 21,5 cm;  
width: 12,5 cm

R10 000 – 15 000



256

**Nico Masemola**

SOUTH AFRICAN 1987–2015

*Medici Lion (Looking Right)*

signed with the artist's initials and  
dated 2015 on the underside  
painted and glazed ceramic  
height: 27 cm; length: 21,5 cm;  
width: 12,5 cm

R10 000 – 15 000



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257

**Hylton Nel**

SOUTH AFRICAN 1941–

*Resting Cat*

signed with the artist's initials and  
dated 25.5.2009 on the underside  
painted and glazed ceramic  
height: 9 cm; length: 29 cm;  
width: 17 cm

R12 000 – 16 000



258

**Hylton Nel**

SOUTH AFRICAN 1941–

*Dog Bowl*

signed and dated 23.11.15 and 4.2.16  
on the underside  
painted and glazed ceramic  
height: 8,5 cm; diameter: 23,5 cm

R6 000 – 8 000



259

**Hylton Nel**

SOUTH AFRICAN 1941–

*Sheep Shearer*

signed with the artist's initials

and dated 5.7.99

height: 30 cm; width: 30 cm;

depth: 1,5 cm

R6 000 – 8 000



260

**Nico Masemola**

SOUTH AFRICAN 1987–2015

*Nativity Scene*

signed with the artist's initials

and dated 2011 on the underside

painted and glazed ceramic

height: 26 cm; width: 30 cm;

depth: 14 cm

R6 000 – 8 000

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261

**Hylton Nel**

SOUTH AFRICAN 1941–

*Yellow Horse*

signed with artist's initials and  
dated 25.5.07  
painted and glazed ceramic  
height: 22,5 cm; width: 21 cm;  
depth: 11 cm

R5 000 – 7 000



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262

**Nico Masemola**

SOUTH AFRICAN 1987–2015

*Brown Horse (Looking Left)*

signed with the artist's initials  
and dated 2007 on the underside;  
inscribed with the artist's name on  
a Knysna Fine Art label adhered to  
the underside  
painted and glazed ceramic  
height: 21 cm; length: 26 cm; width:  
9,5 cm

R6 000 – 8 000



263

**Nico Masemola**

SOUTH AFRICAN 1987–2015

*Brown Horse (Looking Right)*

signed with the artist's initials  
and dated 2007 on the underside;  
inscribed with the artist's name on a  
Knysna Fine Art label adhered to the  
underside  
painted and glazed ceramic  
height: 21 cm; length: 26 cm; width:  
9,5 cm

R6 000 – 8 000



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264

**Hylton Nel**

SOUTH AFRICAN 1941–

*Seated Woman*

signed and glazed ceramic  
height: 27 cm; width: 22 cm; depth:  
22 cm

R6 000 – 8 000

*'My work has blossomed from the time  
I took the plunge to devote all my time  
to it after long, though unconscious,  
preparation. I am grateful and think that  
a late flowering could be better than an  
early one and any flowering better than  
no flowers at all.'*

HYLTON NEL



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265

**Hylton Nel**

SOUTH AFRICAN 1941–

*Grey/Blue Vase*

signed with the artist's initials  
and dated 15.8.6  
signed and glazed ceramic  
height: 28 cm; diameter: 13,5 cm

R5 000 – 7 000



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266

**Hylton Nel**

SOUTH AFRICAN 1941–

*Marbled Vase*

signed with the artist's initials and  
dated 9.6.14 on the underside  
signed ceramic  
height: 17,5 cm; width: 19 cm;  
depth: 15 cm

R7 000 – 10 000



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267

**Nico Masemola**

SOUTH AFRICAN 1987–2015

*Mandela and De Klerk*

signed with the artist's initials  
and dated 2008 on the  
underside; inscribed with  
the artist's name on a Knysna  
Fine Art label adhered to the  
underside

painted and glazed ceramic  
height: 27 cm; width: 23 cm;  
depth: 13 cm

R8 000 – 12 000



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268

**Nico Masemola**

SOUTH AFRICAN 1987–2015

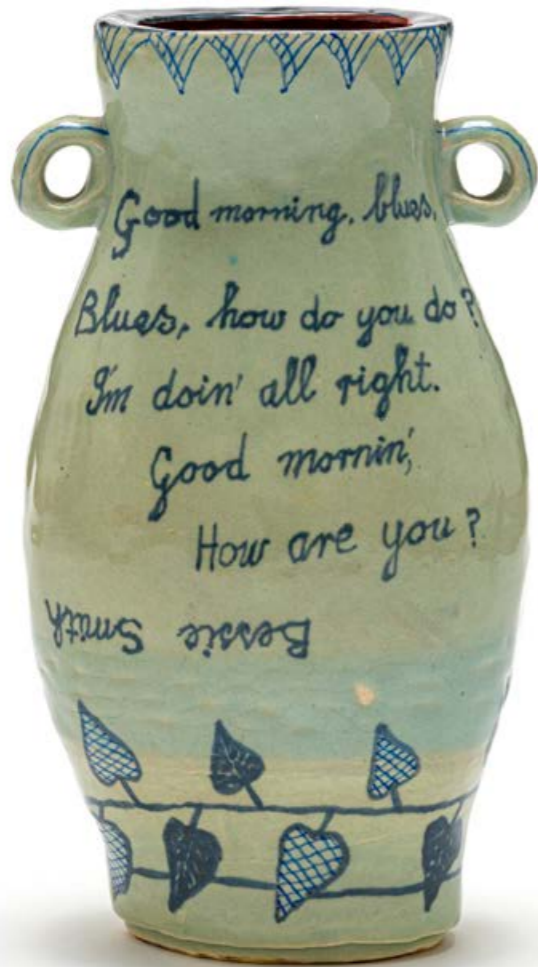
*Black and White  
Spotted Bull*

signed with the artist's  
initials and dated 2015 on the  
underside

painted and glazed ceramic  
height: 17 cm; length: 29 cm;  
width: 12 cm

R12 000 – 16 000





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269

**Hylton Nel**

SOUTH AFRICAN 1941–

*Owl Vase*

signed with the artist's initials  
and dated 21-12-15 on the  
underside

painted and glazed ceramic  
height: 31 cm; width: 17 cm;  
depth: 12 cm

R12 000 – 16 000



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270

**Hylton Nel**

SOUTH AFRICAN 1941–

*Spotted Cat Vase*

signed with the artist's initials  
and dated 25.4.14 on the  
underside

painted and glazed ceramic  
height: 33 cm; width: 18 cm;  
depth: 12,5 cm

R15 000 – 25 000



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271

**Hylton Nel**

SOUTH AFRICAN 1941–

*Marbled Cat Vase*

signed with the artist's initials  
and dated 9.5.14 on the  
underside

painted and glazed ceramic  
height: 33 cm; width: 18 cm;  
depth: 12,5 cm

R15 000 – 25 000

NO LOTS 271–280



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Images of Hylton Nel and his studio at Calitzdorp by Mario Todeschini, courtesy of the artist and Stevenson.

Source of image of Nico Masemola:  
Africa Nova

Source of Hylton Nel quotes: Michael Stevenson (2003) *Hylton Nel: Conversations*, Cape Town: Michael Stevenson Contemporary and The Fine Art Society, London.

Source of Isaac Benigson quote:  
<https://chandlerhouse.co.za/voorkamer/2021/01/the-school-of-hylton-nel/>

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