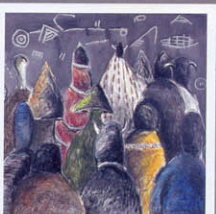
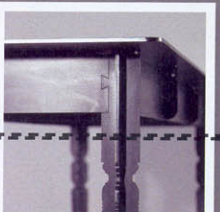
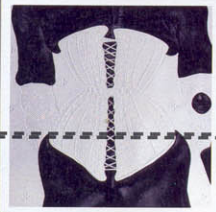


TRADITIONAL AND CONTEMPORARY
SOUTH AFRICAN ART AND DESIGN
FIND A HOME IN A NEW YORK CITY SPACE
THAT SEAMLESSLY MERGES THE GALLERY
WITH AN EVOCATIVE RETAIL EXPERIENCE



TOP ROW, FROM LEFT Willowlamp chandelier by Team Two Design; ZenZulu Lace Platters designed by Marisa Fick-Jordaan and woven by Thembi Gigaba; earthenware ceramic vessel by Astrid Dahl. MIDDLE ROW, FROM LEFT Bug side table in powder-coated laser-cut steel with handcarved wooden legs by Egg Designs; *Learning Posture, Practising Pose 2004*, detail of right-hand panel of diptych, by Diane Victor; rolled-steel table with poplar legs by Gregor Jenkin. BOTTOM ROW, FROM LEFT Mary Slack and Fraser Conlon, the driving force behind New York's Amarian; *Initiation Figures 2004*, oil and pastel on canvas, by Colbert Mashile; *Water*, a sculptural woven-poplar vessel, by Lientjie Wessels.

PHOTOGRAPHS FRANK OUDEMAN, JEANNE-CLAIRE BISCHOFF, KEVIN MACKINTOSH,
DARYL MCGREGOR, MATTHIEU SALVAING WORDS NADINE RUBIN

● Ten years' work in PR for the New York fashion industry – culminating as PR director for Gucci under Tom Ford – taught Fraser Conlon a thing or two about marketing a concept. Fraser is now co-owner of Amarian, the African art gallery-cum-retail space that he opened in partnership with Mary Slack in New York's lower SoHo in May this year. 'African style is becoming more and more popular in America. At the same time, people are eschewing the mass-produced, and are yearning instead for items that are made by the human hand,' says Fraser of the impetus behind Amarian. Like its name – an amalgamation of the words *amadlozi* (ancestral spirits) and *meridian* (the imaginary lines that traverse the globe) – the idea behind Amarian is to unite past Africa with future Africa. 'It's about changing perceptions through the arts,' Fraser explains. 'New Yorkers, of all people, are ready to embrace this.'

Amarian marks the realisation of a four-year dream for the Johannesburg native, who spent that time working

and a dark blazer – Fraser tells me that he instinctively knew that the first sense to address as you enter Amarian was touch, so he had 1,83m-tall wooden door handles, inspired by the walking sticks you find in Zambia and carved in Limpopo by Thomas Khubayi, affixed to the imposing slick glass doors. And he's right: your experience begins the moment you run your hand along the cool, smooth, voluptuous curves.

Next comes sight, of course. So Fraser recruited Robin Osler, an architect and former Helmut Newton muse, to design the interior. Robin's challenge was to merge the gallery experience with the retail experience. She chose to do this by creating an intact, cube-like exhibition space, while at the same time cleverly divvying up mini-areas within this space. On the right-hand side is the fine-art wall, reserved for painting and photography. Right now, it's home to a Diane Victor triptych that hangs against light grey, a colour chosen to move this experience away from that of a conventional gallery while still maintaining the discipline associated with serious fine art. On the left-hand wall a series of well-lit cabinets are suspended. These take smaller pieces like Lisa Fire's ceramics and display them in a more intimate manner. In the centre of the room, Lientjie Wessels' and Joe and Abel Zata's wooden sculptures seem to twist up from the concrete floor.

Just like the creative partnerships in South Africa that have given rise to projects like ZenZulu or Ardmore, the decor reflects unlikely relationships. Robin got creative and employed recycled materials like Homasote (recycled

CONTINENTAL DRIFT

and reworking his business plan so that contemporary South African and African art and objects could be displayed alongside one another as more than just curios to a discerning Manhattan audience.

Nestled between Opening Ceremony, a store for emerging designers, and E Vogel and Sons, one of New York's oldest manufacturers of equestrian boots, on trendy Howard Street (other neighbours include Vespa, Ted Meuhling and a slew of sought-after art deco and antique stores), the gallery seems out of place. But Fraser wanted it that way and purposely avoided setting up shop in Chelsea, which is currently home to over 800 galleries. 'This is a gallery and a retail store in one,' he explains.

Here, you'll find anything from a Zulu basket for \$30 (about R210) to a stone sculpture from Zimbabwe for \$25 000 (about R175 000). A Barbara Jackson handpainted ceramic pot sits next to one of Lientjie Wessels' woven poplar sculptures. A whimsical Ardmore china dish perches atop an antique wooden stool from Togo. An Astrid Dahl piece meets a ZenZulu plate on a Gregor Jenkin rolled-steel table. And a Roger Ballen print shares wall space with a charcoal-on-paper work by Ricky Burnett and an archival inkjet print of a digital collage by Johan van Wyk.

Mary Slack is, Fraser says, more than his partner; she is also his mentor – a privilege he's enjoyed since the age of 14, when he befriended her daughter Victoria and spent time in their home, White Hills, often marvelling at the incredible collection of art, artefacts and collectables on display there. Fraser serves and buys all the merchandise on show, and Mary serves as the final word on what makes it to America.

newspaper board) to build a central wall that pays homage to the fact that so many African elements are repurposed. The wall, inspired by the Great Zimbabwe Ruins, doubles as a shelf-like space on which you'll find large Astrid Dahl vessels and monumental Ntombi Nala Zulu pots. She took inspiration from the *mashasha* (reed) sticks found in many game lodges and created the contemporary wooden ceiling slats that denote the end of the gallery-cum-store and the beginning of the open-plan office. She used Team Two's ball-chain Willowlamp chandelier to light part of the space and papered the back wall in Egg Designs' wallpaper, now an iconic symbol of new South African contemporary style, that also happens to be for sale.

'We do the editing for an American consumer and bring back really special pieces. It's only natural that we'd put them in a space where they can live on their own merit,' says Fraser. 'There's a story to every piece. Nothing in the gallery lacks meaning. And New Yorkers love that they've come from such a long way away.'

CONTACT DETAILS

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CONTEMPORARY DRIFT



OPPOSITE, TOP AND BOTTOM The clever design of the main gallery space allows a host of artworks to be displayed while retaining a serene, uncluttered air. Ronel Jordaan's felt pebbles and driftwood sculptures by Joe and Abel Zata take centre stage. Among the many artworks on view are Diane Victor's *Mater, Minder, Martyr* triptych; serpentine stone elongated columns by Besta Baureni and sculptures by Ngshert Mukumberanwa and Derek Macheka; and ceramics by Louise Gelderblom and Barbara Jackson. THIS PAGE, TOP Amariadian's imposing Howard Street entrance. ABOVE A glass case that seems to float out of the Homasote wall contains an earthenware vessel by Astrid Dahl; to the left is an Ardmore ceramic urn by sculptors Elias Lutanga and Sondelani Nshatintshali and painter Punch Shabalala.



CONTINENTAL DRIFT



OPPOSITE *Together*, a Chiweshe stone sculpture by Mandinyi, peeps out of a recess beside a Besta Baureni serpentine stone column. An Ardmore ceramic urn is displayed on top of the Bug side table by Egg Designs, while Barbara Jackson's red ceramic vessel sits on Gregor Jenkin's Hybrid table. The Willowlamp chandelier, by Sian Elliot and Adam Hoets for Team Two, hangs at the back of the room.

THIS PAGE, TOP Woven poplar sculpture by Lientjie Wessels. *In Repose* serpentine stone sculpture by Dominic Benhura. *Cow 1*, charcoal on paper, by Elizabeth Gunter. **ABOVE** Ceramic kudu horns by Anthony Harris and Gerard Swart for Ceramic Matters sit on the glass light box near the entrance.