



Pippin Drysdale is an Enigma

An Interview with Tony Martin





EXTRAVAGANT, GENEROUS, BOISTEROUS, LARGER-THAN-life and extroverted are words that spring to mind. A swirling, exuberant and rebellious personality that completely dominates any space combined with a seeming total disregard for social convention. Controversial, contradictory, creative and euphoric coexist uneasily with troubling self-doubt and deep insecurities. Combine wondrous dinner parties, holy men, high society, booming laughter and exotic lovers with a tumultuous private life and a love for the outrageous and the picture becomes a little more complete.

And then there is Pippin Drysdale's art. Serenely confident, superbly crafted ceramic pieces are unlike anything you have ever seen or even imagined. Beautifully elegant curves, assured decoration and ethereal colours combine to produce works that seem to float effortlessly above impossibly small bases. Installation works, exquisitely made, whisper of distant places and forgotten times. Above all there is a feeling of quiet certainty, of sublime mastery. The contradiction is complete.

It is a tenet of art criticism that there must be a separation between the work and the maker, that personalities must not cloud the critic's gaze. When

considering the work of Drysdale, that separation seems impossible. Her art and her life are so inextricably linked that to view either in isolation is to risk profoundly misunderstanding both.

Drysdale grew up in a well-to-do household in Perth, Western Australia. Pretty, pampered and spoilt, she recalls an idyllic childhood clouded only by a struggle with schoolwork. Her teenage years saw her throw herself into everything, except study, with unbridled gusto – resulting in the parting of ways with a number of exclusive private schools. Her later teenage years coincided with the beginning of the 1960s. It was a cosmic alignment – Pippin Drysdale and the 1960s were made for each other. Moneyed, indulged and headstrong, Drysdale revelled in the new found freedom of the times. Melbourne, Sydney, US, London and Europe became a playground for the quintessential good time girl.

At 23 years of age she was married and pregnant. Domesticity, however, was never going to sit comfortably with Drysdale. Several years later found her a single mother with a rollicking laugh, desperately worried parents and few skills to support herself and her young son. An enthusiastic and successful foray into the cultivation and sale of





The Dance of the Ochres.
Photo by Robert Frith, Acorn Photo Agency. Used with
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herbs followed. The watershed moment came when, at 27, a failed relationship left her in possession of a pottery kiln and a few bags of clay.

With characteristic enthusiasm she threw herself into the making of some pots, which she proceeded to fire with typical abandon. The results were disastrous. Drysdale still recalls listening, perplexed, to the sound of explosions emanating from the kiln. The complete failure of this new venture came as an utter shock. For maybe the first time in her young life something she desperately wanted could not be obtained with either charm or money. Drysdale had found her focal point.

I am welcomed warmly into the historic stone cottage in the rather expensive seaside village of Fremantle, Western Australia. Drysdale, elegantly dressed, is friendly, hospitable and engaging. The cottage, a gift from her father many years before, has just been beautifully restored. Over freshly ground coffee the talk is of the difficulty associated with the renovations that have kept Drysdale away from her beloved studio for almost a year, unable to produce any work. The stress this separation had caused was palpable. "It was unhealthy emotionally. I had no power in my life – I did not have my space. You lose your identity, lose your confidence."¹

The object of our interview – the piece that she loved so much that she kept it for herself – sits on an antique wooden table, highlighted by a vase of brilliant poppies. Effortless curves soaring from a slender base are a trademark of Drysdale's long-term collaboration with master thrower Warrick Palmateer. The brushwork is joyous, exuberant, a testament to a moment of passionate, assured freedom. Riotous brush strokes dance between ochres, mauves, golden yellows, sage greens and swirling blacks – all building to a finely thrown rim before spilling inwards to fiery, sunset orange and yellows. It is truly exquisite.

"I just adore this," she muses running her fingertips over the silky surface. "It is like the eye of the storm. It is just so alive; it has that lovely sense of a dance – I called it *The Dance of the Ochres*. I got into



that Jackson Pollock space – splash, dash, slash."²

Drysdale goes on to describe her favourite piece as "a gem that came out of the subconscious."³ "It is all intuitive. It takes a long time to build up your confidence and when you do there is this little tiny window where everything is working. You can work and work and every now and again you have a performance with a piece. I recall so strongly when I did this piece that it just took on this amazing energetic journey and it seemed so easy. I knew the moment it came out of the kiln that it was a gem."⁴

Inspiration for this work came from Drysdale's extensive travels in northern Australia, soaking in the vast horizons and dramatic colours. Having the opportunity to watch indigenous artists at work also left a profound impression. On remote Melville Island she was taken into the multi-coloured ochre pits that for generations had supplied the pigments used in traditional paintings as well as for body decoration in preparation for sacred ceremonies. The colours were exquisite she recalls. "I just emotionally responded to it so much and when this work appeared I felt it was such a celebration, a dance, a feeling. It was such a beautiful sacred place."⁵ As with much of her art this piece is the physical expression of a profound emotional experience. "I just absorb the sense of the space, the place, the colour, the environment,"⁶ she explains.

To try to describe Drysdale's ceramics solely in terms





Warrick Palmateer with Pippin Drysdale.



of emotion and intuitive serendipity, however, would be to seriously underestimate this formidable artist. While the final creative moments may be an outpouring of emotional memory the preparation for that moment is controlled and fastidious. The scrupulously organised studio contains thousands of glaze tests and colour blends. She surrounds herself with highly skilled

assistants. The porcelain clay is pugged multiple times before being carefully wrapped and allowed to 'sweat' for a month before being repugged prior to use. Gallery owners, patrons and potential customers are assiduously cultivated. Nothing that is within her control is left to chance.

Maybe that is one of the truths of Drysdale's life and art. Behind the kaleidoscopic swirl of her public persona – the mesmerising, live for the moment, outrageous 'bad girl' of Australian ceramics there is always her studio with its neat rows of glaze tests, meticulous colour tests and orderly stacks of ageing clay. From that moment when she heard the sounds of exploding pots in her first ever firing, clay has become the solid core, the quiet refuge that has anchored her existence.

Warrick Palmateer is the other indispensable core to Drysdale's art. A master craftsman, he has collaborated with much of her art during the past 20 years. When he joins our interview he does so with an easy-going exuberance that is the complete foil to Drysdale's intensity. Palmateer is tall, powerfully built and unkempt after his morning surf. He is widely regarded by his peers as the finest thrower of porcelain in Australia.⁷ His breathtaking mastery has brought him to work with some of the great names of Australian ceramics but his collaboration with Drysdale has been the most significant and the most controversial.

There is an easy camaraderie between them. Food and coffee appear almost instantly. She speaks with genuine affection of his indispensable contribution to her work. Palmateer, in turn, speaks with true admiration of Drysdale's professionalism. "She always makes deadlines for exhibitions, she is good with her PR and how she deals with galleries and with the people who are influential in her art career."⁸



Then, with surprising candour for this quiet, self-effacing man, he continues "Pip is an amazing colourist; the way she uses colour is phenomenal. She can paint and draw beautifully as well, she has got fantastic command of a brush and her eye for colour is second to none. And I have got a really strong command of what I do – working with porcelain. I have also got a good eye for form and balance. When you put the two things together you have got two people who are, I think, quite brilliant in what they do and we can actually put up with each other (laughs) it works – you get something that truly is magnificent."⁹

It strikes me as I watch these two unlikely collaborators that this may be the true definition of alchemy – the brilliant, outrageous, sophisticated and driven Pippin Drysdale and the laconic, easy-going Warrick Palmateer. Apart they both are superb at their individual specialties, together they create breathtaking ceramic magic that defies our imagination.

ENDNOTES

1. Pippin Drysdale. Recorded Interview. 9 July 2013.
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid.
7. Jeff Mincham. Personal Conversation. 1 May 2013.
8. Warrick Palmateer. Recorded Telephone Interview. 3 September 2013.
9. Ibid.

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