

Ceramics

Art and Perception

2009
ISSUE 77

INTERNATIONAL
AU\$18 US\$18 UK £9 CAN\$20 €15

Ceramics: Art and Perception Volume 19 Issue 3

Print Post Publication No. PP255003100105 September - November 2009

77



Pippin Drysdale

The Kimberley Series

The Tanami Traces Series

*Article by
Ted Snell*

THE KIMBERLEY SERIES IS A GROUP OF WORKS BASED on the artist's experience of travelling in the northwest region of Western Australia. The northwest has been lodged in Pippin Drysdale's psyche since her first visit while still a teenager in 1958, when she sailed on the MV Kanimbla to visit Millstream Station, a property owned by the family of a school friend. The landscape, its people, the dramatic change of seasons and the remarkable geological structures were imprinted on her brain. A trip back to the region in 1998 ignited those

memories and linked them to the mature vision of an artist. Over the following decade, she has explored ways in which this imagery might inform her work. However, the confluence of ideas and the opportunity to work on a major new project resulted in a new group of closed forms that investigates the Kimberley landscape anew.

The process of distilling visual ideas to encapsulate the unique qualities of the topography, the flora, and the changing nature of the atmosphere from day to night and summer through to winter is a long and



arduous process. It begins with the development of new forms. This is a collaborative process involving Warrick Palmateer, a skilled thrower who makes all her vessels. Under her direction, Palmateer creates the shapes and refines them when leather hard to ensure they have exactly the right lift from the ground. Each form is carefully considered in relation to others already made and groupings develop into rounded landscapes that stretch out on the shelves ready for the first bisque firing and glazing.

Generating a palette of colours and orchestrating the linear treatment of the surface is an extraordinarily laborious process that is fraught with risk and littered with kiln failures. Master technician Mike Kusnik developed the glaze she uses, and over the years she has gained great skill in manipulated the recipe to give her the colours and surface qualities she needs, but this is never guaranteed. Each new work is an experiment as colour is laid down, lines are cut with laser precision using a blade and more colour is added back into the fine crevices. So much can go wrong in the kiln and so much cannot be predicted with certainty. Sometimes the pots crack, sometimes the expected colours fail to materialise and the hours of work that went into the careful cutting and glazing results in a disaster, instantly relegated to the garden or the bin. Her standards are high, very high and many of those rejects sitting

forlornly under the lemon tree are gems, flawed though they are. And sometimes magic happens and through the alchemy of fire, clay, glass and lead extraordinary things emerge.

There are numerous triggers that initiate the development of new forms and new approaches to surface decoration. Most obviously it is through contact with a place and its people. Pip met the Indigenous artist Queenie McKenzie at the Warmun Community in the East Kimberley just a few months before her death. Drysdale sat with McKenzie while she completed one of her dry ochre paintings depicting the rocky protrusions, rolling hills and Boabs of her country. She later bought the painting of tall domed hills to hang in her kitchen. That work has been joined by others by Indigenous artists, including a magical painting by Kitty Kantilla, the revered artist from the Tiwi Islands. The influence of their work is evident in both the Tanami Series produced from 2001 and the current Kimberley Series. Her reference to the works of these artists is an act of homage just as artists from across cultures and over centuries have always done: a nod in the direction of their mentors and an acknowledgement of their achievements.

Drysdale absorbs all of these influences and combines them with her memories and experiences of the landscape, such as her 1998 trip to Purnululu. Purnululu is the name given by the *Kija* people to the



sandstone area of the Bungle Bungle Range. Rising as high as 578 metres above sea level, the extraordinary linear striping of the domes is due to the differences in clay content and porosity of the sandstone layers. The shapes prevalent throughout the Range are like inverted versions of the vessel forms she had been exploring for the past 20 years and are the main catalysts for her new work.

There is something very elegant, gravity defying and poised about her earlier series based on the vessel. Those works have a lively spring, an awe-inspiring lightness and there is the added frisson of their delicate balancing act that gives them a presence that sustains long engagement. The vessel also offers the promise of the interior, that wonderful coloured void into which we fall after circumnavigating the complex linearity of the exterior surface. So why change? The risk of moving into new territory is one of the great addictions of the creative artist, knowing you could lose everything and just possibly gain the world. It's a gamble, like the stock market, a calculated risk certainly, but a risk nevertheless that it will all collapse into nothing. This can prove to be a powerful attraction.

To upend the vessel is then a radical act but one the artist had to try. It was a step over the brink that revealed many new possibilities. Immediately the form became non-functional, the void could no longer be accessed, the colour it contains – necessary to keep it stable – no longer visible. The closed form became an object amongst other objects, one that must survive by its own wits, create its own reason to exist and seek out friends. Although singular works have great dignity, they require others to lend support and to tell bigger, more expansive stories.

On the benches in her studio these 'tablescapes' grew as pots were drawn from the kiln, still warm and fresh with a new blush of colour. Moving from bench to bench, the diversity and richness of her response amassed into a vast panorama of geological, botanical and meteorological complexity. Each grouping captured an aspect of the Kimberley landscape, some through nuances of colour and others through a linear extrapolation that flowed over their gently doming forms. They describe the topography of anthills, mountain ranges, tumbling tracts of spinifex and rocky protuberances that spring from the red desert soil. This is the *Kimberley*, or *Pippin*



Drysdale's *Kimberley*, in all its intricate convolutions of form, line, colour and texture, but there was one last facet of the project remaining.

The next radical move was to reintroduce the vessel form into the groups of closed forms and something new and magical happened again. Curve against counter-curve, one arching rising shape locked to the ground by its neighbour, one form opening up to lure the viewer into its seductive core while others remained resolutely impenetrable. The play of incised lines around every form also establishes a rhythmic wave that draws the eye through and around the installation, replicating the movement through the landscape as our eye follows strata layers, fault lines and the ripples of a sand dune or Spinifex row. These groupings are full of surprises, just like the landscape she describes and they are breathtakingly beautiful objects.

Drysdale is an exceptional artist, a fact acknowledged by the Craft Council of Australia who nominated her as a 'Master of Australian Craft' in 2007 and each pot is wrought with enormous care and great skill to draw out some aspect, to illuminate some quality or identify a particular characteristic of the landscape. She has always pushed at the boundaries of her practice, always sought out new challenges and taken the kind of risks that would daunt most practitioners. As a result the *Kimberley Series* is one of her greatest achievements, not only because

it pushes further into new territory than most of her previous projects, but also because of its extraordinary achievement in translating and re-imagining the specificity of place. The open and closed forms coalesce into a vast panorama that is awe-inspiring in its scope and scale – just like the *Kimberley* itself.

Professor Ted Snell is the Director of the Cultural Precinct University of Western Australia. He was born in 1949, at Geraldton, Western Australia. Over the past two decades he has contributed to the national arts agenda through his role as Chair of the Australian Council of University Art and Design Schools, Chair of Artbank, Chair of the Asialink Visual Arts Advisory Committee and as a Board member of the National Association for the Visual Arts. He is currently Chair of the Visual Arts Board of the Australia Council.

He has been a commentator on the arts for ABC radio and television and is currently art reviewer for *The Australian* and a regular contributor to local and national journals. He has published several books and has curated numerous exhibitions, many of which document the visual culture of Western Australia. Ted Snell is also a visual artist and since 1968 he has shown his work in solo exhibitions in Perth, Melbourne and Brisbane, and in numerous group exhibitions. His work is represented in many public and private collections, including the National Gallery of Australia, the Art Gallery of Western Australia and Artbank.

