

Landscapes in porcelain

The Australian landscape of home is the inspirational touchstone for the exuberantly coloured work of Pippin Drysdale. *Joanna Bird* talks to the artist to find out about her formative influences and working practice, honed over 30 years





Pippin Drysdale's fine porcelain pieces have featured in more than 450 exhibitions both in her native Australia and internationally, and she has had around 50 solo shows. But, like many success stories, hers has a humble beginning, and not without a few twists and turns. At the cottage where she still lives in Fremantle, Western Australia, her first calling was as a herb grower, for which her then-partner made terracotta planters in a wood-fired kiln. 'I decided to make some coil pots, which all blew up in the kiln because they had not been properly dried,' she remembers with a laugh.

TRAINING AND TRAVELS

However, Drysdale's curiosity had been piqued. 'I was desperate to know how to work with clay and thought I had better go and find out about it,' she explains. So, in 1982, she took a Diploma in Advanced Ceramics at the Western Australian School of Art and Design before going on a study tour to Russia and Italy, finishing in Colorado. 'I had discovered the Anderson Ranch Arts

Center, and decided to go and join them,' she recalls. 'So I sold every mug, jug and casserole that I had ever made, and with \$6,000 in my back pocket, off I went.'

At the Anderson Ranch she met Japanese-American ceramist Toshiko Takaezu (who called her 'Bo Peep') who became a mentor, mother figure and source of inspiration, introducing Drysdale to her impressive group of contacts. Takaezu pushed her, too, insisting that she give talks about pottery at august institutions like Princeton. 'I was thrown in at the deep end,' Drysdale exclaims. She also met the leading American ceramists Peter Voulkos and Daniel Rhodes. 'One evening Daniel was watching me and came over and said: "You've got the makings of a great potter". I have never forgotten those words,' she says. 'I've hung onto them through thick and thin ever since.'

Returning to Australia, Drysdale went back to study, undertaking a degree in Fine Art at the Western Australian Institute of Technology (now Curtin University). In 1991 she resumed her travels, working in an Italian maiolica factory in Perugia and then exhibiting the resultant body

of work in Tomsk and Novosibirsk, Russia. A subsequent study trip to Pakistan in 1999 proved particularly inspirational, and in 2000 she had her first solo exhibition in Australia at the Quadrivium Gallery in Sydney.

Drysdale's first solo show in Europe came in 2003 with Gallery Marianne Heller in Heidelberg; followed by a solo exhibition at the MAK Museum in Frankfurt. She was impressed by the 'intensity and seriousness' of the Germans. 'At that time, many collectors gifted my work to museums, but that doesn't seem to happen with the present generation,' she notes with some regret. In 2007 she had her first major retrospective, at the John Curtin Gallery, Curtin University, featuring over 350 works. 'It played a pivotal role in my career,' she says.

CREATIVE TURNING POINT

Then in 2016, Drysdale was invited by the curator and writer Wendy Gers, to participate in an exhibition at the Henan Museum in Zhengzhou, China. This opportunity gave rise to a series of work called *Devils Marbles*.

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The stunning assemblage of highly coloured pieces is based on a geological phenomenon of balanced rocks in Warumungu, in Australia's Northern Territory. The closed organic forms mark an important turning point in her work. She intuitively added lustres to some of the marbles; gold, platinum and silver – nothing was stinted, all are lusciously applied to maximise an exotic effect.

This concept opened up a whole new vision of creativity, which developed into a major exhibition called *Confluence* at the John Curtin Gallery. Similar works within this ongoing series have since been exhibited elsewhere in



PIPPIN'S PATH

- **1982:** Diploma in Advanced Ceramics, Western Australian School of Art and Design, Perth
- **1982:** study and work in Perugia, Italy; Anderson Ranch, Colorado, USA and San Diego, USA
- **1983:** sets up workshop in Fremantle
- **1985:** Bachelor of Art (Fine Art), Curtin University of Technology, Perth
- **1988:** Certificate of Excellence for Outstanding Achievement: *International Art Award*, New York, USA
- **1991:** first solo exhibitions in Russia
- **1994:** artist in residence at the Banff Centre for the Arts, Canada
- **1999:** represented Australia at the International Lustre Symposium, Italy
- **2007:** first retrospective, *Lines of Site*, at the John Curtin Gallery, Perth; given the prestigious *Master of Australian Craft Award*
- **2015:** *Living Treasure Award* from Western Australian Government
- **2018:** *Convergence* – 17 installations from the *Devils Marbles* collection (2017/18), John Curtin Gallery, Perth
- **2020:** Honorary Doctorate of Arts, Curtin University



Australia and at Chatsworth House in the UK. The latest evolution in the series, *Splendour at Black Rock*, currently features in a collaborative exhibition *An Idea Needing To Be Made* at the Heide Museum of Modern Art, Melbourne, which also features the luminaries Kate Malone and Alison Britton, amongst others.

INFLUENCES AND SUPPORT

Travel within Australia has been important to Drysdale and is the mainspring of her passion for vibrant colours. About 20 years ago she took a trip into the deep heart of the continent. The aerial perspective from the plane led her to look anew at her home country's big skies and expansive landscape, or as she puts it, 'the wonderful infinity of the deserts.' Over time, as this influence has worked its way through, she believes, her work has become more painterly.

Drysdale pays tribute to her very driven father who was a formative influence and great practical support in the building of her workshop and studio in Fremantle,

back in 1983, which is where she has stayed, restoring and improving this heritage property over time.

For nearly three decades she has worked alongside fellow potter (and surfing enthusiast) Warrick Palmateer. With typical generosity, Drysdale praises her younger artistic partner's incredible throwing skills. 'I am the luckiest bunny in the world to have someone make me the most incredible forms,' she says.

And it is on these deceptively delicate-looking forms that she works her particular decorative magic. The thrown vessels are bisque-fired, then sanded down 'to the softness of a baby's bottom – they need to be as perfect as possible,' explains Drysdale. Using a damp sponge, she sprays or pours coloured glaze into the pot's interior. After an overnight wait for the clay to absorb the moisture of the glaze, the piece is turned upside down on a sponge (to protect its rim) on a banding wheel. Drysdale then sprays the exterior, working from light colours to dark. Sometimes she will use white tin glaze for warmer, softer tones; on other pieces she might spray

several layers of different coloured glaze, so that they bleed together in an unpredictable, often fascinating way.

She then uses Liquatex – a white, water-based glue – as a resist agent. After applying a patch of this, she cuts it with contour-like lines, before brushing out the fine channels created with a soft brush. Once this incising work is done, she creates another coloured area, and then changes the direction of the lines within this area. After resting the pot overnight, she then fills the incised lines with another colour with a soft squirrel brush. Then, she rubs the glaze into the channels and, finally, sponges away any residue.

PROCESS AND CHALLENGES

Turning the pot upside down once again, Drysdale finishes the rim on the banding wheel. She brushes on different layers of colour on the rim inside and out, to get the final colour bleed she is searching for. 'It's when the process feels at its easiest and most natural that most of the gems emerge,' she says simply.

In terms of her public, Drysdale's biggest wish now is that more serious young people will collect her work. In terms of herself, she has certainly travelled far, in more ways than one. For someone who has admitted that prior to taking up ceramics she had often felt like a misfit, now, she says: 'I wake up every morning with a challenge... I just can't believe how privileged I am. My motto has always been to work hard, and to dedicate my life to the commitment of being an artist. It is my life. It has kept me sane.' ^{CB}

For more details, see Drysdale's work as part of *Auto Ritratto*, Joanna Bird Gallery, London, check website for details; joannabird.com and at Breakaway Country, Sabbia Gallery, Sydney, 22 July–15 August; sabiagallery.com

Images: courtesy of the artist and Joanna Bird Gallery