



PIPPIN DRYSDALE

STORY MAGGIE BAXTER



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To call ceramicist Pippin Drysdale a distinctly Western Australian artist is not a parochial statement. She has after all travelled frequently and widely, over the years drawing inspiration from sojourns in Italy, Russia and Pakistan. But it is irrefutable that her enduring passion, the one that reaches into the core of her soul, is her love for her home state, where she has lived most of her life exploring it, from the Tanami Desert and Bungle Bungles in the Kimberley to the more lush south-west, and stints on pastoral stations in the Pilbara and Gascoyne.

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PIPPIN DRYSDALE SAYS, "Landscape is all about colour, whether subtle and soft or vibrant with contrast." There is no intent to accurately describe a scene or to be pictorial. She captures fleeting moments of memory with a vision that is emotional and intuitive, remembering a sunset or cloudburst, looking at the earth and sky before and after rain, contrasting splurges of red, magenta, orange, yellow, green, blue and soft greys to recall ravines, chasms, outcrops and the screeching calls of corella birds.

As much as colour defines Drysdale's work so do the complex layers of finely incised and meticulously brushed lines on the surface of her vessels. These provide a flexible graphic language to describe tracking, mapping and traces of time in this most ancient of geologies.

In recent years her colour and mark-making have been soft and subtle, even pastel with a delicate, vertically linear quality. Not so in her most recent *Pilbara* series, in which loosely confident downward strokes contend with strong, rolling lines curling and winding around the pots. These give a clear definition to the comprehensive and daring colour palette that pits hue against hue with breathtaking boldness, emulating the intense play of light and shadow triggered by the uncompromising sun, and long tracks of railroad that stretch across hundreds of kilometres of spinifex desert. These landscapes are Western Australia at its most wildly beautiful – sharp, ostentatious, brazen, dangerous, mesmerising and addictive.

A careful and determined equilibrium is central to Drysdale's aesthetic. Viewed from above, deep voids of intense colour balance with the tracery of lines on the exterior. The delicate finesse of her elegant vessels is in contrast to the rugged and untamed land she is describing.



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Created in collaboration with fellow ceramicist Warwick Parmenteer, they subtly shift and change shape from series to series. Formerly tall and graceful, they are now slightly more curved and voluptuous in concert with the more undulating surface lines. The constant is the small base, which is designed specifically to give each vessel a sense of incredible lightness as though able to lift off and fly away.

For the past decade displays of single pots have been of far less interest to her than installations of groups, varying the individual components by height, circumference and tone within an overall colour palette, but sometimes throwing in one or more wild cards to unsettle the certainty of the assemblage. In this way she can expand her thoughts on place and time as though the memory of land she is describing moves slowly from dawn to dusk, or travels over hillocks through flat plains to pools at the bottom of a gorge.

Drysdale tends to work obsessively and with intense concentration in bursts lasting several months, followed by a period of rest and travel in which she allows ideas to percolate slowly in her mind until the next concerted production begins.

Although there is continuity in her work, each new series inevitably has a different feel, evolving from the last but with its own tale of place, time, vegetation and landform. As the narrative begins to take shape in her mind, she rethinks each interdependent component of the vessel, first the shape, then the colours and the mark-making.

Ceramics is as much about chemistry as art, and each ceramicist has a carefully compiled notebook of recipes, so when all the ingredients change, essentially it is back to square one with a big, hard thud. It is challenging enough to start any new series of works, but even more so

when everything is thrown into disarray because what was known, tried, true and tested suddenly becomes unavailable. That was the position that Drysdale (along with other Western Australian ceramicists) found herself in this year when their local suppliers closed and she had to source new glazes and frits from all over the country and overseas.

The texture and quantity of the frit, which is a white powder that acts as a melting agent for glazes, can considerably affect the resultant colour, and in Drysdale's case, where she uses multiple colours on one vessel, it is hard to get all the colours to fuse simultaneously.

With the deadline of upcoming exhibitions looming, she had to go back to basics and make colour test pieces individually and in combination at the same time she was producing the vessels. It was a very stressful situation that required a lot of chemistry and the help of an artist friend to work out.

Together they made numerous miniature bowls painted with equally numerous mixtures and permutations of colours, making notes of new recipes, kiln temperatures and firing times to see how each reacted one against the other. She decided to mill her own frit to approximate her preferred consistency. Colours changed, many for good, some (now discarded) not so, but overall, Drysdale feels that whatever the pressures and anxieties, somehow the colours in the *Pilbara* series have a more mystical quality than those used earlier.

Will this continue? Drysdale knows that when she begins the next series she will need to commit to a new frit, sourced from overseas and that inevitably this will mean that the testing will start all over again. Popular mythology equates the struggle of any artist with the

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excellence of the outcome. It is, as Drysdale says “just very very hard” and there is no question that the forthcoming gestation period will be difficult. But equally we can be certain that the new hues, tones and textures will emerge to describe all that is wild and wonderful in the land of vast grandeur that she so loves. ■

Pippin Drysdale is represented by Mossgreen, Melbourne, and Sabbia Gallery, Sydney
www.pippindrysdale.com
www.mossgreen.com.au
www.sabbiagallery.com

- 01 Kuniandi Range Great Sandy Desert 1722 - Tanami Mapping III Series, 2014, porcelain, 32 x 26cm
- 02 Kakadu Burn Installation - Tanami Mapping I and II Series, 2011, porcelain, sizes variable
- 03 Cats Paw Hill, Canning Stock Route - Tanami Mapping III Series, 2014, porcelain, 11 x 17cm
- 04 Rosella Siding - Karijini, 2015, porcelain, 26 x 22cm
- 05 Kalamina Gorge - Karijini, 2015, porcelain, 26 x 28cm
- 06 Echidna Chasm - Pilbara series, 2015, porcelain, 30 x 24cm
- 07 Devils Elbow Kimberley - Pilbara Series, 2015, porcelain, 32 x 29cm
- 08 Pippin Drysdale's WA studio, photo by Victor France
- 09 Pippin Drysdale at work
- 10 Here and Now Exhibition - Solstice Installation, 2014, porcelain, sizes variable
- 11 Pelican Pool I, II and III - Pilbara Series, 2015, porcelain, I - 13 x 18cm, II - 16 x 19cm, III - 113 x 16.5cm
- 12 Portrait of Pippin Drysdale, photo by France Andrijich
- 13 Rainbow Ledge - Breakaway - Pilbara Series, 2015, porcelain, 36 x 32cm
- 14 Lizard Siding - Pilbara Series, 2015, porcelain, 24 x 21cm

Courtesy the artist, Lawrence Wilson Art Gallery and the University of Western Australia