



THE FACE

VICTORIA LAURIE meets **PIPPIN DRYSDALE** Ceramic artist

THE past, present and future of ceramic artist Pippin Drysdale are represented on the kitchen bench between us, three exquisite vessels from different phases of her life.

There is a tall, slender bowl whose riotously-hued surface in azure, cadmium yellow and deep green glows like an oriental rug.

"I visited Pakistan in 2000 and loved the rugs and weavings so much, I wanted to bring a whole planeload back," she says, launching into vivid tales of a past in which she befriended a Pashtun doctor and travelled on the Karakoram highway to the Hindu Kush.

"I created a whole series of bowls about Pakistan called God is Great because I thought it got such a bad press and didn't deserve it.

"This one is present tense, really," Drysdale continues, caressing a severely elegant vessel in grey charcoal, "but it shows the way I am changing from being too disciplined to finding a balance between restraint and spontaneity. I suppose that's what I'm looking for now."

The third vessel is her newest work, an upside-down bowl shape that is replicated in dozens more on the table behind us. Huddled like small mountain ranges, the smooth cones hint tantalisingly at Drysdale's future move into more sculptural forms.

"These closed forms have forced me into being very exploratory," the artist says, resting a lit cigarette on the windowsill before pouring me a coffee. "I guess that's the good thing, that I'm always living on the edge and I'm never satisfied. So each piece has its own personality."

Five minutes in Drysdale's presence and you know her art reflects an even bigger personality; her deep throaty laugh is born of delight in people's company, excessive smoking and the odd glass of wine.

"A female Falstaff, larger than life, colourful and generous of spirit" is how one friend describes her, and Drysdale doesn't mind a bit.

It's easy to visualise the picture of childhood she paints, the naughty, myopic daughter of a wealthy Perth family. Luckily, with the silver spoon came thick glasses and an ambitious streak. "I was Dad's little girl and he gave me the big picture," Drysdale says affectionately. "I've never wanted to be just a mugs, jugs and casserole person. I've always wanted to make my mark."

Although not exactly a household name,

Drysdale was recently honoured by the Craft Council of Australia as one of 10 Masters of Australian Craft. Now in her mid-60s, she has little left to prove, although a healthy dose of self-doubt keeps her striving for perfection.

Her work, from tiny goblets to audacious Ali Baba-style giant pots, is in the National Gallery in Canberra and dozens of public and private collections across the country.

The Victoria and Albert Museum in London will exhibit her pots and bowls next January and two big solo shows are scheduled this year in Germany and Japan.

"The Germans are so thorough: they come and ponder over the vessels, the form, the decoration, the surface, the colour. They are so appreciative of the technique. It made me realise how starved we are in Australia for that wonderful sense of appreciation."

Drysdale has been working day and night for months to meet a more imminent deadline: in June, a retrospective of her work will open at Curtin University's John Curtin Gallery in Perth, and an illustrated book by Ted Snell, *Pippin Drysdale: Lines of Site*, will be launched at the exhibition. "Just as well I work, sleep and eat in the same place," she moans, rubbing her lower back after sitting at the potting wheel for five hours straight.

We step through the back door of her cluttered Fremantle cottage, down a few steps and into the open-air studio in her back garden, with its electric potter's wheel, firing kilns and shelves stacked with naked-looking white pots.

For years Drysdale kneaded heavy blocks of porcelain clay into blended batches that were elastic enough to withstand firing. "And then it got to me with my back, and the wonderful Warwick [her assistant] now does the pugging and turning. He prepares the shapes and I say 'belly out' or 'make it taper in more.'"

Then Drysdale incises lines on to the fine porcelain surface with sharp razor blades, filling each furrow with a colour glaze, sponging it back and adding another. "The big pieces take a day and a half because incising takes hours," she explains. "I have umpteen different colours and I do thousands of tests, so you'll get subtle variation in each piece."

The tracks of Drysdale's colourful career have left imprints on her pot-making. There was the "comfrey herb garden lady" of her early adulthood, when she started throwing rough clay



pots and filled them with exotic herbs from her own commercial nursery. Then came the alternative, (“almost Orange Person”) tree-hugging forest dweller, and roles as wife and as a mother to son Jason. Then she studied for an advanced diploma in ceramics, interspersed with overseas study tours to learn from distinguished US and Japanese potters. In recent years, a unique series of pots has emerged each time from eventful trips to the Canadian Rockies, Italy and the northwest frontier of Pakistan, which is her personal Shangri-la.

“I did a trip right up through the Swat Valley, following the Indus River to Chitral on the border between Pakistan and Afghanistan. We drove in a jeep through these bloody great mountains and amazing valleys,” she says, her hands swooping down to indicate their extreme depth. “You’re high as a kite and you completely shed your inhibitions in a place like that. It made me feel 10 years younger.” Her huge laugh bounces once more off the kitchen walls.

Hanging high above Drysdale’s head are Aboriginal paintings by celebrated artists such as Queenie McKenzie and Kitty Kantilla, both of whom she watched paint for hours during a memorable 1999 trip to northern Australia. I observe how strikingly similar are the smooth

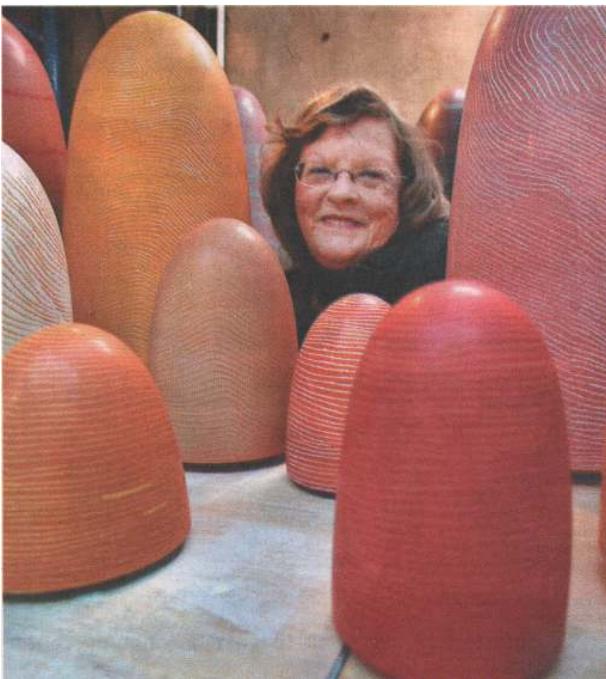
cone shapes painted by McKenzie of the Bungle Bungle Ranges and Drysdale’s cluster of upside-down-bowl shapes on the table below.

Drysdale nods in agreement. “It’s interesting how a journey like that can impress you, but at the same time it can take some years for it to come out,” she says. “We flew through the Tanami Desert and camped in the Bungle Bungles with all those wonderful ochres and red iron linear grooves that circle around them. I’d like to think I’ve captured something of the macroscopic quality of light, the linearity and the oldness of our continent.”

A large vessel sculpted out of fine porcelain is a fragile thing, she explains: “You’re really defying gravity.” Less than half the pots emerge from the kiln’s flames with glaze and shape as she envisaged them. Many simply crack.

Drysdale turns her gaze back to her past, present and future vessels. “These are extraordinary works, the sort of thing I could never do again,” she says, examining them fondly. “They are the product of a particular mood and time. Each piece is always unique.”

Pippin Drysdale: Lines of Site, John Curtin Gallery, Perth, June 22-August 10



CLOSE-UP

Big break: Exhibiting at the Museum of Applied Art in Frankfurt in 2000, which opened up the European and British markets to me.

Career highlight: Studying with Japanese-American potter Toshiko Takaezu, an amazing inspiration.

Career lowlight: Can’t think of one. Being an artist is about elation as well as down times, and I’ve always felt positive.

Favourite potter: Daniel Rhodes, almost a spiritual influence, who told me, “You’ve got the makings of a great potter.”

Guilty pleasures: Good food, wine, cigarettes and organic butter.