



PHOTO: VICTOR FRANCE

Pippin Drysdale, 'Aurora Australis', 1996, ceramic, ht 45 cm. Collection: Art Gallery of WA

## LOVE OF LANDSCAPE

Ceramic artist Pippin Drysdale is essentially a painter whose chosen canvases are the slab, chalice, goblet, crucible and bowl. Profile by Dorothy Erickson.

Photography by Victor France and Robert Frith.

THE majority of Australia's population lives in an urban environment clinging limpet-like to the periphery of the continent where horizons are hemmed in by the cubic forms of buildings. That "wide brown land", that "sunburnt country" of Dorothea Mackellar, synonymous with our perception of our nation, is not the daily milieu for most Australians. Tall skies and a wide horizon line are really only seen by city dwellers when they visit the beach. Perhaps this is why so many flock to the sea in summer and also why so many are attracted to the recent pots of ceramist Pippin Drysdale. She is an artist whose emotional and intuitive response to the landscape provides us with a poignant essence of bush, beach and elsewhere.

Passionately fond of Australia's expansive spaces, she wrote in a 1994 profile: 'All my life I have been surrounded by wide open spaces – the land and the

sea – and fascinated by their contrasts, light, colour, space, texture and spirituality.'

Rich painterly glazes are Drysdale's forte. Suffused sunrises and glowing sunsets above a horizon line evocative of the "breakaway" country, contrast with crystalline foregrounds indicating vegetation. Her plainer forms are overlaid with crackle resembling the crazing of a parched lake, as in *Horizon* in the collection of Australian Capital Equity, or showing the "glint of gold" where seams of lustre encircle a pot, as in the *Pinnacles Series* in the collection of Manly Art Gallery. Sometimes a golden texture, as in *Desert Plains*, could indicate a harvest of ripe wheat or native grasses, heads nodding in the breeze against the vermillion background of the earth from which it came. At times the results appear to resemble semi-precious stones, at others the landscape itself. All of these and more are seen in the major



body of work she has produced since mid-1994. This affinity with her country and her interpretation of it have won her plaudits both at home and abroad. Her résumé lists a formidable number of residencies, awards, inclusion in books and exhibitions. Her work is in the public collections of the Art Galleries of WA, Queensland, NT, Tasmania's Queen Victoria Museum in Launceston, Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences, New Zealand Art Gallery in Auckland, Tomsk and Novosibirsk State Galleries in Siberia, Russia and numerous regional, corporate and private collections internationally. The major omission is the national collection. Significantly, from her 1998 exhibition at Quadrivium Gallery in Sydney, the majority of the pieces were sold to German and American collectors. The work speaks to nationals of other countries as well as touching a chord with those to whom it belongs.

Drysdale, *née* Carew-Reid, is an artist imbued with a love of the landscape instilled from time spent on family properties in both the south and the north of Western Australia. A latecomer to art as a career, Drysdale graduated from Curtin University in 1986 following a grounding in the excellent "Advanced Ceramics" course at Perth Technical School under David Hunt. Early work focused on the south-west forests and environmental degradation. The painterly surfaces were covered with the graphic and gestural marks of an abstract expressionist. The work was often dark and sombre, reflecting not only the deep shadows of the forests but also the imminent destruction of the pristine wildernesses. As a former forest dweller and "The Comfrey Herb Lady", Drysdale was passionate about the loss and, as she considered it an important duty of artists to assist good causes, attempted to change attitudes through her work.

Since 1991 she has maintained an international profile with lecture tours and residencies. An inveterate traveller, bon vivant, raconteur and generous friend, her contacts from her past as well as the present have introduced her to interesting and educative experiences. One such was the opportunity to become a decorative artist-in-residence at the Grazia Deruta factory, Italy for three months in 1991. This was followed by time at Swansea in Wales and a further three-month artistic exchange with Tomsk and Novosibirsk in Siberia, Russia the same year. With this sort of intense program, where subliminal influences are constantly at work, she and her art are products of diverse transcultural experience. Dedicated to advancing her art, she builds on contacts made with potters in Australia and those she made in America in 1982 when she studied with Daniel Rhodes and Toshiko Takaesku. Drysdale has undoubtedly learnt from those with whom she has come into contact, but the influences are more conceptual and philosophical than visual. The philosophy and example, not to mention the work ethic, learnt from Takaesku still support her today. It was Takaesku's advice that set her on her path and permitted the growth of the artist she has become. He told her to forget the fashionable, rustic Zen aesthetic traditions, to create her own sensibilities and adapt her techniques to suit her own environment.

Drysdale is essentially a painter whose chosen canvases are the slab, chalice, goblet, crucible and bowl. The strength of her practice is as a colourist. With time, the spatial qualities, style, motif and figuration have become more organised. Time spent in Italy and Russia in 1991 saw a structured approach



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*'Landscape II', from the Logging on Parchment Series, 1990, 45 x 39 x 7 cm*

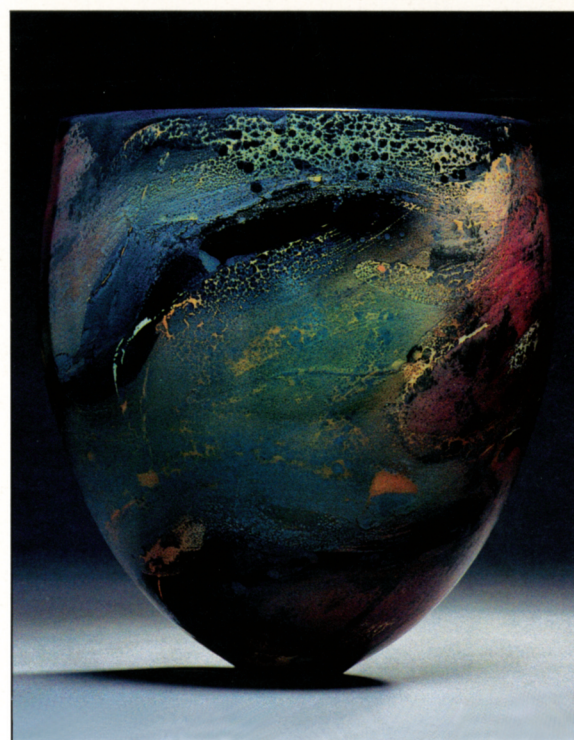


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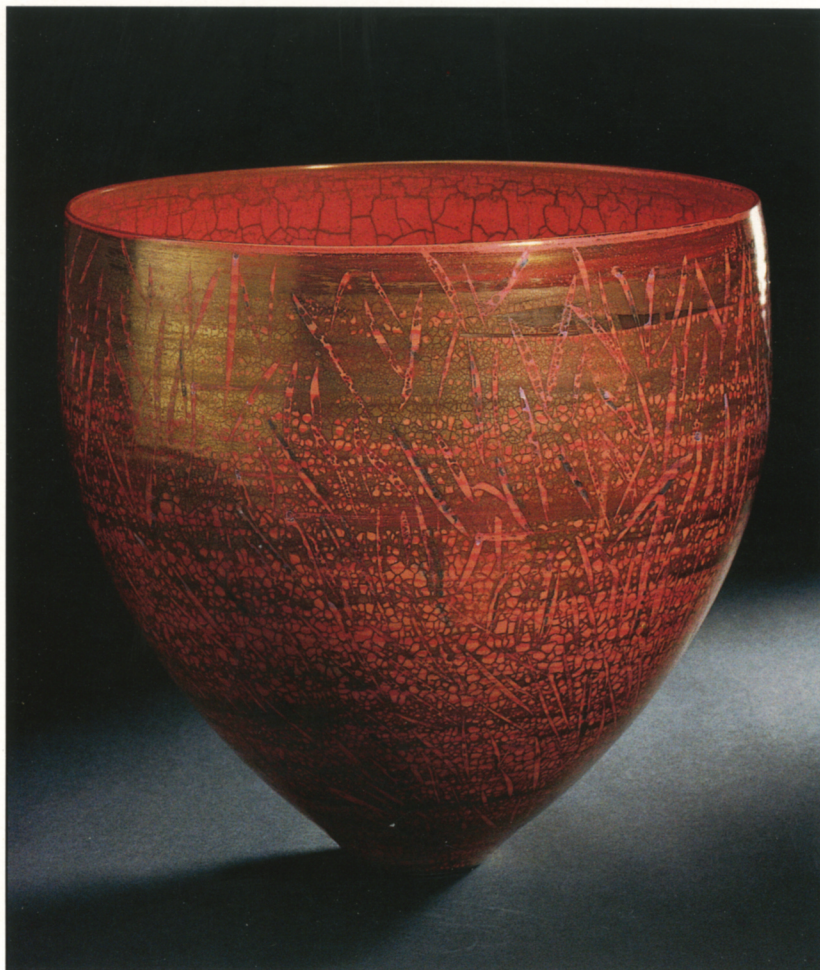
*'Geiki', 1996, ht 30 cm. Collection: Wool Board, Seoul, Korea*

*'Southern Twilight', from the Landscape Lustre Series, 1993, 13 x 11 cm. Collection: Ron & Sandra Wise*



PHOTO: VICTOR FRANCE





'Desert Plains', 1995, ht 28 cm

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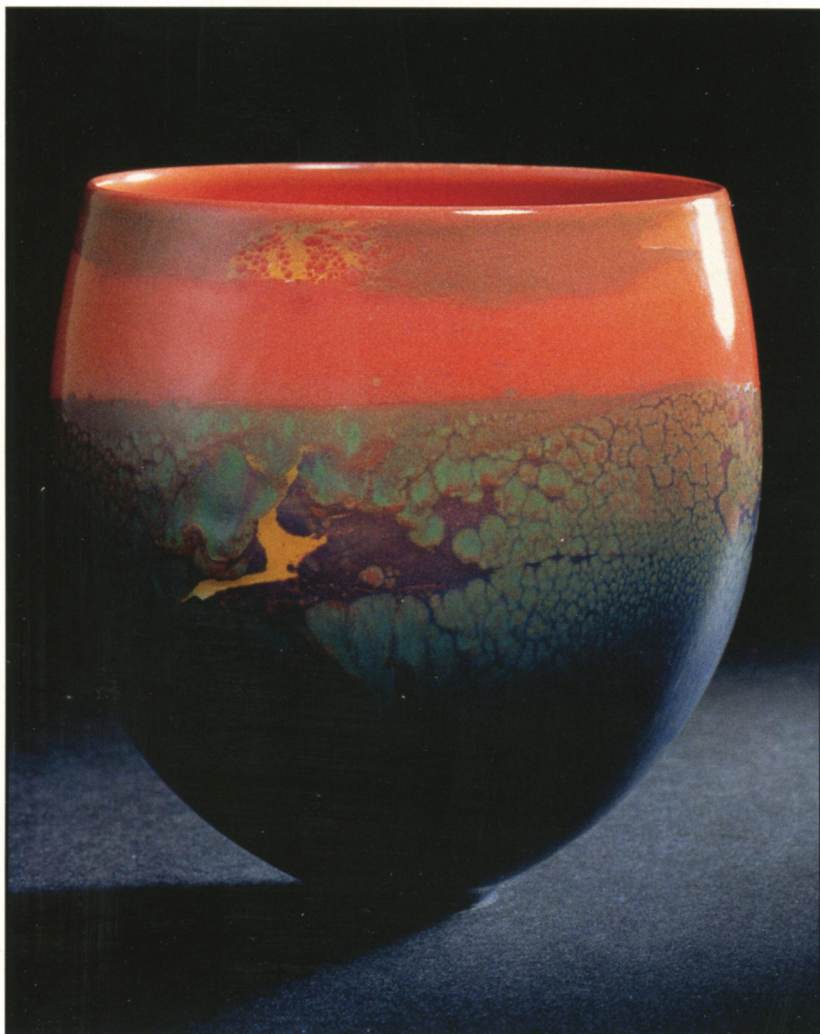


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absorbed from the confined surrounds as much as the traditional way of working at the pottery in Derruta. An exuberance of colour, pattern, lustre and onion-dome forms became part of her *oeuvre*, following time spent later that year in Russia. Her imagery and sensation were galvanised and modified to create the *Carnivale*, *Effigy* and *OTT Series* dominated by vivid purple, crimson and lustre.

This frenetic work was followed by a return to her roots – a tranquil desert interlude in 1993 with bowls suffused with one or two colours rimmed by lustre. *Desertscape*, now in a private collection in the USA, and *Southern Twilight*, in the collection of Ron and Sandra Wise, exemplify this. In the former a red ochre base burns under a pitch-dark sky. In the latter the outside of the form has the lilac of a dawn sky contrasted with the rich golden lustre of the interior. Since 1994, Drysdale's work has drawn on her love of the Australian outback. The vastness, endless space and the rich reds of the earth, the glorious sunsets, the delicate hues of dawn, the subtle tones of salt-encrusted lakes and the riotous colours of the spring wildflower displays, speak to her. This work is quintessentially Australian, despite time spent in the Canadian Rockies in 1994. The *Pinnacles Series* is as much about the local petrified forest forms of that name as it is about the steep mountains of Banff. In other linkages, the forms which are her canvas at times echo those of the crucibles of the WA goldmining industry, while the palette re-creates the autumnal tones of the desert landscape, as in *Saltbush Plains* in the Noakes Collection. The delicate lines encircling the forms of the *Circles in Space* are both broken and continuous, a subtle interruption to regularity which tease the senses and focus concentration on the object.

Porcelain forms, from tiny "limoge" goblets to pots of almost Ali Baba proportions, are thrown and turned by Drysdale and assistants. The larger pots are the work of "tech" graduate Warwick Palmenteer. After his visits, her studio is filled with serried rows of ghostly forms waiting to be brought to life under her brush. The painted surfaces are complex feats of technical virtuosity – a type of controlled "happen-chance". Glazes react with each other, underglazes

Left: 'Fly Flat Diggings', from the *Eastern Goldfields Series*, 1996, ht 25 x 12 cm



PHOTO: VICTOR FRANCE

'Effigy IV', 1992, 7 x 58 cm. Collection: Manly Art Gallery



with lustres, with crackle and to other pots in the kiln, and so it's only after considerable research and development that Drysdale has reached the point where she is in control of most of what emerges from her kiln. Placing a surface on a pot is rather like the process of etching, where many things are done in reverse and it is only after the various overlays are planned and the "pulls" are complete that you know if you have a prize or a plodder. Drysdale's wastage is particularly high as she pushes to achieve technically and artistically difficult results. Fortunately, she has received four Australia Council Development Grants over the 13 years of her practice and is one of two 1998 ArtsWA Fellows. This sort of support has been pivotal in allowing her to develop the technical facility necessary to express her colourist aesthetic with supreme confidence.

The progression, as Drysdale mastered the various difficult techniques, is evident in the surfaces of the pots. The crystalline glazes, married with brush and resist, produced the luminous landscape series of 1996. *Noon Heat* shows what the combinations of techniques can achieve when handled in a confident manner by someone with an eye for colour and form and an intimate technical knowledge of her medium. This series was produced after a spring visit to Leonora in the remote Eastern Goldfields of WA. The resulting works of art eloquently evoke a sense of place and have been eagerly sought, particularly for large corporate collections.

A significant year for Drysdale was 1995, when she really came to prominence by winning the Perth Craft Award, the Newcastle Ceramic Purchase Award and was represented in the major Australian exhibition "Delinquent Angel: Australian Historical, Aboriginal and Contemporary Ceramics" at the prestigious Museo Internazionale delle Ceramiche in Faenza, Italy – the holy grail for ceramic artists.

Drysdale's ceramics are characterised by formal simplicity enlivened with a painterly surface which, at times, could almost be described as chaotic. *Lost in a Sandstorm* almost envelops you with its swirling heat. *Geiki*, in the Wool Board Offices in Korea and *Aurora Australis*, now in the collection of the Art Gallery of WA, are two magnificent pots of an audacious scale, some 45 cm tall.

Each piece is a virtuoso performance that she starts with trepidation. Like any painter, the first mark

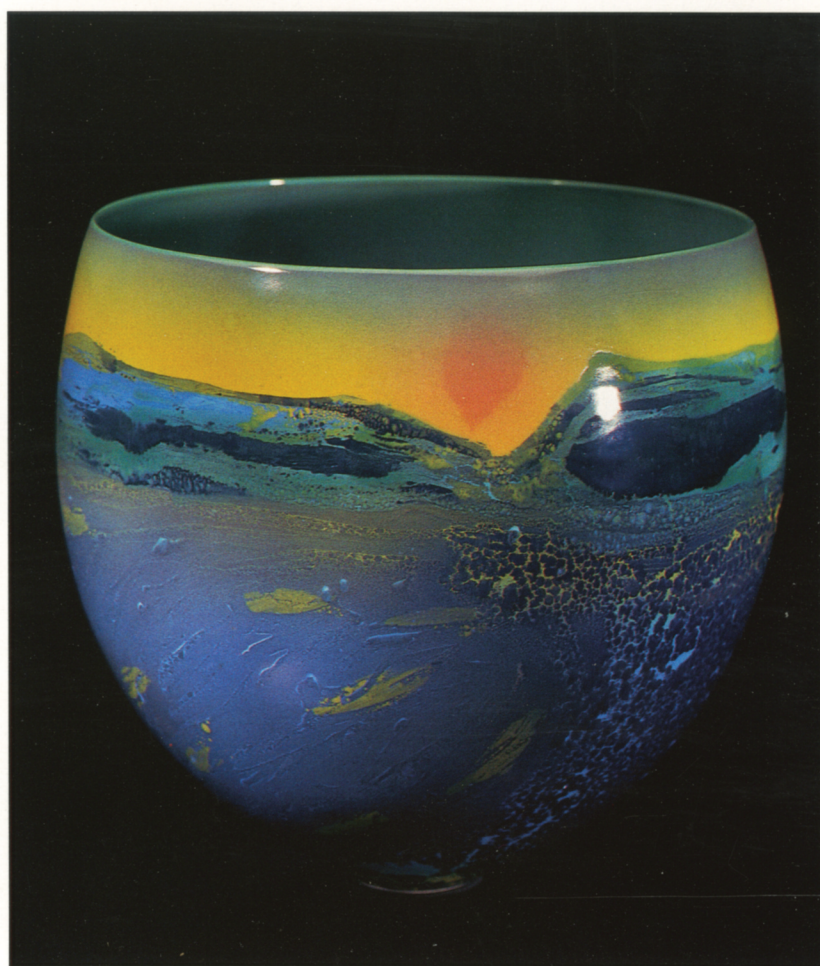


PHOTO: ROBERT FRITH

is the hardest. The vessels, having previously been designed and made as a separate exercise, sit cold, creamy white and formally naked, waiting to be dressed. One of the most successful themes that has come through in this body of work is that of sunrise and sunset in the landscape. The controlled collision of brushed glaze with the crystalline growth structure of the chemicals, produces effects evocative of forests, lakes or scrub on wide plains or undulating terrain. The brushed horizon line creates the break-away of a butte or the wide curved surface of the ocean. Above this a radiant colour in hues of yellow or pink rise to the rim. The subtle peach shades of the *Fly Flat Diggings* pots, one of which is in the

*'In the Wet', 1997,  
ht 30 cm*

*Below left: 'Horizon',  
1995, diam. 30 cm.  
Collection: Australian  
Capital Equity*

*Below: Surface detail  
of after firing*

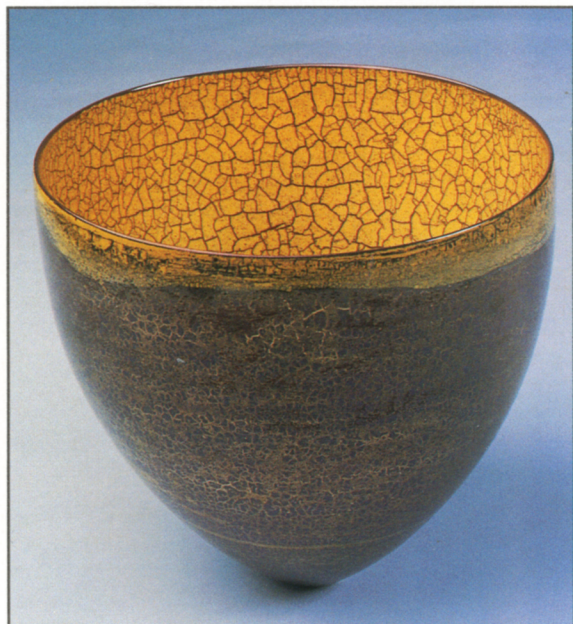


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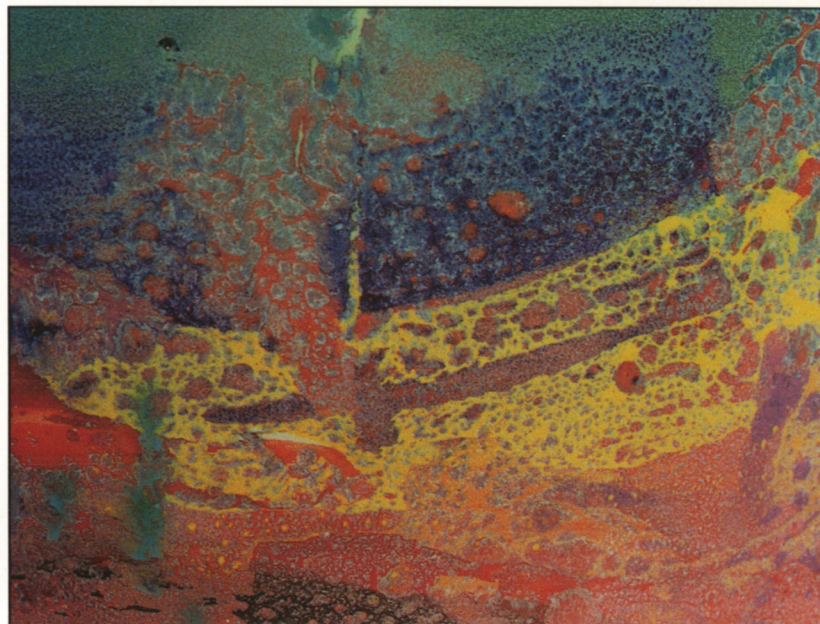


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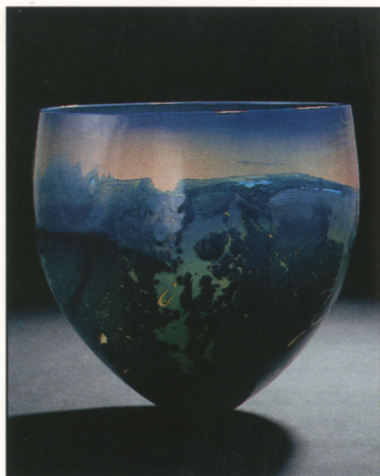


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'Tempest', 1997, ht 32 cm

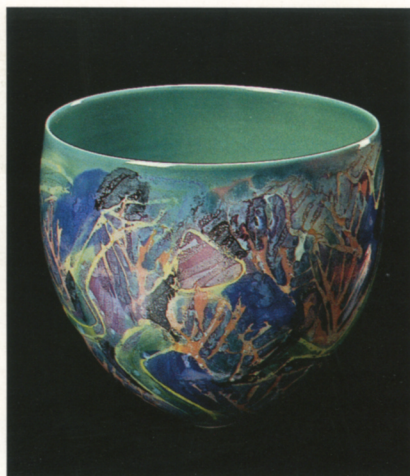


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'Beginning of the Myrtle', 1997, ht 22 cm

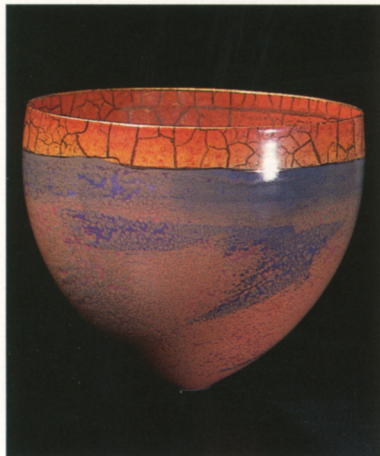


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'The Resolution', 1998, ht 23 x 20 cm.

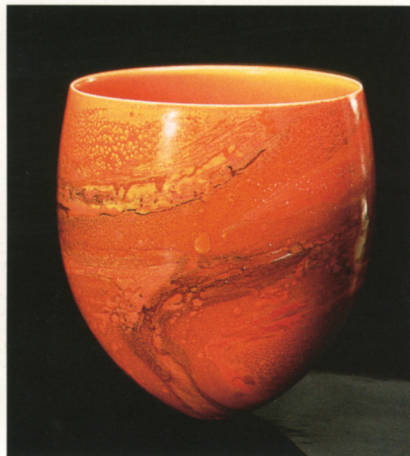


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'Lost in a Sandstorm', 1997, ht 19 cm.

Below: 'Basalt Genesis', 1998, ht 33.5 x 29 cm. The Sinclair Collection, USA

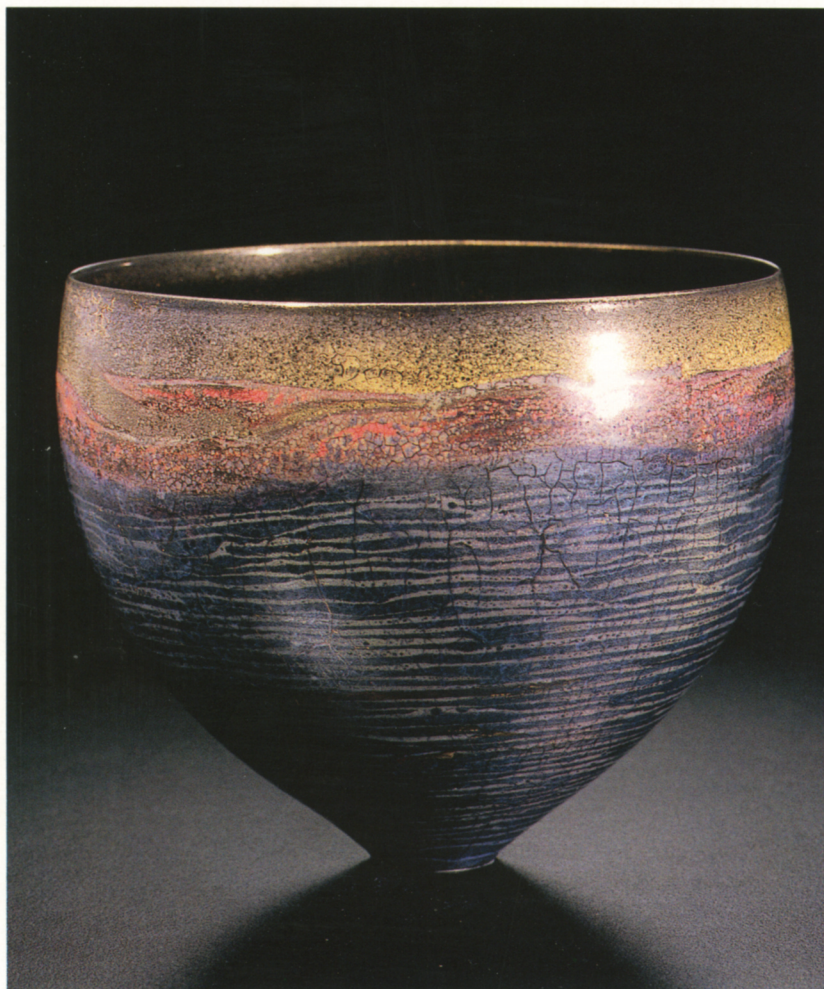


PHOTO: ROBERT FRITH

Auckland Art Gallery, are a perfect counterpoint to the turquoise of the mulga scrub over the brown earth. Or could it be a dark lake on which lilies are floating? The work invites this leaping imagination. One can read so many different narratives in each surface. It is as if the ancient land has unveiled some of its mystery to a master to allow "city folk" the chance to share the eternal mystery of the outback. They can certainly admire works like *The Resolution*, which has a lightning-flooded sky illuminating the violet hues of a tropical evening embodying the arrival of "the Wet" to bring relief to the parched earth. This contrasts with the more muted colouring of *Basalt Genesis*, which was sold in New York to a major American collector.

In a different vein is *Beginning of the Myrtle*. The wildflowers on the road verge flash by, leaving "after-images" on the retina. The myrtle among the catkins of the grevillea on the road out of Southern Cross is captured against the green of the new winter grass. The brush marks of the resist are more evident in this than many other pots, but the energy with which it was created is still imprisoned in the pot. Despite the dogged determination it often takes to bring her inspiration to the public, this side is not obvious in the finished object. The immediacy of impact and the freshness of appearance belie the ground-work that goes into producing the final result.

The inspired character of Drysdale's current vessels is an accumulation of subliminal, abstract forces of both Nature and culture acting in symbiosis. They include: her youth on the family properties in The Kimberley; the example and sculptures of her ancestor Sir Bertram McKennal; the paintings of Fred Williams; the photography of Richard Woldendorp and Dorothy Erickson; the forces of Nature that sculpt the land itself; the shared experiences, endless discussion and criticism with friends of each offering from the kiln, together with many hours of preparatory research into her media. All of this, melded together, has contributed to an informed and confident approach which allows free rein with intuition when she takes up the brush. Works such as *Tempest* are the result. As Margaret Moore has written, 'Drysdale is aware that her "themes" are living forces and although they may be of the earth they cannot be grounded by an earthly art form.'

Ten solo exhibitions over the past five years, as well as numerous major group exhibitions, workshops and residencies, is a punishing pace. Formerly she worked in cycles, from turbulence to peace and back again, but with this recent body of work has come stability and maturity – a sustained development that marries quietness with chaos. In early July, 1998 she worked toward an exhibition curated by the Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences in Sydney for Hokkaido Museum of Modern Art in Japan. On the completion of this work she embarked on a tour of central and northern Australia by light aircraft, attracted by aerial perspective and the contact with Aboriginal culture. This contact will undoubtedly bring changes to her work. Whatever the input, Pippin Drysdale will remain a virtuoso skilled with stains, glazes and lustre; a magician who absorbs the essence of her surroundings and transforms elegant porcelain shapes into objects of desire.

#### Dorothy Erickson

Dr Dorothy Erickson is an artist, writer and historian based in Perth, WA. She exhibits her jewellery internationally, co-edits Craftwest and is currently writing a book on West Australian designer/makers.