

Living Treasures: Masters of Australian Craft
\\ Prue Venables



Education Kit

Australian
Design
Centre

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Introduction

Acclaimed ceramicist Prue Venables is the ninth artist in the Australian Design Centre's series *Living Treasures: Masters of Australian Craft*.

Living Treasures is a series of solo exhibitions honouring eminent Australian craftspeople, celebrating their mastery of skill, their achievements and the unique place they occupy in the national design culture.

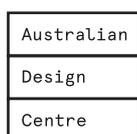
The works in this exhibition explore the significance of everyday objects through multiple sequences of forms in porcelain, with additional elements in metal and wood. The forms are simple and elegant, with a minimal colour palette and create a distinctive visual language.

Living Treasures: Masters of Australian Craft \ Prue Venables is an ADC ON TOUR national touring exhibition opening at fifteen locations across Australia from 2019 to 2022. The full touring schedule can be found here: <https://australiandesigncentre.com/prue-venables/exhibition-prue-venables/>

The exhibition is accompanied by a book of the same name featuring essays by the artist Prue Venables, UK ceramic artist and writer Alison Britton OBE and educator and ceramacist Neville French with photography by Terence Bogue, and a film made by Angus Lee Forbes.

This resource was developed for the Australian Design Centre by Melinda Young. Melinda Young is a contemporary jeweller and craftsperson whose current work engages with the idea of 'place'. Her practice is underpinned by playful explorations of materiality and meaning. Alongside her making practice, Melinda has spent the past 20 years working as an educator, curator and gallery manager, she is currently an Associate Lecturer at UNSW Art & Design.

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About the Exhibition



Prue Venables in her studio. Photo by Angus Lee Forbes

Acclaimed ceramicist Prue Venables is the ninth artist in the Australian Design Centre (ADC) series *Living Treasures: Masters of Australian Craft*, showcasing new work by master craftspeople with more than three decades of excellence in their chosen discipline.

‘In Prue’s work, shapes that are so familiar to the domestic landscape are taken to a whole new level, giving us a symphony of ceramic nuance. Included in many public and private collections worldwide, Prue Venables’ works explore complex and unusual approaches to working with porcelain, challenge the significance of daily objects and highlight the richness that they bring to our lives.

Forms that are deceptively simple, stand quietly, with light dancing on the sprung tension of their rims, their softly melting forms inviting touch. Venables’ major body of work for this exhibition explores the significance of ordinary objects through multiple sequences of forms in porcelain, with additional elements in metal and wood.’¹

In writing about her work, Prue Venables frequently muses on her childhood, recalling the events and experiences of her early life that formed her and now inform her artistic practice. She says: ‘For as long as I can remember I have been a maker of things. Watching my mother started it all. My mother was always doing something with her hands and the sight of those busy fingers – as they sewed, gardened, painted and cooked throughout my childhood – is memorable still.’

The resonant moments of Prue’s life, such as her childhood experiences studying science and playing music make themselves known in her work. She says: ‘the ability of handmade objects to hold and celebrate the essence of their maker. It is the mark and expression of hands, of thought, energy and personality, the distillation and imprint of life, all melding together into a final presence that drives my practice.’²

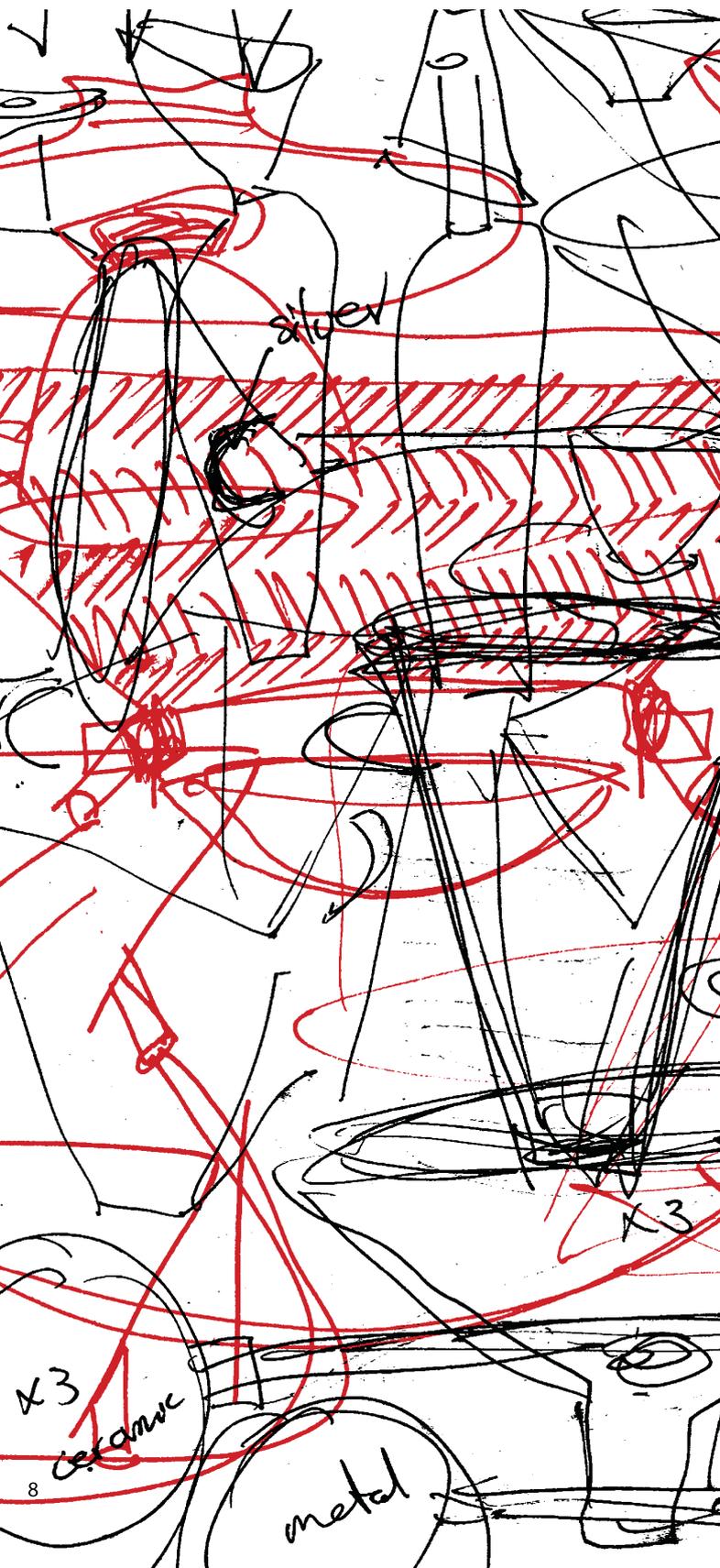
Venables work has shifted over the course of her career from decorated surfaces and utilitarian function to forms that merely suggest use and are devoid of overt surface decoration. The stillness evoked by her work belies its richness and complexity. ‘Her graceful forms are made to be used and handled but also embody sculptural and spatial interactions to reflect musical rhythm and even a quiet pause for breath.’³

1 Cahill, Lisa. Prue Venables: Living treasure [online]. *Journal of Australian Ceramics*, The, Vol. 58, No. 1, Apr 2019: 32-33

2 Venables, Prue. Melding together [online]. *Journal of Australian Ceramics*, The, Vol. 58, No. 1, Apr 2019: 66-68. Availability: <https://search.informit.com.au/documentSummary.dn=303331843928824;res=JELHSS|ISSN:1449-275X>. [Cited 04 Jun 19]

3 <http://www.beavergalleries.com.au/artist/prue-venables/>

How to use this Resource



This education resource takes key themes and influences in Venables' practice, drawing heavily on Venables' own descriptions of the formative ideas underpinning her practice and unpacking them via a series of activities to engage students. The aim of the activities is to extend students' understanding of the themes in Prue Venables' work as well as awakening imaginative material play through interacting with objects, making, drawing and writing.

The resource is designed for students of all ages and abilities. The selected themes have been expanded for their relatability and draw on the work of other artists and designers whose work plays with some of the ideas addressed.

Activities can be adapted to suit a range of different educational environments and are not limited to students studying ceramics.

The resource is designed to reflect Venables' practice. She says: 'I like to work across a theme, making a logical extension from one thing to another, taking information and skills, and using them for the next object... there may be several themes but each have cross-connections.'¹

Each theme is designed to follow on from the previous one and build on the ideas generated. Integrated throughout are prompts for students to make entries in a journal – embedded in each thematic section are suggestions for journal activities – providing the opportunity for students to make links between each theme and develop a document based on their research.

The themes covered are:

- Memory Objects: The Things That Surround Us
- Still Life
- Utility
- Hybrid Objects
- Music (and Silence)

Illustrations from Prue Venables' journal . Photo courtesy of the artist.

¹ P. Venables, 'From then to now...', Prue Venables: Living Treasures: Masters of Australian Craft, Sydney, Australian Design Centre, 2019, p.78

The Journal



Photographs of Prue Venables' journals. Photo by Terence Bogue.

Integral to Prue Venables creative practice and that of many artists, craftspeople and designers is the habit of keeping a journal. Journals are the place for sketching and recording observations; where technical and theoretical research is noted and reflected upon; ideas are drawn, annotated and developed and inspiring or thought-provoking images are stored. Prue Venables makes slow and measured use of time in her approach to making and the practice of keeping a journal of ideas reflects this, her journals are filled with notes, iterative sketches of forms, reference images of metal, plastic and historical objects.

The artist's journal provides a space for creative engagement with the world and importantly for reflection, it is the space for enquiry, research and the building of understanding. Ceramicists need to be meticulous in their approach to the technical aspects of practice, recording glaze recipes, kiln temperatures, the correct timing for firings or interventions in forms and the behaviour of different clay bodies – the journal is the site for this practice. The journal is evidence that underpinning skill and ideas development is a willingness to explore materials and push their possibilities through material play and invention, process and material engagement these ideas are integral to Prue Venables' approach to making.

Throughout this Education Resource you will see this symbol indicating an opportunity for journal work. 

You will find references to symbols, they refer to:



Think

Investigate and research before you visit



Explore

The exhibition through questions and activities



Extend

The exhibition through questions and activities

Objects move us, they tell stories about families, the places we have been to or come from. Many people collect different types of objects and these can reflect personal interests and narratives. Objects connect us, they provide opportunities for conversation and discovery, bridging generations and cultures. Venables creates groups of objects that refer to the grouping of objects remembered from her childhood that tell stories or evoke memories. These groups of objects come together in careful arrangements to present quiet narratives. The clues to the stories Venables tells are often found in the titles of her work, such as *Esme's Dressing Table* or *Betty's Kitchen*.



Esme's dressing table, 2017, details. Limoges porcelain, thrown and altered, Jingdezhen porcelain, cast, silver, copper, thread, bristles, various dimensions. Photo by Terence Bogue.

Think

What sorts of objects are there in your house? Do you or your family members collect anything?

Explore:

Research one of the objects in your house and write a short biography of it. This could involve speaking to a family member about the history of the object or undertaking research in the library or on the internet. Draw the object to illustrate your written description.

Extend:

Write a detailed description of an object in your house and give it to a fellow student to draw or make in clay using your words only as a guide. ✍️

- For older students – describe an object from memory while a fellow student takes notes and then draws or makes that object in clay. ✍️
- How can seemingly unrelated objects come together to tell a story – bring together a group of random objects from your home and write a short story connecting them using narrative. Draw a picture of these objects. ✍️

Theme: Still Life



Betty's Kitchen, 2017 Limoges porcelain, thrown and altered, silver, copper, thread, various dimensions. Photo by Terance Boague.

The work of Prue Venables is highly skilled. Her mastery of techniques and materials mean that the works themselves are rendered effortless to the viewer. In making her work, she is motivated by a search for simplicity and quietness¹ creating 'assemblages or groups of objects that lend themselves to display as much as to use.'² The result of this is that the inventiveness and the diversity of references underpinning the work also fade away, allowing the forms to stand 'innocently'.³

This leaves the viewer free to notice the quiet details of the forms, their inter-relationships and gestural suggestions are allowed to flourish and the eye is drawn as much to the spaces between the forms as to the forms themselves. Sometimes the titles of Venables' work draw us into a story, at other times the titles are simply descriptive, the undecorated forms with their muted, monochromatic glazing are left to speak for themselves, allowing us as viewers to bring our own experiences to understanding the work.

Alison Britton says of this aspect of Venables' practice that 'The relationships between objects, as in all manifestations of "still life", are very important. Like resolving harmony in music, grouping is the final point of it, though it remains fluid; we can interact and move it around. It is a deceptive simplicity of aim, one that also reflects autobiography and adjustment in terms of remembered objects and personal history.'⁴

A still life is a work of art consisting of mostly inanimate subject matter and typically commonplace objects which are either man made or natural. Still life is one of the principle genres of Western art with its origins in the Middle Ages and ancient Greco-Roman art. Still life painting emerged as a distinct specialisation in Western Art by the 16th century and has remained significant. A still life allows artists a great deal of freedom to experiment with arrangements of elements within the composition of an artwork. For Prue Venables, creating still life compositions with her vessels and objects allows for 'the gathering of great assemblies of different pieces in terms of colour, material, scale, touch, and texture.'⁵

1 P. Venables, 'Prue Venables', Australian Ceramics Community (website) <https://www.australianceramicscommunity.com/listing/prue-venables/> (accessed 31 May 2019)

2 Britton, A (2019) 'A view from afar', Living Treasures Masters of Australia Craft - Prue Venables p.32

3 'Prue Venables' Beaver Galleries, (website), Canberra ACT <http://www.beavergalleries.com.au/artist/prue-venables/> (accessed 24 May 2019)

4 Britton, A (2019) 'A view from afar', Living Treasures Masters of Australia Craft - Prue Venables p.32

5 Britton, A (2019) 'A view from afar', Living Treasures Masters of Australia Craft - Prue Venables p.32

Venables has collaborated closely with photographer Terence Bogue¹ for several decades to document her work. Together they ensure that every detail of the grouped works are balanced and lit to enable the work to speak and each element to interact. As Alison Britton notes in her exhibition catalogue essay 'The everyday words are simply bowl, bottle, jug, cup. But the pots themselves, and the still life perfection of the photography, the light falling on the pale rims and metallic black glaze, the poise and space in the images, is transformative.'²

Venables has said "I delight in the relationships that spring and develop between objects as they stand together like elements of musical harmony. From the shadows that form between them to the implied movements across spaces, they dance. A search for simple, quiet, innovative forms to be held and used; the translucency of porcelain with light dancing on the sprung tension of a rim, the softly melting body inviting touch... all motivate my work"³.



Betty's Kitchen, detail, 2017. Limoges porcelain, thrown and altered, silver, copper, thread, various dimensions. Photo by Terence Boague.

The muted, complementary use of soft colours and monochromatic glazes on Venables' deceptively simple forms draw the viewer to notice not only the forms themselves, but the interplay between them as well as positive and negative spaces. The work is as much about the individual pieces as the interrelationships within each carefully-positioned group.

¹ <https://www.tbogue.com/prue-venables>

² Britton, A (2019) 'A view from afar', Living Treasures Masters of Australia Craft - Prue Venables p.31

³ P. Venables, International Academy of Ceramics, (website) <https://www.iac-iac.org/en/member/prue-venables/> (accessed 31 May 2019)

Think:

Bring together a collection of found objects. Arrange them together to create a story or narrative. Take notes and make some rough sketches of the composition. Share your thoughts about the collection with your group. (See how many different narratives you can create using the same collection of objects!) 

Select a grouping of objects in the exhibition. Look at them carefully and think about why they have been grouped in this way, make some notes and share your thoughts with your group. 

Explore:

The genre of still life has been a constant in art practice. Explore the work of other artists working within the genre. You might like to start with Giorgio Morandi. Morandi (1890–1964) was an Italian painter and printmaker who specialised in the still life genre. His paintings are known for their simplicity, minimal colour palette, compositional balance and focus on domestic wares such as vases, bottles and bowls. Morandi would depict the same familiar bottles and vases again and again in paintings notable for their simplicity of execution. There are echoes of Morandi's forms and colour palette in the work of Venables. 

Sketch a grouping of Venables' work in the style of Morandi. 

Extend

Create your own still life composition. Use a collection of readymade objects and either draw or paint them. First draw, paint or photograph the objects themselves taking care to consider the placement and proportion of each element of the composition in relation to the others. A second exercise considers the spaces between and around the objects as the focus of the artwork; re-draw or paint the composition with the objects absent. Play with different lighting and note how this alters the composition. 

For students of ceramics – create a still life composition using a minimal glazing palette or one type of unglazed clay body. Ensure that the work explores textures, form and the interrelationship between the forms. Make notes about the firing temperatures, glazes and clay bodies used. 

Theme: Utility



Black funnel and pierced spoon, 2007 Limoges porcelain, thrown and altered funnel, various dimensions. Photo by Terence Boague.

Function not only allows you to handle an object, but also to consider the way an object reflects life.

Prue Venables ¹

The objects that we use in our daily lives have many stories to tell about us. For example, they reveal what and how we eat, the kind of lifestyle we lead, our cultural background, even the climate where we live. When objects are used, the traces of use add to these stories, perhaps indicating intimate secrets about our lives; a favourite tea cup may be chipped or deeply stained by tannins, bearing traces of constant use – other objects may bear scars of wear, hold traces of hair, mould to our bodies or fade with exposure to the sun. Objects of utility can be seen as the silent witnesses of the theatre of our lives, they are the players in the ceremonies of your lives. Venables wants her 'work to function both physically and metaphorically, reflective of life stories, cultural meanings and purposes.'²

Venables has had a particular interest in making functional objects throughout her career. Alison Britton notes that 'all her forms have logical background sources in the home'³. Her early studies at the Harrow Studio Pottery Course in London 'concentrated on the making of high quality, inventive functional objects'⁴. The structured working practices, high expectations and inventive questioning embedded in the Harrow Studio Pottery Course were similar to science and music, which were her initial areas of learning. The ability to make functional objects well requires practice, precise technical skill and knowledge, for example making a teapot or jug which pours effectively, or a cup that not only accommodates the hand but is pleasing to touch.

¹ P. Venables, 'From then to now...', Living Treasures Masters of Australian Craft - Prue Venables, p.78

² P. Venables, 'From then to now...', Living Treasures Masters of Australian Craft - Prue Venables, p.78

³ A. Britton, 'A view from afar', Living Treasures Masters of Australian Craft - Prue Venables p.32

⁴ P. Venables, 'Prue Venables', Australian Ceramics Community (website)

When we look at Venables' work 'we have in the back of our minds, not just tableware, but some echoes of the 'dressing table' too, that past domain of feminine presence with a three-sided mirror and hairbrushes and little boxes of stuff that children were meant to leave alone.'¹ References to utility in her work extend to objects found throughout the home. As we have seen already in her work, the recognisable references to utility in Venables' practice ground her work in both known and discreetly uncanny forms. In her current work, references to function are subtle.

For me, the soul of the maker reflects permanently from any hand-made object, silently waiting for recognition. I am fascinated by objects in use, in life, as they reside next to each other, perhaps spread in some particular order or stacked on a shelf in random and chaotic piles. Independently of these arrangements, as individuals, they always retain their history of time, materials and making processes but there is something else too. The holding of personal history, the fingerprints of their maker, of ownership, occasion, ceremony, ritual – it is these unspoken memories and stories that they also carry for us, inciting our wonder and curiosity.

Prue Venables ²

Prue Venables references 18th and 19th century English industrial pottery as well as to more contemporary and familiar metal and plastic vessels. She has said that 'the making of functional pots, the exploration of objects to be held and used, alongside a search for new and innovative forms, provides a lifetime of challenge and excitement. A beautiful cup seems simple and yet is capable of gently holding and reflecting so much ceremony and personal connection'. Since the 2000s, Venables has consistently made objects based on domestic utensils such as teapots, jugs and beakers, as well as strainers, sieves and colanders, and grouped these objects in specific arrangements³.

¹ A. Britton, 'A view from afar', Living Treasures Masters of Australian Craft - Prue Venables p.32

² P. Venables, 'From then to now...', Living Treasures Masters of Australian Craft - Prue Venables, p.77

³ Prue Venables, exhibition catalogue, Craft Victoria, Melbourne, 2002 cited in 'Black Group' by Prue Venables, Powerhouse Museum, Sydney <https://collection.maas.museum/object/352069> (accessed 27 May 2019)

Think:

Reflect on the objects you use everyday, do you have any ceramic objects that you use? Which is your favourite ceramic object to use at home? Why are you drawn to this object, what makes it special? What is it used for? How old is it? What is it made from? Does it have any marks of use? What special qualities make this object useful?

Draw a portrait of the object and write a short description of it. Share your findings with the class. Compare your findings to those of your classmates, do any common themes emerge? 

Explore:

Prue Venables went to Jingdezhen, the legendary porcelain capital of China in 2011. In Jingdezhen, where even the street light poles are made from porcelain, it seemed to her that anything was possible, and this experience was transformative in her making. Porcelain is one of the most commonly used domestic materials, yet we often overlook it. Explore your everyday environment – what can you find that is made from porcelain – make a list. Share your findings with the class. 

Ceremony and utility: one of the most well-known use of ceramic objects for ceremony is the Tea Ceremony. Tea ceremonies are a ritualised cultural activity involving the preparation, presentation and consumption of tea. Different iterations of tea ceremonies are practiced in Asian culture by the Chinese, Japanese, Taiwanese, Vietnamese, Koreans and Indians.

Research the Chinese Tea Ceremony making note of the particular customs related to tea drinking in Chinese culture. Can you see any objects in this exhibition that may relate to the consumption and preparation of tea? 

Extend:

Play with this idea – what kinds of unlikely objects can you think of that are made with porcelain. Also consider what sorts of existing objects could be made with porcelain instead of their usual material(s). How would this change them – would they still be useful? You might want to explore the work of Australian ceramicist Honor Freeman in the context of this question! 

What makes objects useful? Reflecting on objects that you use daily, can you re-design any of these to make them more useful? Draw or make your designs and share them with the class.  (Link to Hybrid Objects activity)

¹ <https://www.honorfreeman.com/> (accessed 25 June 2019)

Theme: Hybrid Objects



Black tea caddy, black oval forms, yellow sieve and white bowl, 2017 Limoges porcelain, thrown and altered, Jingdezhen porcelain, thrown, various dimensions. Photo by Terence Boague.

Venables' mother made all the family's clothing 'from scraps, offcuts and reused garments... With an inspirational sense of colour relationships and the ability to match pattern and shape, the items she made were never ordinary. Her palette and sense of form were sophisticated, elegant and finely detailed. She taught me, by example, to make simple garments. As a child this was something that just happened around me, but I realise now how much I absorbed and how it formed me.'¹

In many of Prue Venables' works, disparate elements are pieced together in a harmonious manner, resulting in hybrid forms; the visual simplicity of these forms belies the complexity of thought and technique underpinning each piece. These porcelain pieces appear to be simple but making them is a labour-intensive process. In creating her work, Venables takes cues from functional and historical objects, melding them together to create subtle hybrid forms that have historical references such as 19th Century industrial English pottery, these shapes are juxtaposed with 'references to modern metal, and plastic objects and vessels.'² She says, "I enjoy the contradictory nature of the pieces, where the sprung tension of the throwing remains clear, but the origins of forms are uncertain."³

The making of these hybrid forms is the result of intensive technical research and invention. The techniques used by Venables have their origins in both studio and industrial pottery. Venables' first exploration of hybrid forms came alongside her shift from working with stoneware to porcelain. She commenced using throwing as a method for making separate elements for assembly, rather than as an end in themselves: 'bowls, when reversed and joined to saucers, became teapots, walls thrown without a base were manipulated into new oval forms and meticulously joined to a new foundation.'⁴ In her work 'throwing is a way of making building materials from which the final object (is) constructed.'⁵

1 'Prue Venables' Beaver Galleries, (website)

2 Contemporary Applied Arts, 'Prue Venables' Tradition and Innovation – Five Decades of Harrow Ceramics, (website) <https://www.caa.org.uk/exhibitions/archive/2012/tradition-and-innovation-five-decades-of-harrow-ceramics/prue-venables/> (accessed 31 May 2019)

3 Contemporary Applied Arts, 'Prue Venables' Tradition and Innovation – Five Decades of Harrow Ceramics, (website)

4 P. Venables, 'From then to now...', Living Treasures Masters of Australian Craft – Prue Venables p.73

5 A. Britton, 'A view from afar' Living Treasures Masters of Australian Craft – Prue Venables p.30

These were complex processes but they 'opened up many new technical and conceptual possibilities...the role of function in my work began to quietly change into something more referential and sculptural.'¹ This work 'is characterised by removing the circular base of a thrown form, and reattaching the form to an oval base, sometimes further altering the body shape while the clay is malleable. 'In my work, an apparent simplicity conceals the laborious making process. Using thrown clay as a building material rather than a finishing point, the pots are initially formed on the wheel, then altered when wet. New bases are added at the leather hard stage.'² The techniques she developed at this time have persisted alongside the results of Venables' more recent research, undertaken during residencies in Jingdezhen, China. This research has enabled her to fire 'objects fired fully glazed inside each other, suspended in the kiln and freely able to move when completed. Handles are now fired separately, suspended, to be joined later. These high-risk practices lead to objects that have a sense of impossibility and without the encumbrances of limitations defining them even while they are still an idea.'³ By challenging and pushing the conventions of making processes, Venables' imagination is no longer limited by technical (im)possibility.

She has also undertaken extensive education in silversmithing which has allowed her to bring metal components into her work – further pushing the hybrid forms. Of this she says '(the) silver components extend formal possibilities and facilitate the strengthening of joints between sections. The silver material and new techniques has enlivened my understanding of the porcelain I thought I knew so well. Objects now emerge, to challenge and enable fresh rhythms, different energies and spatial interactions.'⁴ The nature of sheet metal has meant that Venables has been able to apply new approaches to developing work – such as using paper patterns as a means for exploring new forms that would be technically impossible to make and fire from porcelain alone, this has led to a stronger source of sculptural freedom.



Black tea caddy, black oval forms, yellow sieve and white bowl, details, 2017. Limoges porcelain, thrown and altered, Jingdezhen porcelain, thrown, various dimensions. Photo by Terence Boague.

The notion of Hybrid Objects melds with Utility as a key feature of many ceramicists working methods in the studio. In the ceramics studio there are specialised tools such as wheels, kilns, extruders and the like, however you will also find many home-made tools or tools that have been adapted for purpose from other objects. In fact, a key feature of Venables' study at the Harrow School of Art Studio Pottery was learning how to make tools from whatever was available. One of the methods of approaching making was 'to start from an end point and work backwards, inventing and exploring, making tools from old rulers and found objects, taking risks with materials and abandoning assumptions.'⁵ This inventiveness extends to the resulting forms.

1 P. Venables, 'From then to now...', Living Treasures Masters of Australian Craft - Prue Venables p.78
 2 Prue Venables, exhibition catalogue, Craft Victoria, 2002
 3 P. Venables, International Academy of Ceramics, (website)
 4 P. Venables, International Academy of Ceramics, (website)
 5 P. Venables, 'From then to now...', Living Treasures Masters of Australian Craft - Prue Venables p.68



Think:

Look closely at the work by Prue Venables in this exhibition – can you see where the forms have been altered or what kinds of recognisable forms have been combined? Note how this alteration affects the way that you understand the object. 



Explore:

Visit www.theuncomfortable.com. The Uncomfortable is a collection of deliberately inconvenient everyday objects by Athens-based architect Katerina Kamprani, who takes easily recognisable utilitarian objects and re-imagines or re-makes them to render them 'uncomfortable'. Kamprani's goal is to 'to deconstruct the invisible design language of simple everyday objects and tweak their fundamental properties in order to surprise you and make you laugh. But also to help you appreciate the complexity and depth of interactions with the simplest of objects around us.'¹

Think about the very obvious ways that Kamprani has created 'uncomfortable' objects and compare them with the subtlety of Venables' forms, where the slightest extension of a handle or twist of a vessel also makes us re-think the objects that surround us.



Extend:

Design and make your own collection of hybrid objects – you might like to use readymades, such as objects from the recycling bin or make your own using clay. Document your objects individually and as a class. 

Make a set of your own tools for use in the ceramic studio adapted from readymade or domestic objects. Create a series of work testing your new tools and record the results. 

¹ K. Kamprani, The Uncomfortable (website) <https://www.theuncomfortable.com/about/> (accessed 31 May 2019)

Theme: Music (and Silence)



Oval jugs, white / yellow, 1994, Limoges porcelain, thrown and altered. Photo by Terence Boague.

Music has always been important to Prue Venables. She says that “involvement in music was probably my first experience of understanding the value of having an open mind, and of ongoing discovery.”¹ This grounding in music and the habit of hours of disciplined music practice from an early age also taught her that practice can be ‘joyful, unquestioned, rigorous and important’. She also notes that ‘music taught me about expression, the ability of an instrument to sing and to speak of feelings plus the essential and committed practice regime required to facilitate this.’²

An understanding of music also impressed the importance of the ‘refinement of detail’ in making, she observes that ‘detail must be so well resolved that you almost don’t notice it.’³ The flow state that can occur when we are listening to or playing music is similar to making. The rhythm and nuance, repetition can guide the hands and the mind.

The discovery of clay had an immediate resonance with her existing knowledge of music. Venables describes her first encounter with clay at an adult education course in London as ‘a visceral and instinctive response, but my understanding of the processes as support had already been established. It was a natural step to apply the need for skill development learned through music to my making. This was new territory for me. Exciting, challenging, confronting, wonderful.’⁴

It is not just the practice and discipline of playing music that has influenced Prue Venables in her approach to making. The practice of listening also plays its part. She says of her work: ‘I delight in the relationships that spring and develop between objects as they stand together like elements of musical harmony. From the shadows that form between them to the implied movements across spaces, they dance.’⁵ To look at Venables’ work is to feel the caress of a gentle tune, measured and nuanced; the silences are perfectly filled.

¹ P. Venables, ‘From then to now...’, *Living Treasures Masters of Australian Craft* - Prue Venables p.66

² P. Venables, ‘Melding together’ *Journal of Australian Ceramics*, Vol. 58, No. 1, April 2019, p.66-68

³ P. Venables, ‘From then to now...’, *Living Treasures Masters of Australian Craft* - Prue Venables p.78

⁴ P. Venables, ‘Melding together’ *Journal of Australian Ceramics*

⁵ P. Venables, *International Academy of Ceramics*, (website)

Think:

Music – think about a piece of music that you like to listen to, sing or play – share your music with the class and talk about how it makes you feel, it will be interesting to note how it makes others feel.

Explore:

Listen – close your eyes and listen to your favourite (short) piece of music at least five times – what are the colours and shapes that drift through your mind whilst you are listening? When you have finished listening to the music, make a drawing based on the piece of music.

Music – listen to an entirely new piece of music as a class, something different, confronting or challenging. While you are listening, close your eyes and move a pencil across paper. At the end of the piece of music, share your drawing with the class, each discuss what you felt whilst listening to the music. 

Extend:

Music – listen to a piece of music as a class. While you are listening, work a ball of clay into a vessel – let your hand movements be directed by the rhythm and flow of the music. Try the exercise again without music and compare the vessels. Reflect on how the music directed your movements. 

Research – music has inspired and directed the work of many artists. Roy de Maistre is one such artist. De Maistre worked alongside Roland Wakelin at the vanguard of Australian abstract painting in the early 20th century, using music as a generative model, they 'explored the idea of colour-music synchronism in works that imaged local scenes in intensely coloured and radically simplified compositions,'¹ creating 'small 'colour orchestrations', chromatic experiments based on correlations between hues of the colour spectrum and notes of the musical scale. That informed larger abstract paintings such as de Maistre's Rhythmic composition in yellow green minor, 1919.²

Music is a constant presence in the practice of contemporary Australian artist David Sequeira. Sequeira works across painting, photography and mixed media installations. Sequeira's work explores music and colour. Research how Sequeira uses the language and nuance of music in installations such as Fugue (2008–2018) where the 'arrangement (or orchestration) of the vessels on a gallery shelf represents the culmination of the process... (the objects) create chords of colour ... a single line of vessels that requires the viewer's time and movement, deeply connected with everyday experience.'³

Of his use of colour in his paintings, Sequeira says: 'For me, it's quite obvious that those sorts of ideas run parallel with ideas of music. The idea that several notes together can make a chord, that one note played next to another note creates a particular mood and experience – it's a sensory experience that's not dissimilar to one colour placed next to another colour.'⁴ Or even, one vessel placed next to another.

1 'Roland Wakelin', Art Gallery of NSW (website) <https://www.artgallery.nsw.gov.au/collection/artists/wakelin-roland/> (accessed 20 June 2019)

2 'Roy de Maistre', Art Gallery of NSW (website) <https://www.artgallery.nsw.gov.au/collection/artists/de-maistre-roy/> (accessed 20 June 2019)

3 E. Sullivan, 'David Sequeira: Fugue', Artlink, 21 March 2019 (website) <https://www.artlink.com.au/articles/4751/david-sequeira-fugue/> (accessed 20 June 2019)

4 S. Pryor, 'David Sequeira: A life in colour', Sydney Morning Herald September 19 2014 (website) <https://www.smh.com.au/entertainment/art-and-design/david-sequeira-a-life-in-colour-20140919-10j68k.html> (accessed 20 June 2019)

Glossary

Bernard Leach tradition

See Leach tradition of studio pottery.

Bisque or bisque ware

Bisque refers to clay that has been fired once in the kiln. Bisque ware is the term for pots that have been fired for the first time. It is hard but porous. Bisque can be painted with ceramic glazes or underglazes and then fired again, after which it is water safe.

Clay

Clay consists of fine-grained particles that are relatively weak and porous. Part of the firing process includes heating the clay until the particles partially melt and flow together; creating a strong, single mass. Through firing the pores are reduced in size, causing the material to shrink slightly. The fired clay is very hard and strong, although usually somewhat brittle.

Decoration

Surface decoration on ceramics can consist of a number of different techniques, including the application of glazes and underglazes, but also through applying slip, or by carving, piercing or pressing the clay.

Earthenware

Low-fire earthenware: Terracotta, earthenware and raku (fired to 900-1000 degrees Celsius)

Mid-fire earthenware: Earthenware and stoneware (fired to 1100-1200 degrees Celsius)

High-fire earthenware: Stoneware and porcelain (fired to 1220-1300 degrees Celsius)

Figurative work

Work that is figurative represents forms from life, including the human figure.

Functional pottery

Pottery made for use rather than for decoration.

Glaze

A coating that has been matured to the glassy state on a formed ceramic article, or the material or mixture from which the coating is made. Consists of a Flux, Silica and Colorant/Oxide.

Hand-building

All forms of making pottery by forming systems by hand, such as thumb pots, coiling, rolling, squashing.

Kiln

Kilns are insulated chambers or ovens required for the firing of clay at high temperatures. Kilns can be as simple as a metal drum filled with wood chips to large expensive electric or gas kilns with timers and temperature gauges.

Leach tradition of studio pottery

Bernard Howell Leach CH CBE (5 January 1887 – 6 May 1979), was a British studio potter and art teacher. He is regarded as the 'Father of British studio pottery'.

Leather hard

Leather-hard refers to a stage during the drying of an object in which the clay is still visibly damp (usually a darkish gray) but has dried enough to be able to be handled without deformation.

Porcelain

A type of clay that contains kaolin or china clay and must be fired to a high temperature (1300-1450 degrees Celsius) giving a hard, white, translucent finish. First developed in China it is traditionally the most difficult to work with.

Potter's wheel

A potter's wheel has a circular turning surface on which the clay is placed and shaped by the centrifugal force of the spinning clay against the hands.

Reduction firing

Firing in a low oxygen environment. Copper red/blue glazes can only be manufactured in Reduction.

Slip

A suspension of clay, clay body or glaze in water.

Stoneware

A relatively highly fired vitreous or semivitreous ceramic material.

Studio Pottery

Ceramics produced by individual makers usually trained in art school rather than learning as artisan potters in a family business. Studio pottery is a practice dating from the early 20th century and makers normally sign their work.

Throwing

The term used when referring to forming or shaping on a potter's wheel.

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