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THROWN TOGETHER

Pippin Drysdale and Warrick Palmateer's *Confluence* is the result of a unique pairing, writes **Victoria Laurie**

If any art show was ever likely to capture the essence of both Australia's inland and its jagged coastline, *Confluence* is it. Ceramic artist Pippin Drysdale, now into her fifth decade of creating exquisite clay vessels, says she has always looked for inspiration in deserts such as the Great Sandy and Tanami in Western Australia's remote heart.

Her co-exhibitor in a John Curtin Gallery show is Warrick Palmateer, a tall, musclebound surfer cum potter who finds inspiration as he paddles beyond the ocean reef at Yanchep most mornings before a day spent sitting at a potter's wheel in Drysdale's Fremantle studio.

Drysdale finds their respective obsessions fitting: "Western Australia is dominated by these elements; we are defined by our deserts to the east and our coastline to the west."

The pair's work is not simply the heart and edge of the nation combined; Drysdale and Palmateer are artistic collaborators who produce some of Australia's great, collectable ceramic items.

Now 75, Drysdale was only a few years into serious dedication to the art of ceramics when she noticed Palmateer, then a 19-year-old enthusiast, throwing pots under the eye of the legendary Fremantle-based potter Joan Campbell. "He was doing amazing things. I thought he was so gifted," recalls Drysdale.

For years she had kneaded blocks of fine porcelain clay into blended batches that were elastic enough to withstand firing. Then her back began to complain, so she hired Palmateer to prepare the clay, then to take over throwing pots when his prowess on the wheel overtook hers. "He'd say: 'That shape isn't flowing properly, there's a lump in it.' And he'd be right."

Drysdale's forte has always been taking the pristine porcelain pots and scoring them with her signature patterns before applying glazes of radiant and disarmingly bright hues. She incises lines on the fine clay surface with razor blades, filling each furrow with a colour glaze, sponging it back and adding another.

The elegant shapes, the luminous glazes, even the musical note emitted by gently tapping the eggshell-thin rim of her vessels — all have earned Drysdale a reputation as one of Australia's foremost ceramic artists and, in 2015, the title of West Australian State Living Treasure.

"I've never wanted to be just a mugs, jugs and casserole person; I've always wanted to make my mark," she told Review in 2007 when her retrospective show was held at the John Curtin Gallery.

Then, as now, her appetite for adventure exposed her to landscapes she found inspiring, from trips through Canada's Rocky Mountains to adventures in Pakistan's Hindu Kush. A memorable light-plane trip across West Australian desert country to drop in on Aboriginal art centres, including hours spent observing renowned artist Queenie McKenzie paint, lingered for years.

Drysdale's ceramics have a large fan base in the US and Europe; her work has been displayed at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, and among her most avid collectors is

Peregrine Cavendish, the 12th Duke of Devonshire, who owns about 100 of her vessels.

Drysdale amusingly describes visiting the British peer's estate at Chatsworth House, "realising you never saw the same butler twice, and sleeping under a Rembrandt painting". Gratifyingly, she says, "my work is always displayed gracefully in the state room, the grandest room in the house".

Confluence includes Drysdale's latest "marble" series inspired by a visit to the Devil's Marbles, the large and smaller boulders near Alice Springs that resemble a giant's marble collection. "They all have such an amazing tension, organic shapes that are technically difficult to replicate, like egg shapes and ball shapes."

Confluence marks a milestone in her partnership with Palmateer; they agreed that a joint exhibition at Curtin, where they both studied art, was a timely celebration. But Drysdale hopes it



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also exposes his work more widely.

“I always say, without Warrick my work wouldn’t exist. I feel like the luckiest bunny in

the world to have someone make me the beautiful forms to create my own journey on my vessels. Words can’t express my gratitude. But he has an incredible throwing skill and an incredible sense of form.”

Palmateer says he feels grateful that Drysdale kept him employed, throwing about 200 pots a year, while he raised a family. “I didn’t really have time to focus on my own work because I had a family of three daughters to raise.”

Now, he says, he feels free to give more time to his own, different approach to clay. He finds inspiration in the swirls and eddies of the sea current, sand textures and — more prosaically — the clay pits, within 150km of Perth, from where coarse, multi-hued natural clays are extracted for Perth’s booming brick industry.

“I’ve always been fascinated by brick clay — it’s got more guts to it, large particle sizes, more texture, earthy tones and colours,” Palmateer explains.

“I also wanted to build the biggest pots I could, but I needed access to industrial-scale

ceramics-makers. As strong as I am, I wouldn’t have been able to move pots weighing between 100 and 200 kilos each without access to a forklift.”

In Western Australia there are three brick factories whose kilns are big enough to fit gigantic ceramic pots. One of them, Brik-makers, readily agreed to let Palmateer load his unfired pots — standing 1.5m high — on to brick wagons each carrying 50 tonnes of bricks. The pots emerge after a fiery route through a 170m tunnel kiln.

“I’ve had a lot of learning to make my work alongside an automated brick production process,” he says. “But some of their techniques have allowed me to make pots that are bigger, bolder, stronger than I have ever made before.

“This project is special to me because it brings together two of my greatest loves, the ocean and clay. With surfing, you jump to your feet on your board, and if you get it right, the rest of the wave will just flow. And it’s the same with throwing a good piece. If you get it right, the first pull of clay, the thing can flow together.”

Drysdale admires the way Palmateer has forged a different kind of partnership with the brick company to execute his own work. “But I’ve threatened him that he must promise me he won’t stop working with me until they carry me out in a body bag.”

Palmateer says Drysdale’s artistry “always drives me to seek perfection because her forms

are so pure and it’s great the way Pippin treats the surfaces. When she gets that right, and if I get my part right, the two come together into something that’s really special.”

Confluence is at the John Curtin Gallery, Curtin University, Perth, until December 2.



Pippin Drysdale,
Warrick Palmateer,
and his *Dusky
Whaler* (2018)