

A NEW SENSE OF FREEDOM

# Prue Venables

by Heidi McKenzie

*“Science and music taught me that there is no end point—just ongoing exploration.”*

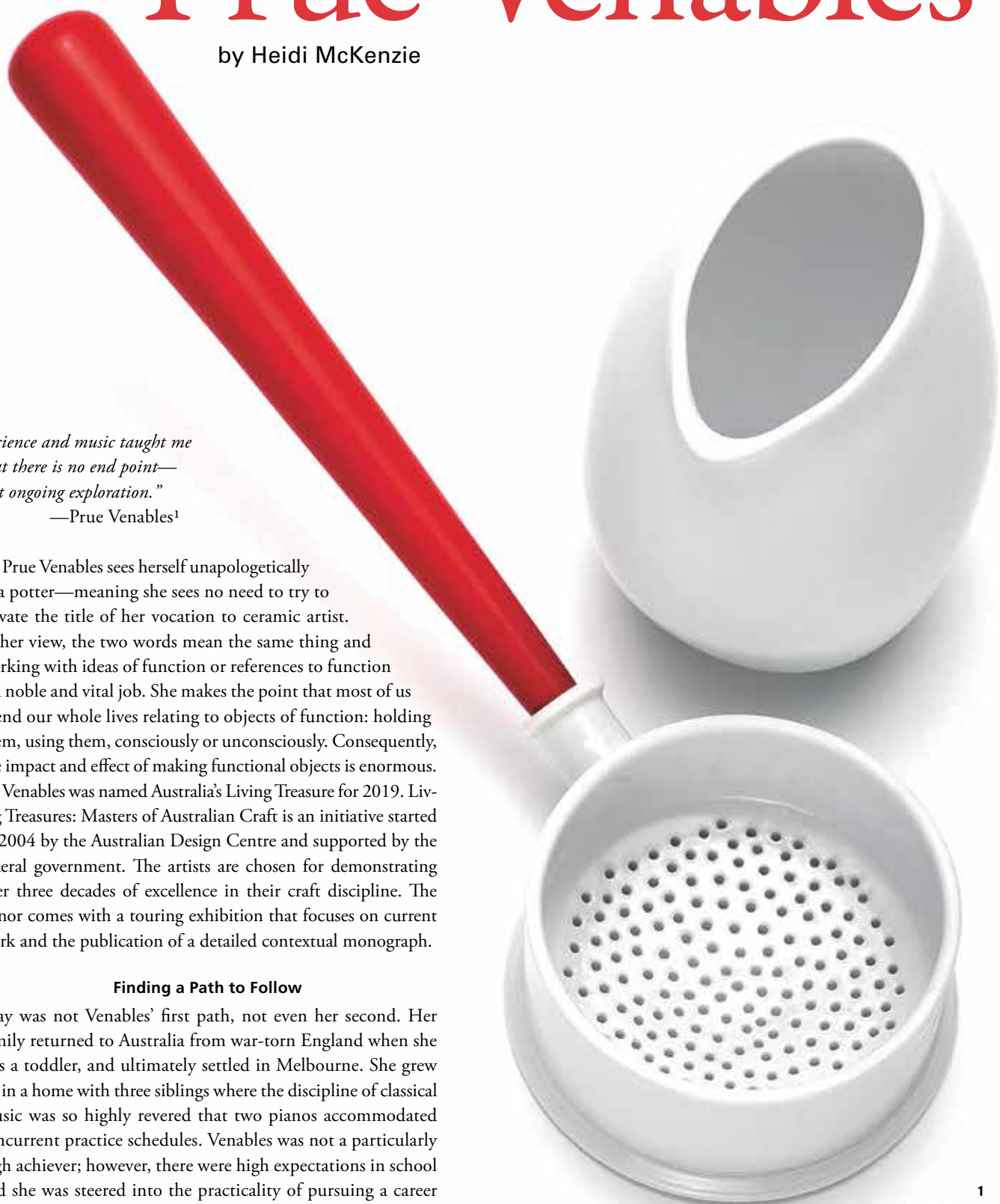
—Prue Venables<sup>1</sup>

Prue Venables sees herself unapologetically as a potter—meaning she sees no need to try to elevate the title of her vocation to ceramic artist. In her view, the two words mean the same thing and working with ideas of function or references to function is a noble and vital job. She makes the point that most of us spend our whole lives relating to objects of function: holding them, using them, consciously or unconsciously. Consequently, the impact and effect of making functional objects is enormous.

Venables was named Australia’s Living Treasure for 2019. Living Treasures: Masters of Australian Craft is an initiative started in 2004 by the Australian Design Centre and supported by the federal government. The artists are chosen for demonstrating over three decades of excellence in their craft discipline. The honor comes with a touring exhibition that focuses on current work and the publication of a detailed contextual monograph.

## Finding a Path to Follow

Clay was not Venables’ first path, not even her second. Her family returned to Australia from war-torn England when she was a toddler, and ultimately settled in Melbourne. She grew up in a home with three siblings where the discipline of classical music was so highly revered that two pianos accommodated concurrent practice schedules. Venables was not a particularly high achiever; however, there were high expectations in school and she was steered into the practicality of pursuing a career



in the sciences. She holds a Bachelor of Science degree in zoology from Melbourne University. After two years of post-graduate work as a research assistant, she abandoned zoology in favor of her true love and boarded a plane to London to pursue learning the baroque flute.

Venables' life changed forever one evening in London when she decided to take a ceramics class. As soon as she touched the medium, she knew she had to dedicate her life to rendering clay into beautiful objects. She enrolled at the Harrow School of Art Studio Pottery while working as a science editor to help pay her way.

In England, she worked in high-temperature earthenware, applying Staffordshire factory processes. Her early work is highly decorative and patterned, with color featured prominently. She admits that decoration became an obsession, she adopted, in her words, a "wallpaper-all-over" approach.

When she left London thirteen years after she had arrived, she returned to Australia. The move afforded Venables the opportunity to rethink materials, processes, form, and design. Soon after settling, she was drawn to porcelain stoneware's potential for unpredictability, distortion, and its unique interactions with glaze.

In 2011, Venables experimented audaciously with porcelain in Jingdezhen, China. She took great risks (like firing pots upside down on their rims, and suspending her objects within a cone-13, gas-fired car kiln), pushing the boundaries of the medium past the point of no return. Earlier, she had fallen in love with Limoges porcelain. Venables likens throwing all porcelain to throwing something akin to "a cross between ice cream and rubber." Although she primarily slip cast while in China, throwing is her natural mode of working, and so she decided to try throwing the incredibly plastic Chinese porcelain. Drawing on her musical analogies, she found herself being forced to rethink making, and reexamine which forms would actually work with the new medium and its properties. She found that it was like "playing a piece of music and having to stay within the structure of the notes in front of you, but there's room within that for expression."

#### Pushing Boundaries and an Attention to Detail

Venables attributes her ability to overcome challenges in her ceramic practice to both the problem-solving techniques she honed over decades of music training and the inquiry and exploration of the sciences. After having already studied flute for ten years, a new teacher in London told her it was time to start over. For six months she was only allowed to play four notes for three to four hours a day. Venables recalls that it made her truly hear detail and understand how to make a sound in a different sort of way, "it completely changed the way I played."

The transfer of skills seems obvious in the meticulous attention to detail, the simplicity of form, the integrity, and subtle nuances of



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1 Sieve with red handle, wheel-thrown and pierced Limoges porcelain, wooden handle, painted lacquer, 2019; white jug, 2018. 2 White jug, wheel-thrown and altered Limoges porcelain, 2018. 3 Black vessel with silver lid, 10½ in. (27 cm) in height, thrown and altered Limoges porcelain, silver lid, 2019.



4 *Esme's Dressing Table*, mirror, powder box, comb, hair brush, sieve, lidded pot, necklace, perfume bottle, oval vessels, hat pin. Materials include Limoges and Jingdezhen porcelain, fine and sterling silver, copper, thread.

Venables' current work. In her own words, "I'm interested in the way things are placed. The way that things interact is important. I don't see them as particularly still. A musical chord is moving and still at the same time—that's the sort of place where my mind is in a way—it's moving on to something else, the work is not rigidly fixed."

Venables has had the opportunity to experience and observe many different cultures through her ceramic practice: "I've learned to sit quietly and watch. It's my natural way of being, to see how other cultures do things, how they function, how they interact with each other, and the enormous admiration they have for ceramics." One anecdote she recounts from her time in Korea is that when a moon jar was repatriated, the country declared a national holiday. She revels in the exhilaration of a culture whose reverence for her chosen craft can attract upwards of hundreds of thousands of spectators to see a ceramics exhibition, the way a football match might attract a similar crowd in the West. One can see Venables'

cultural sensitivity and keen powers of observation in the attention to detail and the way she imposes a tenacious pursuit of the marriage between form and function that is culturally specific to the item she designs.

Reflecting on her current work, and her decision to work in a virtually monochrome palette, she believes that "the pattern and process of decorating has been drawn in the structural making of the forms and the relationships of the separate objects." According to Venables, the limited color scheme demands a rigorous and meticulous attention to detail and level of sophistication in her understanding of making that she simply had not achieved in her earlier work. "The role of function in my work began to quietly change into something more referential and sculptural."<sup>2</sup> For example, in 1995, Venables won a prize in New Zealand for some tiny jugs. She describes the win as being quite controversial as they were so tiny. The judge was Takeshi Yasuda. Apparently, it took him a long time to notice the work, but when he really saw



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the jugs he declared, “all my life I drank black coffee, and these almost made me want to have milk.” The vitality of objects, such as those little jugs, drives Venables to create work that functions both physically and metaphorically—that reflects life stories, cultural meanings, and purposes.<sup>3</sup>

As Venables continues to push herself, both teaching and learning are integral iterative processes for her. She has recently taken up silversmithing and started to incorporate metal into her work. She describes starting over, learning the lexicon of this new vocabulary as gifting her with a new sense of freedom: “Silver has made me look and think differently. I take more risks.” She is currently mentoring under Beatrice Schlabowsky, with whom she taught at Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology in Melbourne and who now lives close to her current home in Castlemaine, Victoria.

Venables was surprised and deeply honored to have been selected as this year’s living treasure. She views the honor as a chance

to tell her story, that is, “more or less the story of someone who wandered through life, not really knowing what was going to come next,” yet somehow she felt able to follow her instincts, and found her true calling. Venables developed a deep relationship of mutual respect with celebrated veteran Australian potter Gwyn Hanssen Pigott. It was Pigott whose wise counsel she took to heart, “When you really know what you want to be doing, just trust your life. If you’re doing the right thing, it will just come, it may not be easy, but it’s just there.” Venables believes that, “if one person reads my story and thinks ‘I have the really strong desire to do something and maybe I could do it, too,’ then I think the purpose [of the award] has been achieved.” She does not so much think of herself



as inspiring others, but as nudging them to take the reins, to take the leap of faith that is required when you believe that anything is possible.

*All quotations unless otherwise noted are from an interview between Prue Venables and Lisa Cabill, the CEO and artistic director of Australian Design Centre on May 1 at the Australian Ceramics Triennale in Tasmania, Australia, which was attended by the author.*

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1 *Living Treasures: Masters of Australian Craft: Prue Venables*, exhibition monograph, Australian Design Center, Sydney, Australia, p. 78. Exhibition dates: August 1–September 25, 2019.  
 2 *Ibid.* p. 73.  
 3 *Ibid.* p. 78.  
 4 Photo: Terence Bogue.



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## PRUE VENABLES



Thrown and carved bowl, made at Harrow, red earthenware, white slip.<sup>4</sup>

1981

Studio in Melbourne, Australia

1989-2014



Fletcher Challenge Ceramics Award—Premier Award for white and yellow oval jugs

1995

MA Fine Art—Ceramics, RMIT University, Melbourne, Australia

1995

### TIME LINE

1981–1983

Harrow Diploma of Studio Pottery, Harrow College of Art, London, England

1983–1986

Studio in Kings Cross, London, England

1984–85

Crafts Council UK grant for studio setup and one-year maintenance allowance

1986–1989

Studio in Stoke Newington, London

1988

ACSET1 Teacher Training, London, England

1988

Decorated bowl, white earthenware, slip and underglaze painted



1992

Blue and white bowls, wheel-thrown porcelainous stoneware, cobalt painted



2004

One-month residency, Oribe Design Centre, Gifu, Japan: Dinner set design



**5** White sieve, 13¾ in. (35 cm) in width, wheel-thrown, altered, and pierced Limoges porcelain, 2007. **6** White scoop, sieve, jug, spoon, and vessels, wheel-thrown and altered Limoges porcelain, 2005.

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Pair of black bowls, Limoges porcelain

2005



Black sieve and black funnel, Limoges porcelain

2008



White ladle and cup, Limoges porcelain

2014

Six-month residency at Dunmoochin, Melbourne, Australia

2014

Studio in Castlemaine, Australia

2014–present

Selected as Australian Design Centre “9th Living Treasure—Master of Australian Craft”

2018

2006

Fellow, Royal Society of Arts, UK

2006

White funnel, wheel-thrown and handbuilt Limoges porcelain



2007

President, Craft Victoria; Elected member, International Academy of Ceramics

2007

Pair of white ladles, Limoges porcelain



2012

Arts SA residency award, Jingdezhen, China

2015

First Prize, Clunes Ceramic Award, Clunes, Australia

2016

Asialink residency, The Pottery Workshop, Jingdezhen, China

2016

Asialink residency, The Pottery Workshop, Jingdezhen, China

2019

Black triangulated bowl and red handle, wheel-thrown and altered Limoges porcelain, lacquered wooden handle

