

Porcelain master pushes the limits

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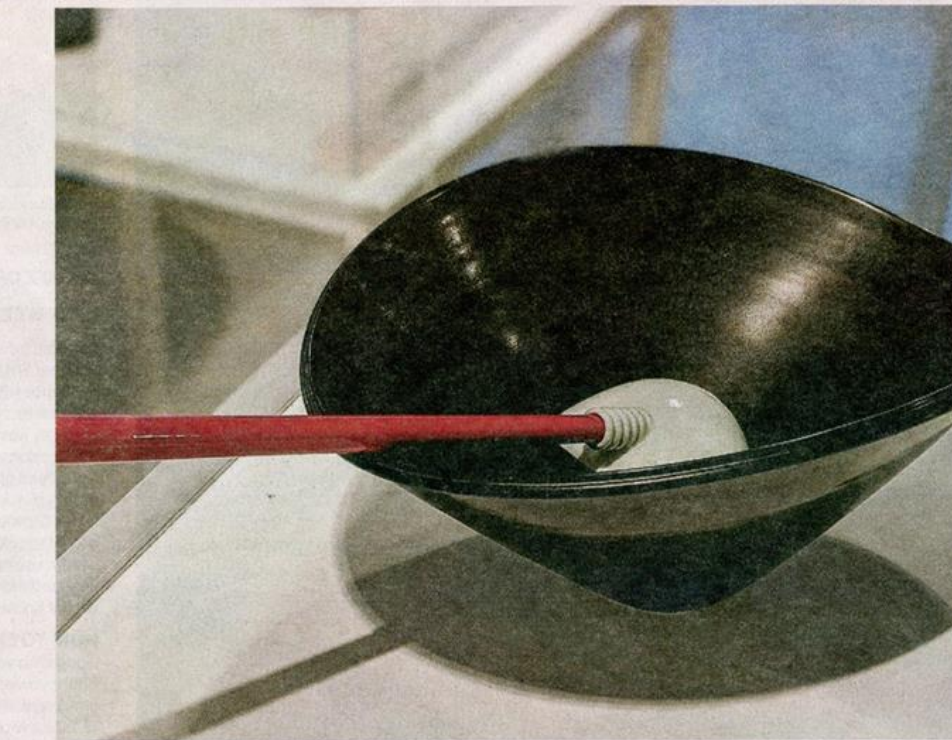
Living Treasures: Masters of Australian Craft - Prue Venables. Canberra Potters Gallery, Watson Arts Centre. Until October 11. canberrapotters.com.au.

Prue Venables is one of only nine artists to be named "A Master of Australian Craft" by the Australian Design Centre, Sydney. The Design Centre's national touring exhibition at the Potters Gallery in Watson is a wide-ranging survey of the artist's ceramics from 2017-2019.

Venables was born in England in 1954. She spent her early life in Australia, going back to England in 1977. She studied ceramics at the Harrow School of Art in London and after gaining experience working in pottery studios and teaching, she returned to Australia in 1989.

Venables has continued her successful art practice in tandem with her role as a lecturer in ceramics in Australia and overseas. She has also played leading roles in arts organisations including Craft Victoria. Her work has accumulated awards and accolades both here and overseas.

In order to make her refined ceramic vessels, Venables uses porcelain, which is a demanding material but suits the artist's considered way of working. Each ceramic piece cast or created on the pottery wheel is pushing the limits of the



Prue Venables, *White Spoon and Red Handle with Black Bowl*, 2019. Picture: Supplied

material within the artist's own creative boundaries.

One stand-alone work, *Large Triangle Black Bowl*, 2019, with its wide flat base and altered walls is testament to the artist's skill in working with this challenging material.

During her residency at Jingdezhen in China in 2012-13, Venables noted that the forms of the pots remained constant during the many

centuries of making porcelain in this renowned pottery.

This is due no doubt to tradition and is also dictated by the physical limitations of porcelain and its firing.

The Jingdezhen tradition perhaps resonated with Venables, who herself mostly works with a restricted variety of forms and coloured glazes.

Her work displays refined

crisp and elegant lines and beautiful subtle glazes within a restricted colour palette. Within this restrained palette there are subtle cream glazes and more rarely a deep yellow ochre interior glaze for bowls and cups.

A flicker of a rich Chinese red in felt or lacquer provides an exclamation note of drama either along the soles of ceramic shoes or the handle of a ladle, (*White*

Spoon and Red Handle, 2019). Venables has also introduced other contrasting elements to her ceramic forms - metal and wood are fashioned into handles and lids and into the bowls of tea strainers.

The introduction of these other elements brings the warmth of the wood, the shine of red lacquer and the soft glow and texture of the metallic handles and

lids to cool smooth porcelain surfaces.

Her work has been labelled as functional. Its forms are based on domestic objects such as bowls, ladles, cups, jugs and teapots. However these objects have become more refined and more subtly exaggerated over time.

They have parted company with everyday functionality and become more individualistic, exaggerated and rarefied.

The works are generally either paired together or are part of large assemblages. I find an intriguing contradiction in the large assemblages such as *Esme's Dressing Table* and *Betty's Kitchen* with their many works, each demanding attention.

You would perhaps expect that, because the ceramic forms share an affinity in material forms, finish and glazes, they would naturally come together in harmonic groupings.

I find the large groupings challenging to take in - each work seems a feisty individual jostling for attention irrespective of size and function.

A quieter meditative harmony is achieved with the smaller groupings as in *Yellow and Black Stemmed Bowl*, *White Cups*, *Yellow and Black Bottle* and *Yellow and Black Oval Form* or where function and form create an intimate relationship as in *White Oval Bowl* and *Tea Caddy*, 2018.