

TRANSCRIPT for the podcast Object: stories of craft and design

Season 1: episode 3 Living Treasure: master of Australian Craft Prue Venables

[introduction with music]

Lisa Cahill: Making a big change in life is scary. But know what's even scarier? Regret.

Back in the 1980s, Prue Venables left the suburbs of Melbourne and a safe job in a science lab for the bright lights of London. Away from the expectations of her family, Prue had a new sense of freedom.

Prue Venables: I felt I could just do whatever I wanted to because I didn't have those restrictions on me. I started to see that people could make their own life.

Lisa: She studied the flute, and then one evening, Prue sat down to her first pottery class.

Prue: I just thought, This is what I really want. And suddenly I had two jobs in potteries and was learning a whole lot of things. But I didn't feel that I was understanding how I could make work that would belong to me. That became a key thing I needed to do.

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Lisa: This is Object ... a podcast about design and contemporary craft in Australia. I'm your host Lisa Cahill from the Australian Design Centre. In Series 1, you'll meet the master craftspeople we call Living Treasures. What makes a Living Treasure? What has driven them to a lifetime love of their craft? Is it the material, or the process, or both? How do they contribute and advocate for the arts? And what's their advice for makers who follow in their footsteps?

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Lisa: Let's meet Living Treasure and master potter Prue Venables. Prue is one of Australia's most accomplished ceramics artists. She has practiced since 1977, with a demonstrated mastery of porcelain.

Her work is in collections of major institutions in Australia and internationally, and Prue has mentored and taught generations of ceramicists.

The Australian Design Centre honoured Prue as a Living Treasure in 2019 and her Living Treasures exhibition tours Australia until 2022.

Prue Venables makes porcelain vessels - like jugs and beakers, ladles and colanders - that elevate humble domestic objects to exquisite works of art. They are

smooth and elegant, with a minimal colour palette of white, metallic black and sometimes red.

In this episode of Object, you'll hear how Prue went from a career in science to pottery; how three tiny porcelain jugs changed everything for her; and her controversial advice for new makers.

Lisa: Prue lives and works on the ancestral lands of the Dja Dja Wurrung people in Central Victoria. We're meeting in Launceston Tasmania on the traditional lands of the Stoney Creek Nation, where Prue's Living Treasures exhibition is showing at Design Tasmania.

Lisa: Hi Prue

Prue: Hi Lisa.

Lisa: Prue, what was it about clay that drew you in? 3.30

Prue: It's hard to explain it, but there's something about the material, just touching it. I just suddenly felt at home. I just knew it was what I wanted and I had no idea what that meant, but I just knew I had to do this.

You see that from time to time in makers. But I think it has to be in every professional musician because the work required is so great. And the, wanting to do it, the need to do it. It becomes a visceral need. It's not just, it's not just something you think, 'Oh, I'll go and make something today'. It's not like that.

Prue: It doesn't mean you have to do it all the time. Somewhere in your system is this absolute visceral need to do it. And that's what I identified when I first touched the clay. I didn't know what it meant, but I just felt this was where I felt good. and I just had to work out how to do it and what it meant. I still don't really know what it means.

Lisa: So you went to London with your flute Prue and you came back to Australia as a potter. How did that come about?

Prue: Well, I'd been working in the Zoology department after I finished my degree and doing laboratory work basically. and also playing music as much as I could.

And I just felt, I wasn't satisfied. I wasn't happy. I decided that I wanted to learn the flute and I didn't feel that I could do it in Australia because the pressures were on me for my family, to be a scientist. And so I just packed up my little backpack and I went.

[music]

5:20

When I got to London, I felt I could just do whatever I wanted to because I didn't have those restrictions on me. I started to see that people could make their own life. They could actually do something and build a life themselves. And that really interested me. I was learning the flute quite a lot, And really enjoying that side of

myself. And then I went to an evening class in pottery and I just thought, Nah! This is what I really want.

And so then after that, I started to try and find as many opportunities as I could to learn and work out how I could do it. How I could discover as much as I could about making pots and working with clay. Suddenly I had two jobs in potteries and was learning a whole lot of things, but I didn't feel that I was understanding how I could make work that belonged to me. That became a key thing I needed to do.

[music]

Lisa: And then you went to study pottery at Harrow College in London?

Prue: I had to apply through the normal sort of procedures to be an art student there. So I had to have a folio of drawings and I thought, Well, I can't draw. And then one of my old zoology friends happened to come and he said, "Well, yes, but you've spent years and years and years drawing things down a binocular microscope. Of course you can draw!"

So that sort of encouraged me, and I did a drawing class for a year and I made a folio and then I went and applied

The teacher I had at that time, Helen Hatory. She was a bit of a dragon, and very controlling, but she had this emphasis on imagination. And so for the first year of her classes, you weren't allowed to use the wheel. And I was always looking, yearning, over at the other side of the room. I want to be doing that!

7.14

I think she was right because I learned to actually handle the material and control it. And so when I did start using the wheel, I was much more in control very quickly. But her focus was on being imaginative. So she would set a topic and you had to make something, whatever you wanted that was to do with that topic. And you could do anything you liked. Some people made huge things and some people made really tiny things. The focus was very much on identifying who you were in the sense of scale and what sort of things you were interested in.

7.50

And she started me on doing research on things I liked. I'd worked in that way in science and music. But I'd never worked in that way or thought in that way about objects. And I started to look at things in a completely different way.

The first thing I made in her class was a chicken, a hand-built chicken. It was quite big with a head and that had a sort of chicken's comb on the top.

And so I learnt how to structure something and the timing of working with the clay, and how to decorate the surface. I actually put a luster on the surface. It probably took me six months to make the object. It's funny. A friend of mine has it in England and I look at it now and think, "Hmm!" But it's actually quite well proportioned, it's okay as an object.

So that was the first thing I made. Then I started throwing and I made pretty awful, awful teapots and things. I didn't have the skill and understanding in order to make them well.

And then at Harrow we did everything you can think of. It was very, very intensive. We did all sorts of techniques. We built kilns, made tools and it was a totally immersive experience and I made lots and lots of lots of things.

When I left the course, I was making very fine teacups and saucers and teapots and things. And that's really how I survived for the next six years; I think it was.

When I came to Australia, I started to feel that this was an opportunity to change. And I wanted to start firing at higher temperatures and simplify what I was doing basically.

And so, I then started to work with stoneware and porcelain and to manipulate the forms.

Lisa: I wanted to ask you how important or whether creativity and making were important to your family as you grew up?

Prue: Yes, they were, in a quiet sort of way where we didn't have a television and our life was focused around being at home. The three girls, we all did knitting and sewing and making things. And music was also a very prominent activity. We all played music. It was a very busy life really. We all read a lot. It was quiet, but there was a lot of activity.

Lisa: Your early life aside from music and making and creativity also included science, and you did a science degree. I feel that science and music and that creative foundation of your early life hasn't really left you. I mean, those things seem to be really important today.

Prue: Definitely. They became the foundations of what has become me. The thinking and the discipline, the asking questions and exploring things.

And I was lucky. In every one of those areas, I was taught by people who were really inventive and exploratory thinkers. So, I watched what they did and what they said to me, and it just built up a sort of way of being really.

I approach most things with a sort of inquisitive mind. I like to discover things and I like to try and test out ideas. I liked to see what other people have done in that manner and then see the method and try it. I feel like learning is a very important part of me.

[music]

Lisa: Visiting your home and studio a couple of years ago, I immediately felt very calm in that space, and thoroughly enjoyed my time there. Can you tell us about your studio? What it looks like, and how important this space is to your creative process?

Prue: My studio is made from two old school buildings that came from down the road in Kyneton. It's a very spacious, lovely place to work. Lots of windows, overlooking a creek. I feel very comfortable in there.

Lisa: What do we see inside the studio?

Prue: Lots of stuff. I've got all sorts of things. I've got a lot of tools, kilns and wheels and clay. I often use a number of wheels at the same time, because with porcelain it's very frequently actually better to make something on and let it sit and not move it. Because as soon as you move it in any way, you get this sort of ripple response in the body of the clay, and maybe that comes out in the firing.

So I often throw multiple things on multiple wheels. I've found that means I can take more risks because I don't have to move the pots.

I've also set up a separate area for metalwork. And that's got all sorts of metalwork tools and hammers and things that have in the past been very foreign to me. But now are becoming familiar.

A lot of my tools are made by me and they're made out of junk. Like old hacks saw blades ground down to make a little sharp knife or something to sort of almost grate the clay.

Lisa: It sounds to me like you're making tools as you're problem solving. So if you need something to do a certain thing or to take your work in any direction, you're making the tool for that.

Prue: Yes, yes. I've often stumbled on solutions.

Prue: Like, I was in England, and I went to Stoke on Trent. And I stayed in the Wedgewood Memorial Home, and it was like a bed and breakfast. Anyway, I walked in the door and there was a group of musicians that looked like Irish or Scottish fiddle players in the living room. One of them put his head around the door and said, "Oh, come in for a drink when you've settled."

So I did. And one of them said to me, "Now, why are you here? You know, we're having our little musical camp thing. What are you doing here?"

And I said, "Well, I've come here because I want to find out how porcelain factories in the past supported things in the kiln, just to see if there were things that I don't understand. Because I know that I've seen things that have been made, and I can't work out how they were fired because they looked like they would fall down in the kiln. So I want to know historically how they're supported."

And he said, "Oh, that's really funny. I've just finished my PhD on that subject." And then he talked to me about it and he said, "Oh, it's such a shame. There's this one paper that was written that shows the whole history of these supports for kiln firing. But it's just not available anymore. He said, That would be fantastic if you could possibly get a copy of that."

And he said, "I don't think I even have one."

And anyway, the next day I went to the museum and in the front foyer, there was a table of things for a pound that they were getting rid of. And on the top of the pile were two of these copies of this paper. And so I bought them both and I posted him one. He couldn't believe it, but it's that luck and coincidence that happens.

And I don't even know what I'm searching for. But keeping my eyes open, something comes up and I think, Oh, that's interesting. That might solve my problem.

Lisa: It's serendipity, isn't it?

Prue: It's total serendipity. It's amazing.

Lisa: I'm interested, Prue, you mentioned beginning to work with higher temperatures and different types of clay. Can you tell us what kind of knowledge is needed to work with porcelain?

Prue: Porcelain is a very tricky material and at Harrow we were allowed to use it in the last term, if we really were desperate. But that wasn't really encouraged because they saw it as a material that you use when you're really a developed maker. And the attitude there was that when you finish your course, you probably have another ten years to go before you can really feel like you know what you're doing. And I think that was very accurate with me.

What's needed with porcelain is a sense of, that it's always a developing knowledge. That you start with the material. You have to really feel what the material wants to let you do, and then explore that. And gradually, gradually gradually move the edges and change the parameters as you go. In a way, you have to respect what it's telling you.

That's the most important technique really. You have to listen to it because it'll tell you what it'll let you do.

Lisa: It's almost like the porcelain's mastering you, in a way.

Prue: Yeah, well some porcelains just won't allow you to do certain things at all. For me it's been really interesting to go and look at industries, and where they've used porcelain for decades, or centuries. And see how they've managed it.

When I worked in China, there was like a library of shapes that they used. You soon realise that there's a reason for that. They've had centuries of seeing what happens with it.

Sometimes they're surprised by what somebody achieves or tries to do, who's come from outside. But often the really important thing is to listen to what they're doing, to watch what they're doing because they know what the limits are.

There are many, many, many different porcelains and they all have their own qualities.

Lisa: Which particular porcelain do you work with generally?

Prue: Well, I've been using Limoges porcelain for a long time now. One of the main reasons is that it will allow me to bend it and alter the shape without cracking. It allows me to do what I want to do, but it also, I know that the supply is going to be meticulously regular. Because they're supplying large industries, they can't afford to change the clay. And so there are no surprises in that way. So they, and they have teams of chemists to make sure that the clay is always consistent. And then I also have a supply of Chinese porcelain that I use, but it's not really meant for throwing. It's very, very hard to use on the wheel. And so it limits what I can do.

Lisa: You've spent quite a bit of time in China. Tell us a little more about your most recent experience.

Prue: I went to China because Takeshi Yasuda said to me, You should come. He was working in Jingdezhen and I've had contact with him over many years. He was the director of the pottery workshop there. And he used to say to me, Why haven't you come? You should come. If you don't come soon, it'll be too late.

And he went there about twenty years ago and they said to him, Oh, you've come. It's too late! Because it's changing so rapidly. But it wasn't too late when I went. It's just the most amazing place. You see things you can't believe. Big tiles that are four metres by one metre wide or one and a half metres wide. I would have thought that was an impossibility. They roll them with big rollers by hand. People make huge pots bigger than I can't reach the rim of the pot standing next to it. It's not just the big things. It's very fine work too. Incredibly skilled things I wouldn't have believed to be possible. It's quite rough really, the place where you work. People in tiny little garage spaces, open to the street, working with the most incredible skill. It's fantastic. And they're willing to teach you things. If you, if you show interest, they'll show you things, they're lovely.

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Neville French: Prue's a great teacher, and I think she's had a significant impact on a lot of successful students.

Lisa: Neville French is an internationally acclaimed Australian ceramic artist and educator with over 40 years practice.

Neville: For the type of work that Prue makes, you need deep learning and sequential learning. That's the kind of thing that she taught. It's very good for students to have role models of people that make distinctive work. I think the lesson in Prue's work is that people need to follow their own direction. She makes work that

is highly evolved, beautiful in its material quality, innovative in its design. She's really a great mentor.

[music]

Lisa: What do you think is the most challenging aspect of making a career as an artist for new makers today?

Prue: The hardest thing is accepting it's something in yourself that needs that, and then just doing it. So many times I've met people who've said, Oh, I really want to do this. But everyone tells me that it's, you know, you can't make a living or you can't do this, or you shouldn't, or you should do something more reliable. Often it's the parental voice talking, but I always say, You have one life.

I don't think it is an easy path, but then many paths aren't easy.

Lisa: I completely can see that. I think that sticking to the path, finding out what it is you're really passionate about, following that through, but also being open to the different directions that it might take you in.

Prue: Well you don't know. The directions arrive. And so you need to keep your eyes open. If you want to do something, you've got to make sure that you do it well, and you have to do a lot of work. My advice is to try and always do the best work you can.

And to learn to be really discriminating and not to keep everything and to look widely around you and experiment.

One contentious thing is to not ever use social media as your reference material, because the world is so much bigger than that.

And this is also very contentious. Don't sell your work until it's really well established. If you want to be a really good maker and build a reputation for your work, don't start selling right at the beginning. Everybody when they first make things, think, Ooh wow, I made that, this is great! But a lot of people are selling within the first year or something. I was lucky at Harrow in that we weren't allowed to sell anything. It would have meant instant expulsion. Nobody ever did. Nobody ever tried.

Once you start selling, you cut back on your learning.

I remember Gwen Hanssen Pigott used to say, "If you're thinking about selling all the time that you're making, there's a part of your work that will look like the gas bill."

[music]

Neville French: When Prue started teaching at Ballarat, she used to stay with my family here in Ballarat. So we had a lot of time to talk about things. And I was always interested in Gwen Hanssen Pigott's work. And I had a number of pieces of her work here. I ended up organising a residency for Gwen at the School.

So we did spend quite a bit of time with Gwen. I guess the common interest that we all had was the importance and the beauty of handmade tableware. She was a mentor for us both.

Lisa: So Prue, you clearly have a long list of accomplishments and your work is in many significant collections. You have a national and international reputation as one of Australia's leading contemporary ceramic artists. Is there one thing that stands out from all that you've achieved for you that you'd like to talk to us about?

Prue: This exhibition has been very important to me, the Living Treasures. I think it's very important on a number of fronts. It's enabled me to produce a large body of work that looks at lots of things, and that enabled me to incorporate metal much more strongly in my work and present it publicly.

One of the key things is that it's work by a person who makes functional objects and that's very unusual to have to have an exhibition like this.

The other thing that was really a key achievement for me was when I won the Fletcher Challenge Competition in New Zealand. I almost didn't send the work because I sent three very tiny jugs, some of the smallest pieces I've ever made. Well under ten centimeters tall, they were really tiny, and they were so small.

As I packed them up, I thought, Well, there's not a lot of point to this.

Fortunately, Takeshi Yaseda was the judge. Takeshi said he just walked past them, he didn't notice them to start with. They were so small. And most of the work in the competition was huge. Huge, almost life-size figures of animals and absolutely extraordinary work actually. There's a fantastic contemporary ceramics world in New Zealand.

He said that he wandered around the exhibition for a few days. He didn't notice my work to start with, and when he did, he realised they were very complex. Anyway, he awarded them the first prize and it was after that, that people started to notice what I was doing.

Before that, I used to send photographs away to all sorts of exhibitions and competitions in Australia and nobody noticed. I was always rejected.

That was a really key thing for me to win that. Some people were absolutely horrified because again, it was this thing of functional work, winning a big prize. They thought this was terrible. That really something that was more seen as part of the art world, should have won it.

And he said that there was something about the work...that he'd always drunk black coffee, but this made him think he might take milk.

Because he thought using these jugs would change something. He still doesn't take milk. His comments made me realise, more strongly, that functional objects can actually change your life. They can change your thinking. They can alter how you feel. And they're often ignored. They're very key things in our lives.

Prue: Well, a lot of people talk about functional things as being insignificant, but I don't think they are. I think they're very important in our lives.

Lisa: The exhibition is now about halfway through. Do you have a sense of what impact it has had for you and for our audiences and the ceramics community?

Prue: It's had a big impact for me. When it was in Bendigo, up the road from me, lots of people in town said, "Oh, that's what you do in your studio."

Because I'm actually a very quiet person. A lot of people didn't know what I did at all. Or they knew I made pots, but they didn't really know what I did.

It has a very important role to play for anybody who wants to make functional things. It provides good encouragement that you can actually do that. That you can treat that as your serious work. That you don't have to make something else, and then do functional work as an aside. That's a major, major thing that it's done for the ceramics community.

It demonstrates how long it takes to make things. It was really four years of work. I think it lets people know how much work you do as a maker, if you're really committed to it and how long things take to develop. It's a lifetime of intense focus, really.

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Lisa: That was Prue Venables, ninth Living Treasure: Master of Australian craft, speaking with me, Lisa Cahill.

What really stood out for me was Prue's commitment to making work that 'belonged to her', as she puts it. And the challenge of doing that - that it's not always easy to keep making work that's yours. Like when she almost didn't enter her tiny jugs into the Fletcher Challenge ceramics competition... but then won.

Other food for thought was not using social media for reference material, and not selling your work too early.

You can peek inside Prue's studio in a short film that's on our Show Notes – go to <http://australiandesigncentre.com/podcast>

Prue's exhibition is touring Australia until October 2022. It'll be in Bunbury, Cairns, Noosa, Newcastle and Cowra. Those dates on the Show Notes page too.

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In the next episode of Object, we'll meet master jeweller Marian Hosking.

Marian Hosking: In the visual arts, being sentimental or a souvenir is often a derogatory term. Actually what I do is both souvenir and sentimental. And I really value both of those aspects of my making.

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Object is a podcast by the Australian Design Centre. We're on Gadigal country in Sydney Australia, where this podcast is made.

We'd like to thank the Australia Council for the Arts for funding support for Object. You can follow the Australian Design Centre on Facebook, Instagram and Twitter. Object is produced by Jane Curtis in collaboration with Lisa Cahill and Alix Fiveash. Thank you for listening.

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