

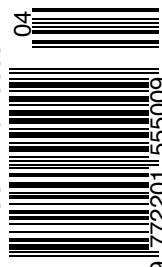
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“Striking gold for Pamela is finding a stack of Staffordshire saucers with their ornate flowers and gold rims...”

You Only Live Once

Pamela Irving

Words by Jo Canham & Pamela Irving Photography Supplied

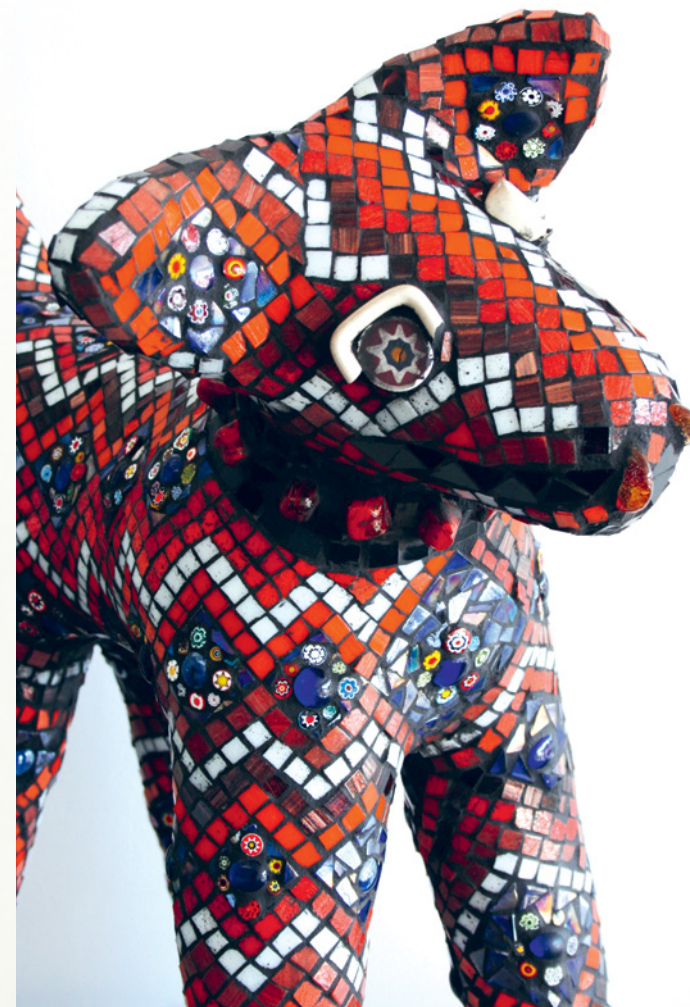
Pamela Irving's art encompasses assemblage, mosaics, painting, ceramics and sculpture. Her art school background is in sculpture and ceramics, with an emphasis on large-scale vessels and figurative forms. By the time Pamela was in her 20s, she had already started to gather awards and her works were finding homes in public collections.

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Motherhood dramatically changed her practice, as first one child and then another disrupted her routine and pushed changes on her working techniques. Clay would dry out, and the pieces wouldn't come together. This changed Pamela's artistic direction. She instead started to fossick in op shops and bazaars while she was out walking with the pram. Her pram began to fill not just with babies, but also found objects, and these pieces she began to join together in the small snatches of time available to a mother of young children. She began creating new objects out of old discards.

In 2004, a pivotal point in Pamela's career came about with the conference held by the Association of Contemporary Mosaic Congress in Melbourne. Attending this event, Pamela found her tribe and realised she was, in fact, a mosaicist. With some of the finest mosaic artists from around the world, it became abundantly clear that mosaics were not just “boring trivets and tabletops” but that they can contribute to architecture, to landscape and sculpture, and that, in fact, there are no limits.

Four years later, Pamela attended the same conference, this time in Gaziantep, Turkey, to present her own paper titled *The Romans Never Conquered Australia*, on the advantages and disadvantages of being an Antipodean mosaicist. This talk led to a commission in Russia, at the State Architectural Museum in Moscow, and then further exhibitions in Japan, France, USA, Latvia and Italy. Pamela has had further commissions in Shanghai and Kuala Lumpur, and returned to Turkey as a guest of the Turkish government to give a talk on contemporary mosaics. She also regularly teaches and exhibits in Chicago, with the pre-eminent Chicago Mosaic School. This year, in October, Pamela returns to Chicago for a collaborative exhibition with the director of the school, Karen Ami, titled *Savage Liaisons* – an exhibition of drawings and mosaic masks using primitive art as inspiration.





Pamela credits her success not just to her children, but also to the use of storytelling that accompanies her choice of materials. Trencadis is a technique where broken ceramics or other irregular pieces of glass or marble are used to cover a structure. Using this technique, Pamela breaks down found objects – largely crockery, porcelain objects, doll parts, bottle tops – and upcycles them. Visiting her in her Bentleigh studio, you will find large tubs of her ‘stuff’ under the work bench. To be invited out the back is to witness a veritable hoarder’s den.

Memoryware is another term that Pamela uses for some of her work, and this harks back to memory jugs of 19th century North America. A deceased person’s effects were embedded into a clay layer around a vessel in order to preserve memories of the individual, often made by people who couldn’t afford a tombstone. Pamela talks about a Hannukah candelabra she made for a Jewish woman whose parents had survived war-torn Europe. The candelabra was assembled out of the broken shards of treasured urns that had also survived the journey to a new country. In the recreation, Pamela used not only the urn fragments, but also other precious objects from the woman’s parents including jewellery. In working with these often old and worn materials, Pamela finds herself thinking about their past lives – who ate from that plate, what conversations has this cup heard, and what stories they might be able to tell. She enjoys giving them new life and new meaning.



While it might on the surface appear that Pamela’s foraging days are over, it seems that once a forager always a forager! For a bower bird like Pamela, you can never have enough. Fortunately, her studio is large enough to store her treasures and besides, she adds, it’s not contributing to landfill if it’s out the back! She’s astonished at what she finds and wonders at the stuff that is thrown out, and also feels some sympathy for mosaicists of the future, who will only have our modern dull china to use – largely white, heavy and the same. Striking gold for Pamela is finding a stack of Staffordshire saucers with their ornate flowers and gold rims...and the special sound they make when they bump against each other.

These days you can find many of Pamela’s works around Melbourne – perhaps most notably the *Dreaming With Open Eyes* installation at Luna Park, which took her four years to complete. Luna Park was built on an old tip site, and at the time of the scenic railway restoration a lot of old china was discovered and kept for Pamela – these pieces were incorporated back into the “large, giggly” heads. Another mural – hundreds of heads made by hundreds of people – won Pamela a Keep Australia Beautiful Award for community engagement and use of recycling – you can find this at the Patterson Station underpass. For each of these massive projects, Pamela’s materials were recycled china, discarded floor tiles and other found objects.





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Pamela recently held an exhibition for the Port Fairy Folk Festival at our own Blarney Books & Art in Port Fairy, titled *YOLO Man Waltzes Matilda*. This body of work is currently on display at Pamela’s studio in Bentleigh. Pamela’s husband, Benjamin Lindner, has recently written and released the book *Waltzing Matilda: Australia’s Accidental Anthem*, with his research taking over five years. During this time, Pamela found she was driven to explore this facet of Australian history through her own work, and she wanted to use her character YOLO man (You Only Live Once) to tell the story. Pamela and Benjamin took a trip to Winton, Queensland, the birthplace of *Waltzing Matilda*, and determined the location of Dagworth Station. Whilst at the site of the station, they were able to find and collect small shards of crockery, glass bottle stoppers, a billy lid, a piece of a broken shear, old tins and more. These pieces were incorporated into this series of YOLO man mosaics. Pamela deliberately left the china pieces dirty, perhaps saving their DNA from which one day we might discover whether Banjo Paterson, Christina MacPherson or Sarah Riley actually ate from that particular piece of china!

When I asked Pamela what her dream installation would be, she responded that she would love to create a giant playground for both adults and children – something truly interactive and on a grand scale that would bring joy to people, and something that could be created out of our discards. Rethink, reuse, reduce, recycle, rejoice!