



*Hakea Petiolaris  
and South Coast  
pod vase. Photo  
by Bo Wong.*

# Calm before the form

*Award winning artist Samantha Dennison, from Albany, WA,  
exudes peace and calm through every brushstroke.*

STORY KEN EASTWOOD

When Samantha Dennison was in her 40s, she was kept frenetically busy, with 3 children under 2 years of age, including baby twins. Life was chaotic, so she craved times of solace and serenity. It took a few years, but the qualified high-school art teacher, who had previously exhibited landscape paintings, began to carve out time to focus on a new form of art – still life oil paintings of simple things she had found in local op shops or her neighbourhood. “It was quite full on, and I found that painting still life – the whole process – calms me,” she says.

That sense of calmness now exudes from every brushstroke made by the established, award-winning artist, who is based in Albany, WA. Last year she won the City of Albany Acquisitive Award in the Great Southern Art Award, and she has twice been a finalist in the esteemed Ravenswood Women’s Art Prize (of which **OUTBACK** is a media partner). Samantha’s art is held in

the Royal Perth Hospital Collection and by collectors in Australia and internationally, who pay thousands for her works. In her last showing in Linton and Kay in Subiaco, Perth, all 26 pieces sold.

With muted, earthy colours, her artworks usually feature pots and ceramics – many of which Samantha has made herself – exquisitely lit with natural light. Occasionally a burst of colour pops, in the form of fruit, indigenous plants or flowers from her neighbourhood, such as the beacon-like blooms of a red flowering gum from across the street. “I’ve always been interested in red,” Samantha says. “I had red flowers for my wedding.”

Located within view of the sweeping shores of King George Sound, her backyard studio is a quiet haven from the rest of the household – including husband Geoff and their now teenage children – with several paintings on the go at a time. “I had to train everybody not to disturb me – when I’m in the studio you have to knock on the



*Samantha Dennison  
in her backyard studio  
in Albany, WA. Photo  
by Ken Eastwood.*



KEN EASTWOOD

*Samantha paints over the burnt sienna that underlies many of her paintings.*

door,” she says. “My goal is to spend 5 hours in the studio a day. Sometimes that’s broken up into 2 hours and then 3 hours later in the day. I generally start about 9am, and sometimes I fit in a walk or a swim. Swimming is another calming activity for me and walking around the bay – it’s beautiful and it’s a good mind shift, too.”

The entire process of creating one of her still lifes is slow and intentional, starting with collecting the items, such as pomegranates or something from someone’s garden (taken with permission). “That gives the containers, the vessels, their meaning,” Samantha says. “There’s always a story attached – it might be literally me walking through my area, or the story of the indigenous plants in the area.

“The arranging is a very focused activity as well – it’s a process I can do all day.” Samantha adjusts by millimetres the pots and pieces on a special plinth that Geoff made for her, waiting for the right diffused light to come through the window. “As the year goes on the light changes,” she says.

Samantha takes a photo of the arrangement, and then spends a lot of time cropping the photograph to get multiple options, like a sketchbook. “There’s a moment when something just clicks when I’m doing the arranging and then I know I’ve got it. It’s the same with cropping.”

She’ll then print out the photo she’s chosen and work

from that. Painting like this from the photograph was a technique that Samantha intentionally adopted when the children were young, because she was never sure how long she’d have before she was interrupted.

She usually paints on a square ‘toothy’ canvas that grabs the paint off the brush. Samantha uses slow-drying oils, and paintings might have 6 or more layers. “I work in batches and that allows me to come back and look at it with fresh eyes and see where the problems are,” she says. “Over the next few weeks, I keep coming back to it, and it’s always better if I do.”

Samantha and her family moved to Albany from Perth in 2012, and she has found a welcoming and thriving art community at the Vancouver Arts Centre, where she uses facilities such as a kiln. “There’s a real sharing of ideas and major generosity. I’ve learnt a lot of things through that, so I’m now making my own vessels again. I like making small batches – I explore shapes and now glazes and clays.”

Samantha is also doing trials with wild clays that she has sourced, and incorporating materials from landscapes into the ceramics, such as ash from firepits on Cheela Plains station in the Pilbara. “The landscape is coming in literally through the materials that I’m using,” she says.

But for now, the ceramics she makes are only for painting, not as marketable artworks themselves. “I don’t want to sell them yet. I want to keep them all.”



*Thomas Look*

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