



WORDS Lindy Schneider | PHOTOGRAPHY Pip Young & Jena Bedson

An Act of Creation

WITH JENA BEDSON

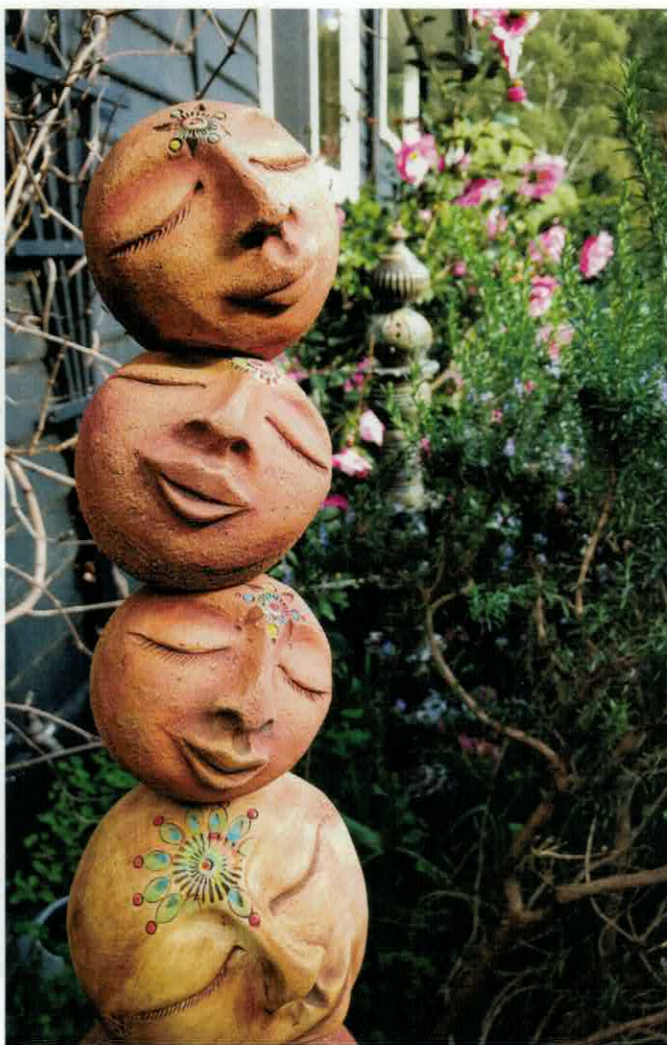
There is long held wisdom in the idea that what delights us as children is what makes us truly happy in adulthood. Philosophers have mused on this; Jena Bedson, a ceramicist and artist based in Warburton, is a living example of this. "My life today is resonant with the vignettes I would create with my sister in the garden when I was a child," says Jena. "We'd build tiny landscapes for our dolls, curating every centimetre of garden, creating spaces of beauty and repose. I didn't realise it then, but I was modelling the way I wanted my life to unfold."

Jena's home, studio and garden are all intricately woven together as extensions of her deepest desire to be utterly and continually creative. "This place has enabled me to work and live true to my intention," she says. A resident of the Yarra Valley for almost twenty years, Jena purchased her home six years ago and shares the space with Summa the foxy dog and Skye the Burmese cat, but from the moment she stepped inside she had a profound sense she would share it with many others. "I called it The Lighthouse because it held something luminous and peaceful."

A successful working artist for more than four decades, Jena has always understood the need for adopting a commercial approach to her work. But her approach to her ceramics is also deeply connected to the magic art weaves as a healing modality – both for herself and others. Her work, which has gone all around the world, is unmistakably "Jena": organic, colourful, in flow with nature, earthy and grounded with shapes that speak of spontaneity, symbolism and metaphor. "My work must carry a sense of meaning, nothing is simply decorative," she says. "And I make work for myself. If someone else likes it, that's wonderful."

More recently, the comfort of creating has taken on an intensely personal significance for Jena when she lost her mother to Parkinson's and supported both her brother and her sister as they experienced life-threatening illnesses. "I started making Serenity Pots," says Jena. "They bought a sense of calm and peace to me, both in the making and in having them around me as I dealt with my own grief and challenges. It's how I was able to be strong for my own family. I realised the best gift I could give them was my presence. Making Serenity Pots gave me that."

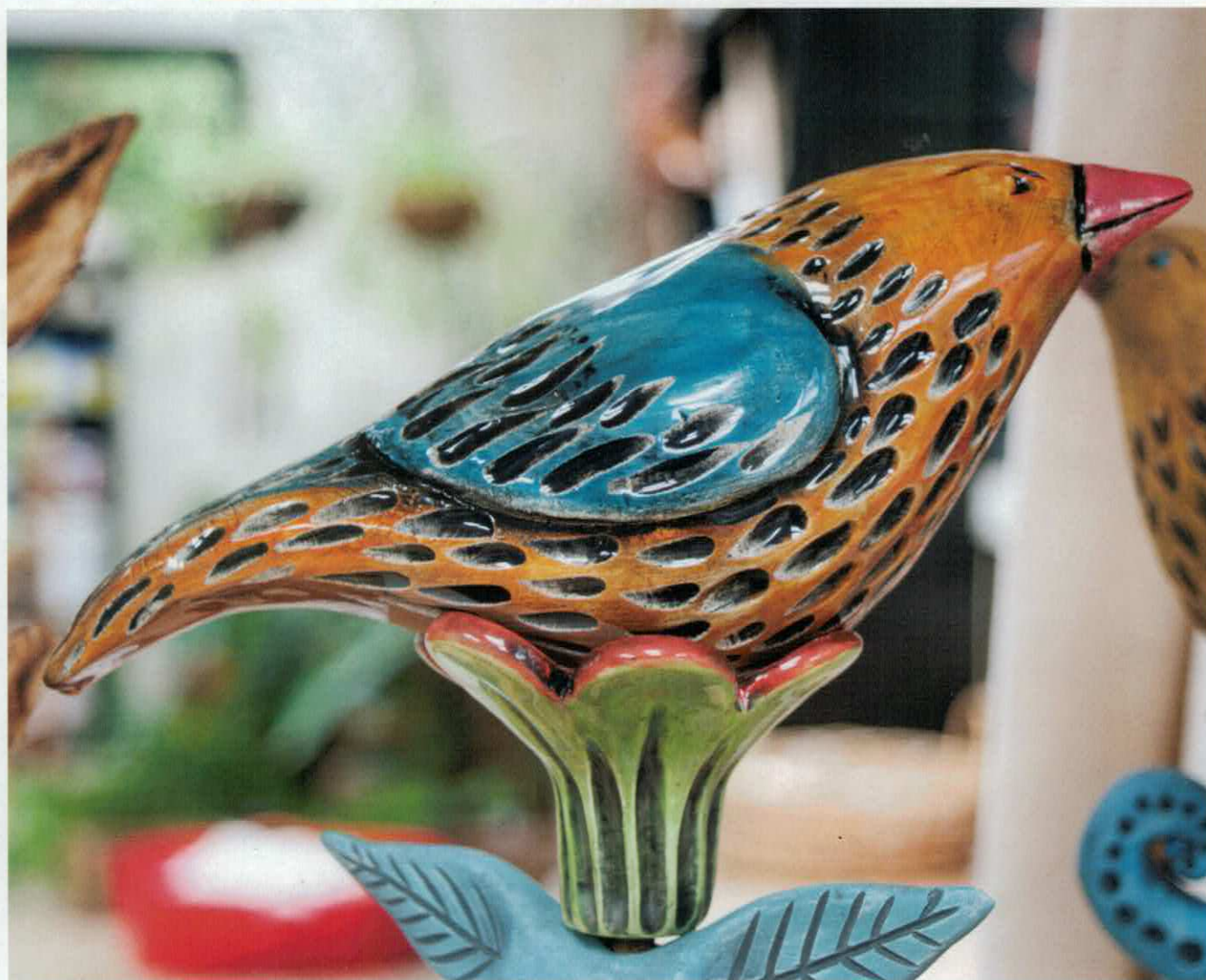
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Each year many people come to Jena's studio as participants in clay workshops or as visitors to her garden and exhibits. "I realised people were coming here to learn a way with clay, but they also brought their life stories – stories of grief and bereavement, of illness, of recovery and resilience. With their hands in the clay, people just seemed to naturally chat about their lives. They felt a sense of safety with other people and, in the holding of creative process, they opened up. I feel working the clay gave them a sense of control, often when much in their life was out of control. There was a therapeutic benefit in transforming those feelings into something beautiful."

What has emerged has brought new meaning to Jena's work. Her commissions now are more likely to be commemorations: unique sculptural pieces to memorialise loved ones, and focus points for meditative spaces for remembering. "It is precious work that is vested in the idea of connection," says Jena, who has, with her characteristic warmth and empathy, created vessels to acknowledge a kidney transplant, a sculpture to honour a miscarried child, and a son lost in a car accident. Her workshops are safe places for people to do the same with their own hands. "A man made a totem sculpture to honour a 30th anniversary of the passing of the liver donor who had saved his life," she says. "Being able to share this with others is a blessing I am grateful for."







Jena's home has north-facing windows that bathe the living areas in sunshine, even on the dulllest day, and frame an ever-changing perspective of Mt Victoria. Every shelf, every surface, reflects her passion to make and to collect other people's work. Just like the little girl in her garden, Jena is constantly moving things around to create new little scenarios in her home. Every corner is alive with this creativity. "I feel deep satisfaction bringing pieces together in harmony and beauty, and then creating all over again." This artist's way is reflected again in her on-site accommodation 'Away with the Birds Retreat', which attracts creative people seeking the inspiration of her garden and studio, or to simply rest in nature.

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"My mission to create my sculpture garden is also my heart's work," says Jena. "I am always germinating – ideas, seeds, projects." Lush with deciduous and native trees, Jena has transformed her half-acre of lawns into colourful garden beds as backdrops for her exquisite ceramic works – totems, sculptures, pots and ceramic flowers and curiosities. "I'm a random gardener, concerned with flow, and soft lines. If I see a gap, I am immediately imagining what I can create to go there." Gracing her home are trees planted by the original owners in the 1950s; Golden Ash, Golden Elm and Elder Trees, and a unique Tricolour Beech tree (one of the best specimens in Warburton) that she has registered for its preservation. Underneath their boughs is one of the greatest expressions of creativity Jena has ever embarked on. "This sculpture garden is how I express myself, but my garden is also how I seek inspiration. So, it's a complete act of devotion to my craft, and a place to share with others seeking nurture."

"In my early twenties my mentor, master potter William Reid, said to me, 'Whenever you feel times are difficult, just go into the studio and make work'. These wise words have carried me through the many challenges of life. I worked hard, and it wasn't always easy; now I live gently and generously, and that is my life. All I want to do is give. And I've discovered the infinite well – the more you give the more comes back to you." ■

