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## A Woman of Surprise

My favourite room: Fusing beauty and sustainability is at the heart of Amanda Pratt's approach to both business and decorating her 1830s home *by Mary O'Sullivan*

Amanda Pratt's new business venture focuses on the sustainable and the surprising. And her period home in south county Dublin, which she shares with her husband and two dogs, is in a similar vein.

It's hard to imagine what Nick Cave, the singer and co-founder of alternative rock band The Bad Seeds (the forerunner of which, The Birthday Party, was dubbed "the most violent band in the world"), could possibly have in common with fashion and homewares designer, retail expert and generally sunny, life-loving Amanda Pratt.

However, apparently they both love ceramics in the shape of Staffordshire flatback china dogs. Cave, it seems, is doing a range of pottery based on the flatback while Pratt has a host of them scattered around her lovely home in south Co Dublin. "My grandmother was an antique dealer and she collected Staffordshire; it was a big trend at one time," Pratt explains.

Pratt has a lot of unexpected items in her home: the kitchen chairs are all different colours and there's an abundance of cushions emblazoned with all sorts of images including antique

portraits, animals and words. In addition there are ornamental bird cages, a stuffed crane, an ancestor's wedding jacket, a ceramic swan, and at least one Buddha. On the face of it, the list sounds kitsch-y. Yet it all hangs together beautifully.

Not everyone could succeed with this unlikely assortment but then Pratt has years of experience. As creative director for decades at Avoca, and more recently as an independent consultant, Pratt has been the driving force behind many beautiful collections, be these knitwear, ceramics, jewellery or homeware.

She's also put her unique design stamp on many different enterprises and in the past few months she's decided to go back into design and retail for herself and has opened Amo & Pax, a gorgeous lifestyle store in the old head office of Avoca in Kilmacanogue, Co Wicklow.

For Amo and Pax she has sourced a huge selection of merchandise: clothing, knitwear, jewellery, homewares and gift items. It's a diverse range with two common threads. "It's about sustainability and beauty, and I really believe the two can sit side by side. Ninety eight percent of the products in the shop would decompose without doing harm," she enthuses, adding that while not everything is local, carbon footprint is important. "I'm really pleased that Colette, the machinist I worked with for 30 years, is here in the shop making shirts from Irish linen woven 40 minutes away," Pratt says.

Pratt is not beyond doing a lot of the making herself — she says she actually cuts out the shirts at her own kitchen table, and this is not PR puff. She's the kind of person who will notice that there's a little rip in your jacket and mend it while chatting. She's also involved in the making of the pottery with renowned potter Geoffrey Healy. "Geoffrey throws it and he says I then ruin it,"

she says with a laugh, pointing out how she created the design on a jug handle with her own thumbprint. She also makes some of the jewellery. “I’m doing all the things I love,” Pratt says, explaining that this is what she did as a child. “I was always sitting on the floor of my bedroom making things and I was lucky. I had a wonderful teacher in primary school, Florence Armstrong, and she totally encouraged creativity.”

After school Pratt went to Trinity College Dublin. She would have loved to have done fashion, but the idea wasn’t entertained by her school guidance counsellor. “I said I’d really like to be a designer. They practically didn’t know what a designer was. Then when I went to Trinity, I was involved in ‘Players’ and looked after the costumes and I went to the guidance counsellor there who said, ‘No I don’t think that would work’. At the time it was an unknown idea.” At Trinity she did a degree in history of art, architecture and archaeology, but has no regrets. “These are all things I loved and still love,” she says.

As a student Pratt continued to make things and even back then bought recycled clothes. “My great friend Rebecca and I used to buy in second-hand shops, and charity shops. What I loved about that [was] we had things no one else had and you could put them together in a different way,” she says, adding that she still likes to be different. “I wear my clothes to death and I usually do something to them. I’ll cut the back of a shirt or cut high-boots down to a short style. Eight of 10 times I buy something I’ll change it,” she says.

After Trinity she got to the London College of Fashion and did a post graduate course in clothing technology. She worked for a few years in London then got the opportunity to come home. “I met my parents at a yarn show in Yorkshire. They said they were looking for someone to look after the knitting department. I said,

‘If you give me the job I’ll come home’.” Back then her father and mother, who had been a solicitor and schoolteacher respectively, were still mainly selling blankets woven at the Avoca Mills; the whole retail experience was to come later when Pratt and her siblings got involved, starting with the knitwear. “Avoca then was different. It was the late 1980s. It was a tourist business, exporting to the US. I then started to design handknits with different yarns, I also did children’s knits and they started selling really well.”

Emboldened by this success, Pratt got the opportunity to design her own fashion lines, first Hope and Thimble then Avoca Anthology. These did so well that they exported to Japan, Britain, Germany and the Netherlands as well as the US. “All the while, the mill was working away and you were hoping that the people who bought the fashion also bought the blankets and scarves and they did, which meant the mill was safe.”

The company with Pratt as creative director expanded hugely and was sold in 2015. Amanda had left in 2014 and one of her first jobs was as a consultant to Scotsman Richard Scott, who is the Duke of Buccleuch and one of Britain’s biggest landowners. “They had a palace they didn’t know what to do with. It was languishing. I worked with them for three years. I didn’t know anything about Scotland, but they were great, incredibly kind”.

After three years with the duke, Pratt worked on the makeover of the National Gallery shop and on creating a shop in Russborough House, Co Wicklow, making the visitor experience more enjoyable. “I love buildings and architecture and I wanted to help look after such important institutions,” she says.

Then during lockdown she got the idea for Amo & Pax. The catalyst was her getting the opportunity to buy the original head

office of Avoca in Kilmacanogue, a place she's always loved particularly as it's beside an ancient yew tree. "The trees are one of the main reasons I wanted to be where we are." She jokes that she wasn't sure if she was mad, but her husband Tom has been a huge support. The couple met in 1988 when Pratt crashed a party her friends were going to after she came back from the UK. They have twin daughters, Indigo, a project manager, and Holly Star, a solicitor. Tom is in the advertising world and, according to Pratt, is incredibly clever. "He's the cleverest person I know, Mensa-clever. And such a lovely person. He developed my website. And he's always there doing stuff."

Before she actually could stock the shop she had to renovate the building, which wasn't in good condition. "I was very specific that everything we did we had to do sustainably. So it's heavily insulated, there's solar power and the most sustainable heating system you can have. That's a big thing — I did my best in terms of the right thing to do."

It's the same when it comes to the shop's stock. Sustainability is to the forefront. Though, as she points out, not everything is sustainable; she has for example leather goods but she went to trouble to source really beautiful leathers. "I'm not saying I'm getting it right, but I find I love trying to get to the kernel. I really feel I have to be part of the conversation," she says. The premises are huge; while the merchandise is downstairs, she's developing ideas for upstairs. "Anyone whose ethos fits in — writers, thinkers, philosophers — I would like them to come and talk. I'm very interested in Alain de Botton's School of Life and in Byron Katie. I'm very interested in how thinking creates our world," Pratt says. "Anyone who has something to teach us; for example, Diarmuid Gavin is going to start a gardening school."

Pratt's own garden is gorgeous and she has a greenhouse, which she says is her favourite room. "I love plants. I've always had about 120 pots and I look after them all".

One thing Pratt loves about her house is her garden being at a slightly higher level than her sun room so she can look at her plants at eye level. This sun room was added eight years ago when she also renovated her kitchen. On the same floor can be found her office, where there is a kiln, Tom's office and an all-white bathroom.

Upstairs there are two high-ceilinged reception rooms, three bedrooms and a bathroom. The house dates from the 1830s. Pratt says it was a solid house even when they bought it 30 years ago. Apart from the little sun room/dining room extension, she's tended not to mess with it. The parquet floors in the reception rooms are still as she found them 30 years ago. "One of the things I fell in love with in this house is the proportions and the casement windows. There are windows on all four walls and the light comes in from three sides, it's just so pretty."

She's loath to put a name to her furnishing style. "The family has a farmhouse in Tuscany, with a lot of olive trees and oaks, and that influences a lot of the aesthetic. It isn't snazzy." So what if it isn't snazzy. The style of Amanda's home is bohemian, beautiful and positively brimming with sublime surprises.