



Amanda Pratt outside her new shop. Photo: Amo & Pax

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Amanda Pratt, one of the Avoca siblings, talks about life after leaving the leading Irish brand and going in a different direction with her new shop, Amo & Pax.

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The wall of Amanda Pratt’s studio is covered in clippings. Notes, quotes, postcards, and pictures she’s collected along the way.

She holds up one card which reads: “You need chaos in your soul to give birth to a dancing star”. Another: “Great minds discuss ideas. Average minds discuss events. Small minds discuss people”.

Perhaps the most relevant to our conversation, however, reads: “When shopping becomes salvation, advertising slogans become our litany... When our worth is measured by how much we earn and spend, then the market is destroying the very virtues on which, in the long run, it depends”. “I would have printed that out in 2007,” Pratt says.

She is on Zoom with me to talk about her newest venture: a sustainably minded shop called Amo & Pax.

To understand how she got here, however, she first takes me back to 2014 when she left Avoca.

“I had no idea I was going to leave”

Pratt was one of the four siblings who, along with their parents, owned and ran Avoca for 25 years (working “very, very happily” together) before it was sold in 2015 for a reported €64 million to US catering giant Aramark. She owned 24 per cent of the company.

The family had already decided to sell when she left, but she didn’t expect to leave as abruptly as she did. It was for family reasons, she won’t say more, calling it “literally a momentary decision... I had no idea I was going to leave”.

She stresses that the family have sorted it out but adds: “We decided that we were sort of slightly destroying each other. That’s really what happened.”

She was at a loose end – and scared. “I left... I was 52 and I thought, ‘Oh, my God, I will never do anything again’.”

That’s when a friend told her to stop being ridiculous. “He said, ‘The great thing about creativity is that often people who have earned their living through their creativity, they actually often get stronger, even as they get older’,” Pratt says. “And I thought, I don’t know, maybe he’s right.”

She was lucky, she says, because six months later she got a call from the Duke of Buccleuch.

### Scottish restoration

The Duke of Buccleuch (pronounced Buck-loo) is one of the largest landowners in Scotland, and he had a problem. He had a lot of big houses and didn’t know what to do with them. In particular, there was a “very unloved” stables on the grounds of Dalkeith Palace just outside Edinburgh.

The family had been to Avoca a number of times and wondered whether Pratt could work her magic for them.

At first she said no – “I don’t know anything about Scotland” – but within a week they’d persuaded her. “It was the best thing I ever did.”

Pratt had a blank canvas to create “The Restoration Yard” – a shop and café in these 300-year-old stables. She operated out of an office on Fitzwilliam Square in Dublin and employed about five other Irish people. “Doing something without the machinery of Avoca and doing it in a different country where I didn’t know anybody, that was fantastic,” she says.

Next, she worked pro bono for the National Gallery for a few years. And she got involved in developing the café and shop at Russborough House.

But by that point, in 2021, she “had a calling to be back [at the original Avoca head office], particularly beside those trees”, she says.

She knew that Aramark had sold almost all the Avoca property by that time so Pratt tracked down the new owners and bought it back.

New start for an old building

“The building was in very bad nick,” she tells me, it had an asbestos roof, no windows. “My instinct was, if this was going to be a place [where] the bones were even things that I believed in, I literally had to get it down to bare bones.”

She got craftspeople in to help her, and installed sustainable oak floorboards and lots of insulation.

“I actually got a call yesterday from the energy company saying that they owe me €500 for the energy the building’s creating,” says Pratt “So, I mean, I think that’s so exciting.”

She got rid of the building waste with a company in Wicklow that “guarantee that everything you take off-site will be recycled... Even though it’s a more expensive process, that mattered to me hugely,” says Pratt. “I feel very strongly that I have to take responsibility for stuff.”

What's the concept behind the new shop, I ask, and has she been thinking about it for a while? "Well, I suppose I have," says Pratt, but "I do find it complicated... I don't have a kind of pat answer."

The name of the shop might help us. It is an approximation of "love" and "peace" in Latin. "That's really because I do think that we need a lot more love in the world. And in terms of peace, obviously, there's the obvious stuff around war, but [it's] also to do with peace within ourselves," Pratt explains. "I don't particularly think it's a good name, but I went through thousands of names..." she trails off. "Because it's in Latin, it's sort of a slightly oblique way of trying to talk about what I think."

### Biodegradable and homemade

She says: "I would like 98 per cent of everything that I'm stocking, if I were to bury it in the garden or it fell in the sea, that it would disintegrate without doing harm."

"It's really to try and be hyper, hyper thoughtful and conscious about things," she goes on. "In terms of materials, it involves linen, cotton, straw, bamboo, ceramic, glass, metal, paper, that kind of thing." She doesn't want to be involved in petrochemicals.

Her other founding principle is to support local Irish craftspeople. "I think that retail in Ireland has been generally very dominated by global players," she says.

"I go [to Italy] quite a lot because I love working with Italians... Aesthetics and design are embedded in their culture, as is manufacturing," says Pratt, lamenting that Ireland doesn't have much in the way of indigenous manufacturing.

"Once I had a history teacher, she told me we weren't allowed to have an industrial revolution," she muses. "I know that's true about a lot of colonised countries. You had to be a market for something... You couldn't have your own [manufacturing]."

Pratt would like to buck that trend. She makes items in her shop herself, designing pottery and cutting Wexford-milled linen into shirts on the

kitchen table at night. Another woman, Colette, sews them up during the day. Then Pratt adds filigree snaps she bought in Paris instead of buttons.

“So you’re literally buying something that the fabric is from down the road, and it’s made on site. And so for me, that’s just an expression of slow fashion, of care, of attention and of consciousness.”

Linen shirts in the online shop right now sell for around €160. Colette will also repair clothing for customers.

Pratt has around 22 Irish suppliers and will stock the shop based on her own curiosity. “It’s still so new because it’s only eight months old... I work my way through it every day.”

“Another thing that I’m really interested in,” she says, “is the whole notion that in Ireland, now, if you’re a farmer, it costs you more to shear your sheep than you get for the wool.”

She might soon stock bedding filled with wool. “Working with a lot of different people, and to be allowed to do it on a micro-scale just really, really interests me,” she says.

### Slowing down

At the point the family sold Avoca in a multi-million euro deal in 2015, it had 13 or 14 locations, a thousand staff, and was open seven days a week. It was “very vertical,” Pratt says.

Her vision for the Amo & Pax shop is not just about what she stocks but how she operates.

“[In Ireland] we’ve kind of followed the American model, where we think bigger is better,” she explains, and it’s now the norm to open seven days a week. “You go to parts of Italy, and it’s a much gentler, much slower thing.”

Unlike Avoca, Amo & Pax opens only five days a week and this year closed for the whole of January. “I paid my staff, but I closed in January, because, again, for me, it was just a little marker to say, ‘[I’m] not going to be part of that, not going to be part of the total, utter wastage that is going on.’”

“I loved that I could close.”

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Pratt almost pulled the plug on Amo & Pax last year, because she was so frightened.

Even after decades of success, she says she still feels as frightened, sometimes, as she did as a young woman going to London with Avoca clothing for the big industry fashion trade fairs.

On the other hand, she also tells me, “if I’m not involved in design in some way, then I’m just not that happy”.

Despite trepidation, when we talk, someone is trying to convince her to expand. She’s not sure yet she’ll do it given that, as she explains, Amo & Pax still feels so new. She’s not interested in the money either.

“I think we have got to be able to have cohorts of people who say ‘no, I’m not doing it for money’,” she explains. “And I know how difficult, by the way, [that is]. It’s so easy for me to say that, but we are going to self-destruct unless loads of us think about everything very, very much more carefully than we are at the moment.”