

The Landscape of Wales

Maira Vincentelli looks at the diversity of ceramics with the backdrop of Wales.

There is something deeply elemental about clay, dug from the earth and transformed by fire, a metaphor in miniature for the process of land formation itself. Potters across the world express that bond and ceramic artists in Wales are no different. But there are some aspects of this relationship that arise from the particular history of art and ceramics in Wales. In the late eighteenth century Wales began to captivate artists seeking out dramatic scenery, quaint peasantry, and the rural 'other', while in South Wales the excitement of the industrial scene offered a different thrill. They rarely settled in the country, and Wales remained largely a place of inspiration to visiting artists.

However, in the latter half of the twentieth century, the country began to attract a new breed of artist – the studio potter. This time they came to stay. The rural environment with inexpensive property offered the potential for a more self-sufficient lifestyle, and suitable locations where kilns could be built and fired. In the 1970s there was a buoyant market for handmade pottery and a growing summer tourist trade. Many makers in Wales express a relationship with the land and in some cases very particular territory – estuaries, beaches, dramatic cliffs, valleys, and ancient windswept outcrops. Among younger makers this may be fused with an element of Welsh or local identity sometimes imprinted with childhood memories.

Clay is a metaphor in miniature for the process of land formation itself





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JAMES CAMPBELL Such is the case for James Campbell, whose idyllic childhood in Pembrokeshire was overlaid by the misery of boarding school (apart from the fact that it was there that he was first taught pottery by Gordon Baldwin). He feels the contrast left him with a particular intensity of feeling and, eventually, he chose to live near Tenby for many years. His works are fustian pieces – domestic in scale, sculptural in form, and painted in tipped-up perspectives of sweeping bays, stark trees, and furrowed fields. Frequently, a signature black bird presides over the view. He uses a red earthenware body covered in white slip on which he can outline in pencil. His designs are distilled memories of shapes and colours constantly refreshed by the activity of drawing directly in the landscape.

LOWRI DAVIES The work of Lowri Davies is also strongly embedded in drawing. She has been making pen and ink sketches since she was a teenager. The delicate graphic designs are applied to the pristine surface of bone china by means of printed transfers prepared by a specialist firm from her drawings and watercolours. Inspired by childhood memories of towering mountains viewed from the cosy china-filled interior of her grandmother's farmhouse in North Wales, much of her work has dealt with issues of Welsh identity through material culture. However, she is increasingly using the landscape drawing that she has always done 'as a hobby'. Her *New Welsh Souvenirs* series was a major project based on landscape and architectural views. She drew a grid over the map of Wales and then committed herself to make a sketch of some characteristic scene or building in each of the sixty-five squares on the map. Working on simple



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2 James Campbell – *Birdland Free*, tripod dish, red clay, white slip, oxides, underglaze colours, clear glaze, 2011, H9cm 3 James Campbell – *Leaving the Shallows*, flat jar, red clay, white slip, oxides, underglaze colours, clear glaze, 2010, H50cm 4 James Campbell – *Storm Cloud* (detail), flat jar, red clay, white slip, oxides, underglaze colours, clear glaze, 2000, H24cm

shapes such as jugs, teapots, or small stands, each piece has a view of a named place. Some are of famous beauty spots, but others represent revealing aspects of modern Wales, such as the funfair at Rhyl or the Corus steelworks at Connah's Quay. While this project made reference to popular china souvenirs, in her recent work she draws on the prestigious porcelain of Swansea and Nantgarw. The vessels are larger and simpler in form to carry the landscape scenes that are sometimes set in an oval shape, while in others the views flow freely across the body.

ANNE GIBBS Collecting is also a feature of Anne Gibbs' process. Looking back on her upbringing in a mining village, she recalls the close community and the freedom to roam in the woods and hills. A keen walker she has recently taken up mountain biking and combines these activities with her hoarding instincts. Rescued from the landscape, the twigs, stones, and other bits and pieces are moulded in plaster, slip-cast in bone china, and re-assembled into table-top installations, creating miniature assemblages mapped on the surface.

BEV BELL-HUGHES A commitment to the local landscape has always been important to Bev Bell-Hughes. Since 1971 she has lived near a river estuary and Deganwy Beach, where the rhythms of rippling sand and the shifting lines of seaweed, shells, and driftwood are a constant source of inspiration. As a mother of four she developed a preference for working alone in silence and in her own space (shed). Here she can achieve the meditative state of mind where she can be completely absorbed as she builds her evocative forms that echo

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geological strata or the structure of shells. They are powerful ceramic sculptures, intriguing forms in their own right, but with connections and overtones of landscape references. As an artist with visual impairment, the sensory experience is paramount in the making, and conveyed in the look of the work, visually suggesting the sharp and rough, the smooth or cool, even when it cannot be touched.

ADAM BUICK Pembrokeshire has a special place in the history of Welsh art and it has long been the haunt of painters inspired by the sweeping land, dramatic cliffs, and ancient rocky outcrops. There is also a ready market for landscape paintings. Adam Buick was brought up in this area, and it is here he has returned to settle with his young family, by way of studying archaeology at the University of Wales, Lampeter, periods of foreign travel, and a rigorous pottery training at Thomastown in Ireland. The combination of craft and technical skills, knowledge of geology and archaeology, and his commitment to a particular place and landscape have come together to produce the innovative range of Buick's current work, which embraces pots, film, and landscape interventions. He first saw a Korean moon jar on a visit to the British Museum, and knew then

Many makers in Wales express a relationship with the land



5 Anna Gibbs – *To be Elsewhere (not)*, bone china, pins, wooden base, 2012, H12.5cm max. (Photo: Chris Stock) & Bay Bell-Hughes – *Total Pot*, ceramic, 2012, H16cm (Photo: Jacqui Malden) 7 Lowri Davies – *Upar and Iawar Cwmwrch* from *New Welsh Souvenirs Collection*, white earthenware decorated with transfers, 2005, H16cm (Photo: Dewi Tannat Lloyd)

Note Anna Gibbs, Bay Bell-Hughes, and Adam Buick were among the artists who exhibited in *Earth* at Ruthin Craft Centre, Denbighshire, earlier this year. Web Bay Bell-Hughes: www.cbceramics.com; Adam Buick: www.adambuick.com; Lowri Davies: www.lowridavies.com; Anna Gibbs: www.annagibbs.co.uk

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that it was a form that he wanted to make. The simple unity of the circular form is the perfect foil to the luscious glazes and surface effects. He uses stoneware and porcelain, originally bisque fired, but finished with a wood firing to lend that extra quality to the surface. His moon jars are all individual pieces thrown in commercial clay, but adjusted with elements of local clays or other materials mixed into the clay or glaze – each becomes a one-off piece. Connecting with ancient practices in marking and reverting the land, he makes votive jars that are placed in unexpected places, hidden in rocky crevices or even hung in caves. His work is a potter's version of landscape art. The jars lend a new significance to a place while making a connection with ancient practices.

In 2011 Butck took on a new venture. The power of clay to go back to the earth is symbolised in his time-lapse film shown earlier this year at Ruthin Craft Centre. It showed a jar placed in the landscape overlooking Cardigan Bay. Eventually it is toppled and breaks under the forces of nature. The film seems to capture the elements themselves, but it also records the modern world as the flashing light of an aeroplane streaks its way across the screen. It even seems to pick up unexpected light effects of the aurora borealis. The technical skills of building kilns and constructing a time-lapse camera box to sit out in the landscape do not daunt Adam Butck, but are all part of the challenge of working in new ways.

The land continues to offer a rich metaphor for innovative new work in the expanded field of contemporary ceramics in Wales. ■



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