

Ceramic Series

ABERYSTWYTH ARTS CENTRE No. 27

OLDRICH ASENBYRL

by Stephen Course



In 1968 Oldrich Asenbryl was on holiday in England when the Russian army invaded his home country Czechoslovakia and ended the tentative liberalisation of the Dubcek government. Oldrich decided not to go back and was granted temporary citizenship in the UK. In Czechoslovakia his interests had been in ceramics, which he had studied for four years, and music. The jazz band in which he was currently playing relieved the monotony of his job in a majolica factory, and it was the only form of free expression allowed against the system. Now stranded in England, with only a weak

grasp of the language, he found work in London as a frame maker for a gallery in Covent Garden, and then through the potter Kenneth Clark he was introduced to Alan Caiger Smith. He moved to Aldermaston Pottery, throwing and decorating their majolica ware.

Oldrich's intention had been to save enough money to continue travelling on to Brazil, but because of his communist origins he was unable to get an entry visa and so stayed in England to set up his own pottery with Simon Rich, another potter from Aldermaston. Together they found a small workshop in Tisbury, Wiltshire, with rudimentary living space in a loft above.

After an uncertain start the partnership worked well for three years. Oldrich's industrial training and work experience provided an efficient commercial background, while Simon Rich concentrated on throwing and decorating, and also on supporting Oldrich as he continued to acclimatise himself to living in England. The pots they produced at Tisbury borrowed much from the majolica tradition and remain the basis of Oldrich's tableware. The forms were elegant, light and colourful. They were decorated in two distinct ways: either a white base glaze decorated with quick generous brush strokes, or half dipped in a dark tenmoku glaze followed by a band of dry ash glaze. The pots were

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deliberately designed to be quick to produce. They were fired in a 15cu. ft. electric kiln to stoneware temperature; the kiln was in constant use. After three years Simon Rich left to begin his own workshop in Mid Wales. Oldrich continued for another two years, with an assistant to help him with the production. By 1975, the workshop in Tisbury had served its purpose: generating enough money for Oldrich to move to North Wales, where he bought an isolated house high in the Llyn peninsula, virtually surrounded by sea. Here he built a spacious studio with a 50 cu. ft. kiln that enabled him to start reduction firings. He also built a small shop which eventually he enlarged and moved to the nearby village of Sarn, preferring to retail the majority of his work.

In Tisbury Oldrich considered his tableware to be primarily a means of affording him the freedom to buy his own workshop and house. As his pottery business had become more secure he had begun to develop a more individual and personal side to his work. This work stood on a different platform, and did not have the commercial constraints imposed by the tableware. His own experiences and passionate interest in jazz drew him to the uninhibited spontaneity of American pop art, and funk pottery movements of the 60's and early 70's. This work reflected his own dry sense of humour and demanded an immediate response from the viewer. He used images of everyday things, their distorted shapes sometimes combined with non ceramic objects both before and after going through the kiln. The images developed from a series of soft alarm clocks, hands clenched or open, to meals of pigs heads served on platters. With his move to Wales, Oldrich's work continued becoming both more refined and more abstract. At the same time, using a new range of pigments and a porcelain body, his domestic pots moved further away from their majolica roots with a freer use of decorating techniques that included brushing, sponging



and slip trailing. After a visit to the USA for a Ceramics symposium, he brought back a hand extruder, giving him another technique to experiment with. This process quickly featured in his work in large dishes, their surfaces built up with a collage of different combinations of reduction glaze pigments, enamels, lustres and photo transfers.

An exhibition in the Oxford Gallery in England and further exhibitions in Belgium and the States began to generate a wider interest in Oldrich's work, but in 1983 his life took another dramatic twist. He suffered a devastating stroke which left him paralysed down one side of his body. Undeterred by four consultants' prognosis of permanent paralysis in his hand and the inevitability of a wheelchair, Oldrich is slowly recovering and improvising within his new situation. He continues to feel the urge to communicate through his work, throwing pots one-handed and channelling his energy into the decoration. The simpler shapes which were hand thrown are now jolied or extruded. He builds up stock with the help of assistants through the summer.

He is now a converted Christian and having come so close to death hopes to simply express, through his work, a love for living.

Stephen Course

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Y Gyffres Gerameg

CANOLFAN Y CELFYDDYDAU ABERYSTWYTH RHIF 21

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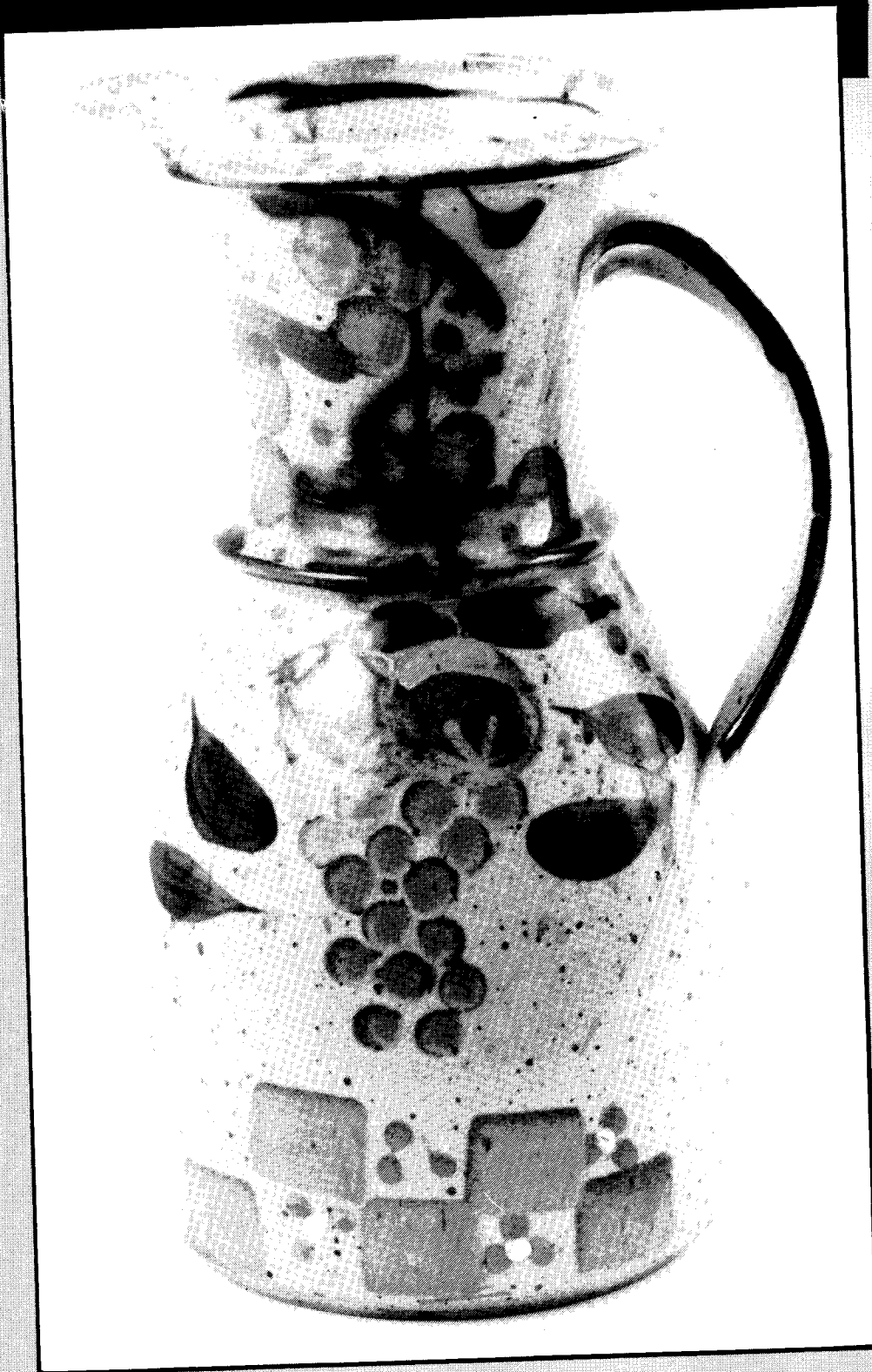
Ym 1968 roedd Oldrich Asenbryl ar ei wyliau yn Lloegr pan oresgynwyd ei wlad Tsiecoslofacia gan fyddin Rwsia, gan roi terfyn ar dueddiadau rhyddfrydol petrus llywodraeth Dubczek.

Penderfynodd Oldrich beidio â dychwelyd a chafodd ganiatâd i aros dros dro ym Mhrydain. Cerddoriaeth a cherameg oedd ei ddiddordebau yn Tsiecoslofacia, ac roedd wedi treulio pedair blynedd yn astudio cerameg. Y band jas yr oedd yn aelod ohono ar y pryd oedd yr unig gyfrwng a oedd wrth law i dorri ar undonedd ei waith mewn ffatri maiolica a'r unig gyfle hefyd i fynegi ei deimladau'n rhydd ynglŷn â system y wlad. Ac yntau nawr yn Lloegr ar y clwt ac heb fawr o grap ar yr iaith, cafodd waith yn Llundain fel gwneuthurwr fframiau ar gyfer oriel yn Covent Garden, ac yna drwy gymorth y crochenydd Kenneth Clark, cafodd ei gyflwyno i Alan Caiger Smith. Symudodd i Grochendy Aldermaston i lunio ac i addurno eu cynnyrch maiolica.

Bwriad Oldrich oedd cynilo digon o arian i'w alluogi i barhau i deithio cyn belled â Brasil, ond oherwydd ei gefndir comiwnyddol gwrthodwyd caniatâd iddo fynd i'r wlad honno ac felly arhosodd yn Lloegr ac agor ei grochenydd ei hun gyda Simon Rich, crochenydd arall o Aldermaston. Daethant o hyd i weithdy bychan yn Tisbury, Wiltshire, gydag ystafelloedd byw digon cyntefig ar y llawr uchaf. Ar ôl cychwyn braidd yn sigledig bu'r bartneriaeth yn eithaf llwyddiannus am dair blynedd. Roedd hyfforddiant ddiwydiannol a phrofiad gwaith Oldrich yn gefndir masnachol defnyddiol ac effeithiol, a chanolbwyntiodd Simon Rice ar y gwaith o lunio'r llestri a'u haddurno yn ogystal â chefnogi Oldrich yn ei ymdrech i ddod i ddygyddod â byw yn Lloegr.

Roedd eu cynnyrch yn Tisbury yn dibynnu llawer ar y traddodiad maiolica, a dyna hyd heddiw yw sylfaen gwaith Oldrich. Llestri lliwgar, ysgafn, cain, wedi eu haddurno mewn dau dduill gwahanol oedd eu cynnyrch: naill ai sylfaen o wydredd gwyn wedi ei addurno'n gyflym ac yn helaeth â brwsh, neu eu hanner trochi mewn gwydredd tenmoku tywyll cyn ychwanegu band o wydredd lludw sych. Cynlluniwyd y potiau'n bwrpasol fel y gellid eu cynyrchu'n gyflym. Caent eu tanio mewn odyn trydan 15 troedfedd giwbig ar dymheredd crochenwaith caled. Roedd yr odyn yn cael ei ddefnyddio'n ddibaid. Ar ôl tair blynedd gadawodd Simon Rich a sefydlu ei weithdy ei hun yng Nghanolbarth Cymru.

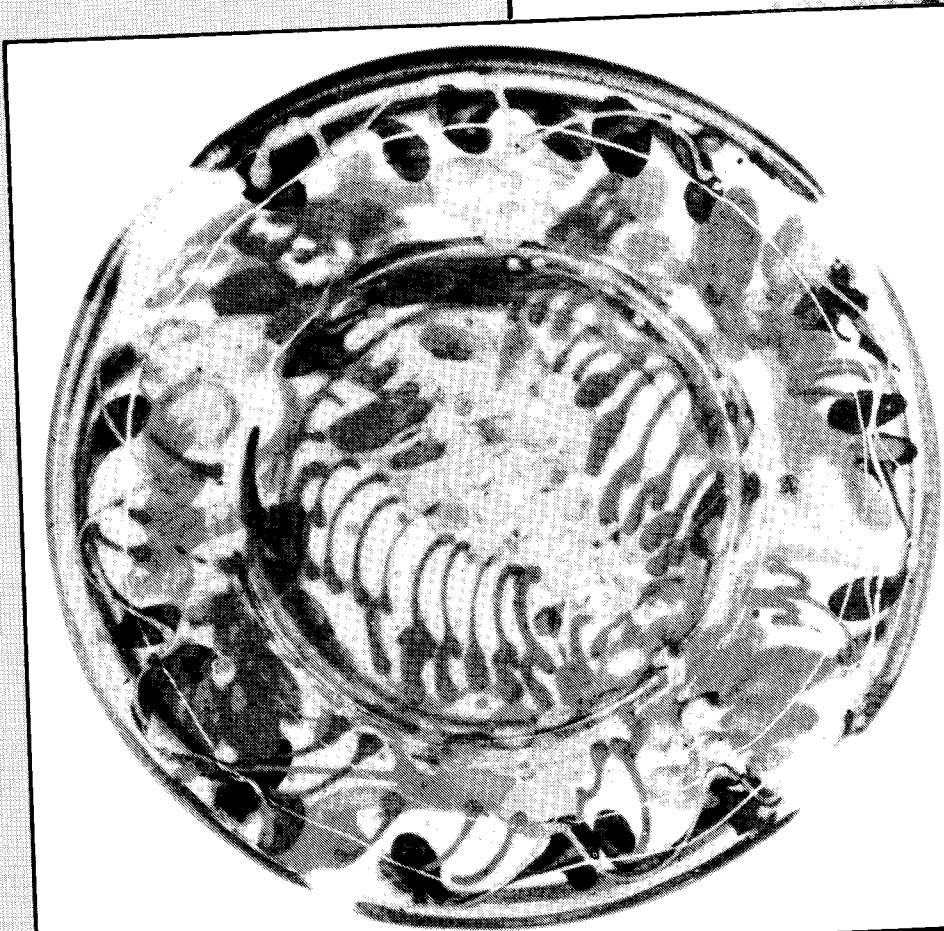
Daliodd Oldrich ati am ddwy flynedd arall, gan gyflogi cynorthwyr i'w helpu gyda'r gwaith. Erbyn 1975, roedd y gweithdy yn Tisbury wedi cyflawni ei amcan, sef cynyrchu digon o arian i alluogi Oldrich i symud i Ogledd Cymru. Yno prynodd dŷ unig ynghanol penrhyn Llŷn, gyda'r môr o'i gylch i bob cyfeiriad bron. Cododd stiwdio helaeth iddo i hun ac odyd 50 troedfedd giwbig,



a olygai y gallai roi cychwyn ar danio di-aer. Agorodd siop fechan hefyd, ac yna ei ehangu a'i symud i bentref Sarn gerllaw, gan fod yn well ganddo werthu'r rhan fwyaf o'i waith ei hunan. Tra oedd yn Tisbury, ystyriai Oldrich ei lestri fel cyfrwng i'w alluogi i ennill digon i fforddio gweithdy a chartref iddo'i hun. Fel yr oedd ei fusnes yn dod yn fwy sefydlog roedd wedi dechrau datblygu ochr fwy personol ac unigryw yn ei waith. Roedd y gwaith hwn ar lefel wahanol, ac nid oedd yn cael ei gyfyngu gan ystyriaethau masnachol fel yr oedd ei lestri eraill. Oherwydd ei brofiad a'i ddiddordeb dwfn mewn cerddoriaeth jas câi ei ddenu gan rwyddineb digymell celfyddyd 'pop' America a mudiad crochenwaith 'funk' y chwedegau a'r saithdegau cynnar. Roedd y gwaith hwn yn adlewyrchu ei hiwmor sych ef ei hun ac yn hawlio ymateb uniongyrchol gan y sawl a'i gwelai. Gwnâi ddefnydd o ffurf gwrthrychau cyffredin gan gyfuno ei ffurfiau gwyrddroedig â gwrthrychau angheramig o bryd i'w gilydd, cyn ac wedi iddynt fod yn yr olyn. Datblygodd y delweddau hyn o gyfres o glaciau larwm meddal, dwylo agored neu wedi eu cau, brydau o bennau moch ar blatiau anferth!

Yn dilyn ymgartrefu yng Nghymru, daliodd gwaith Oldrich i ddod yn fwy cain a haniaethol. Ar yr un pryd, oherwydd ei ddefnydd o ystod newydd o liwiau, aeth ei waith domestig ymhellach oddi wrth ei wreiddiau maiolica gyda defnydd mwy rhydd o dechnegau addurno, yn cynnwys brwshio, defnyddio ysbwng a thaenellydd slip. Yn dilyn ymweliad â Thaleithiau Unedig America ar gyfer symposiwm Cerameg, daeth ag allwthiwr llaw yn ôl gydag ef, a rhoddodd hynny gyfle iddo arbrofi â thechneg arall. Gwelwyd canlyniad y broses hon yn fuan iawn mewn dysglau mawr o'i waith a'u harwynebau wedi eu llunio o gollage o gyfuniadau gwahanol o liwiau gwydredd rhydwythiol, enamelau, gloyweddau a throsluniau ffotograffig.

Yn dilyn arddangosfa yn Oriel Rhydychen yn Lloegr ac arddangosfeydd pellach yng Ngwiad



Belg a'r Taleithiau Unedig, dechreuodd gwaith Oldrich ddenu sylw eangach, ond ym 1983 daeth newid dramatig arall i'w fywyd. Dioddefodd strôc ddifrifol a barlysodd un ochr ei gorff. Er i bedwar ymgynghorwr ddarogan y byddai'r parlys yn effeithio ei law am weddill ei oes ac y byddai'n rhaid iddo dreulio ei ddyddiau yn gaeth mewn cadair olwyn, mae Oldrich yn graddol wella ac yn dod i ymgyfarwyddo â'i gyflwr. Mae'n dal yn awyddus i gyfathrebu drwy gyfrwng ei waith, yn defnyddio un llaw i lunio potiau ar y droell ac yn canolbwyntio ei egni ar addurno. Erbyn hyn mae'r ffurfiau symlaf yr arferai eu llunio ar y droell yn cael eu gwneud â llaw neu eu hallwthio. Mae'n treulio'r haf yn paratoi stoc o waith gyda chynorthwyyr i'w helpu. Mae Oldrich bellach wedi cael troedigaeth Gristnogol a chan iddo ddod mor agos i farwolaeth, ei obaith yw y gall barhau i fynegi ei gariad at fywyd drwy ei waith.

Stephen Course

○ Canolfan y Celfyddydau Aberystwyth 1987