

Ceramic Series

ABERYSTWYTH ARTS CENTRE · No. 8

Mary Bennett

It can take a while for a life partnership with clay to established itself. As we have seen already from the examples of some of the other participants in the **Ceramics Series**, a passion for ceramics may develop not only through painting and sculpture training, but also by way of electrical engineering or clerical work.

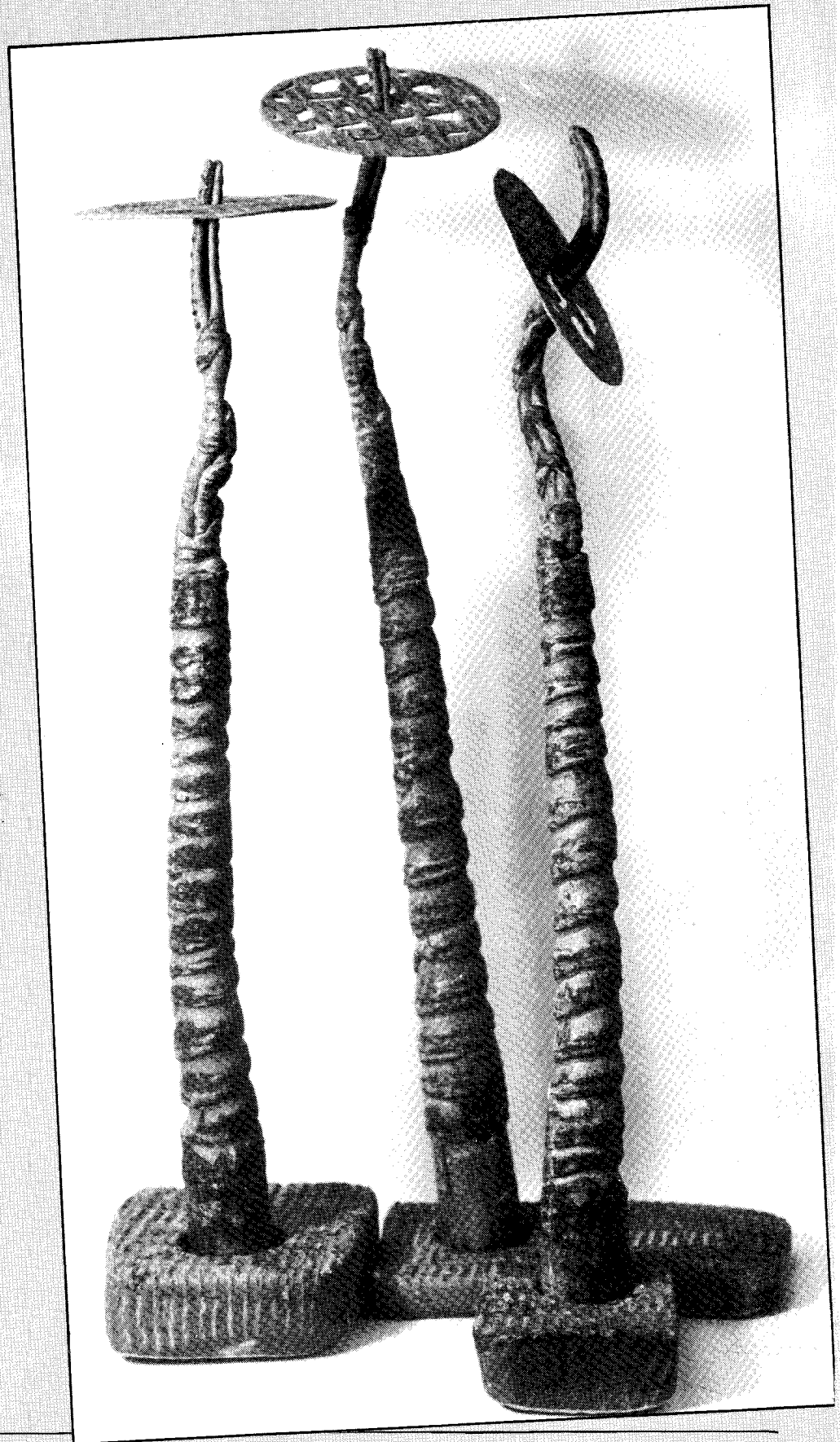
Mary Bennett studied violin at the Royal Academy of Music, 1963-66. (Strangely enough, the well-known potter Elizabeth Fritsch also studied music at the RAM. Is there a temperamental affinity between playing a musical instrument and the manipulation of clay?) Some time after leaving music college, Mary Bennett enrolled for part-time adult education classes in pottery at Morley College, because she fancied having a go at something she had never tried at school. But so compelling did the activity become that she applied to Camberwell School of Arts and Crafts to study ceramics full time ("I'd love to make pots all day", she remembers thinking at the time), and was accepted without so much as a supporting portfolio of work to her name.

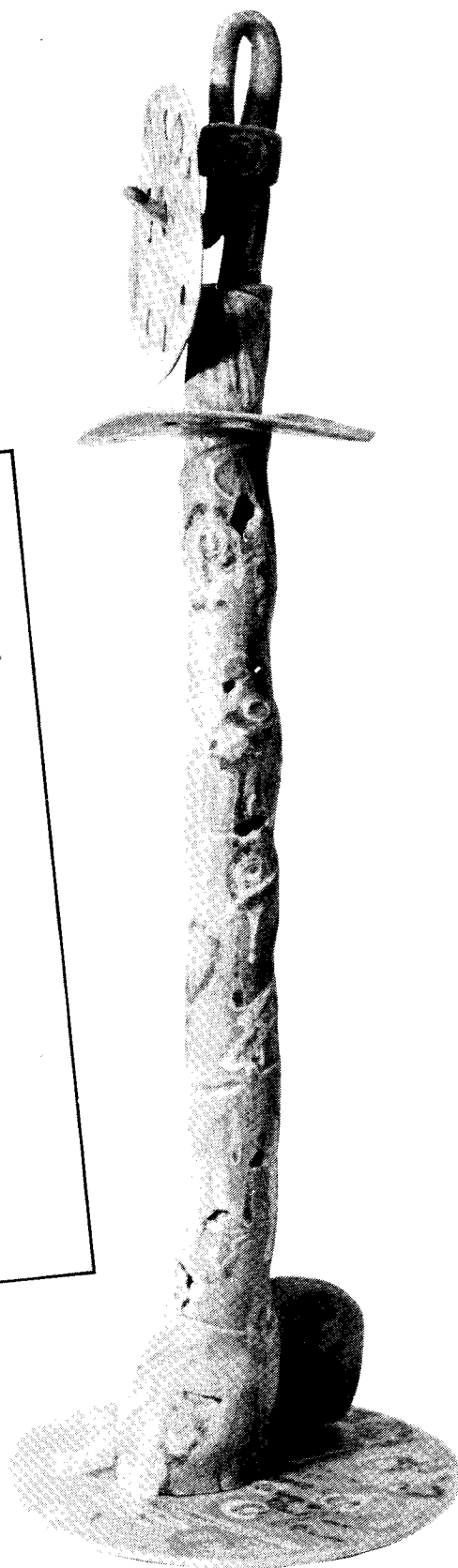
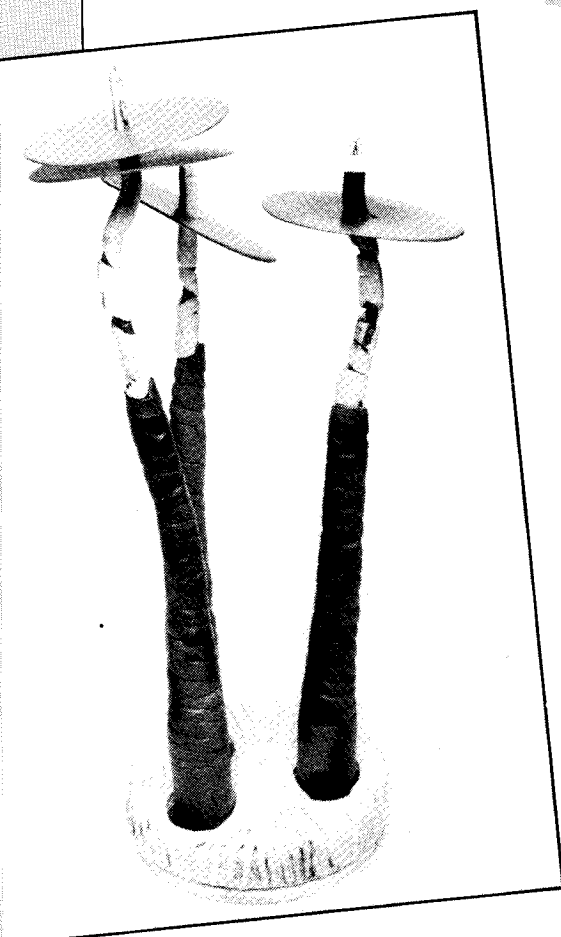
She went to Camberwell simply wanting to learn how to be a good 'functional' potter, but by the time she left in 1975, her ceramic horizons had expanded. (Camberwell has nurtured many of the 'new wave' ceramicists - Linda Gunn-Russell, Henry Pim and Angus Suttie, to name but three.) At this time, Mary Bennett's ceramics were always "container" forms, with hollow insides and lids, though they had a tendency to spread horizontally, and slightly intestinally, in smooth organic block forms, so they did not look very much like casserole dishes or planters.

Upon leaving Camberwell, she set up a studio (with the invaluable assistance of a Crafts Council setting up grant) at the 401½ Workshops at Wandsworth in South London - another hotbed of innovative crafts of all kinds. Here she made jugs to sell, and also pursued her own, more wayward, work, eventually relinquishing container forms all together, when she realised that ceramic objects did not always **have** to be made to put something in.

She now shares a fine workshop space in a warren of businesses tucked away down a side street near Clapham Junction, where she spends as much time as she can making sculptural ceramic objects of unmistakeable singularity, which have, in the intervening period, substituted for their former horizontal emphasis a contrary vertical one.

These tall, spindly forms derive from their maker's long-standing fascination with musical instruments, and particularly with less familiar ones - obsolete mediaeval instruments, and 'ethnic' ones from other cultures. She of ten visits the Horniman Museum - a delightful South London treasure trove with a magnificent collection of musical instruments - and it was there that she say the 'shawms' from which some of her ceramic pieces take their name. If you are one of the growing number of 'early music' fans, you may think of the shawm as the nasal forerunner of the oboe, but it is also the generic name for an almost universal variety





of loud reed wind instruments. Mary Bennett was fascinated by the appearance of shawms from Central Asia, where things tend to be shaggy and shamanistic, wrapped in animal skins and bark.

The various parts of these ceramic 'Shawms' seem similarly to be rolled, wrapped, bound tied in various ways, using different thicknesses and shapes of clay, from flat sheets with moulded surface textures (occasionally unrolling to form wing-like appendages) to stringy strands. For part of the week Mary Bennett works with mentally

handicapped children, and as with all fruitful teaching relationships, the children teach her as much as she teaches them. She has benefitted, for instance, from watching their unrestrained and unprejudiced ways of rolling clay - ways of working which she would eventually have 'unlearned' for herself, perhaps, but more gradually.

On to the tapering top part of each of these spindly forms is placed one or more thin discs, equivalent to the decorative lip guard of the Asian shawms. These add a focus of finely poised balance to the forms, having rather the

effect of those nail-biting plate-spinning acts. They are not a fixed part of the objects, but are interchangeable, and can be chosen to suit the mood of the moment. At the opposite end, the 'bells' of these clay forms stand on a thicker round flat base, or some other form of stabilising structure. Mary Bennett lives surrounded by numbers of wind instruments "standing up" out of their cases, on specially made stands, for her "other half" (her expression) is also a professional wind musician. (Sometimes the clay 'Shawms' stand in groups of two or three, called 'Duos' or 'Trios'.)

Other pieces, apart from the 'Shawms', also relate to musical instruments, with rows of holed like flutes, or 'pegs' like a violin. Most recently, a double form with shapes derived from violins, their smooth surfaces scratched like neolithic rock carvings, is evocative of the interdependent musical lines of a Bach double violin concerto.

But it is possible to make too much of the literal connection between Mary Bennett's work and musical instruments. I must admit that when I first saw some of these 'Shawms', I did not think of musical instruments at all. They stirred my imagination instead towards things which you might find on another planet, or strange plant-animals which could lurk on the sea-bed, or in the jungle - but nothing specific. They bend slightly as if they were listening, or as if they were moving gradually towards the sunlight, or moonlight. They have a "presence". To live with one might be unnerving, but you would miss it when it was not there.

The ancient functional forms and well-used surfaces of old musical instruments provide a resilient basis on which to perform variations in clay. The colours and surface textures which Mary Bennett uses reflect the rich range of materials and patinas of old musical instruments, but do not copy them. One of these objects may be made in several parts, each in a different type of clay, fired at different temperatures, and decorated progressively with slips, underglaze colours, burnishing or sawdusting - a lengthy process. Whereas previously, each part of the objects was in a different, clear colour, more recently they have been "patterned" in a way related to traditions of decorated ceramic ware, rather than to sculpture.

But the 'Bach concerto' piece sees a return to the smooth shapes of her earlier work, and shows the influence of sculptors such as Brancusi. In fact, sculpture means more to Mary Bennett than does the work of other ceramicists, and there is nothing to lose by calling her work 'sculpture'. She would like to make much larger pieces, on a 'sculptural' scale, but is restricted by the size of her kiln. Nobody, except convention, however, is stopping her from using other materials in combination with clay, and she is currently experimenting with wood (at the time of writing, it remains to be seen whether the results of these experiments will be on display at Aberystwyth). To further complicate things, she is also now making coloured 'monoprints' based on her drawings of musical instruments.

But when I visited her studio, she was busy making a very tall and attractive commissioned jug. She still enjoys making such vessels, when asked, and there is no sense whatsoever of such things being irksome necessities, or separate from her other work.

There is a great deal of tedious talk in specialised circles about the dividing line between sculpture and ceramics, but when it comes down to it, very few artists seem capable of enjoying the leap backwards and forwards over the separating narrow but deep chasm, preferring to stay just one side or the other. If there are not enough words to define what Mary Bennett is doing, she is not likely to worry, but just to get on with it, leaving that sort of thing to the pedants.

David Briers

Y Gyfres Cerameg

CANOLFAN Y CELFYDDYDAU ABERYSTWYTH

Rhif 8

Mary Bennett

Gall gymryd cryn amser i bartneriaeth oes gyda chla ei sefydlu ei hun. Fel y gwelwyd eisoes yn achos rhai eraill y gwelwyd eu gwaith yn y **Gyfres Cerameg**, gall cariad at gerameg ddatblygu nid yn unig yn ystod hyfforddiant mewn peintio neu gerflunwaith, ond hefyd drwy weithio fel peiriannydd trydanol neu wrth wneud gwaith clerigol.

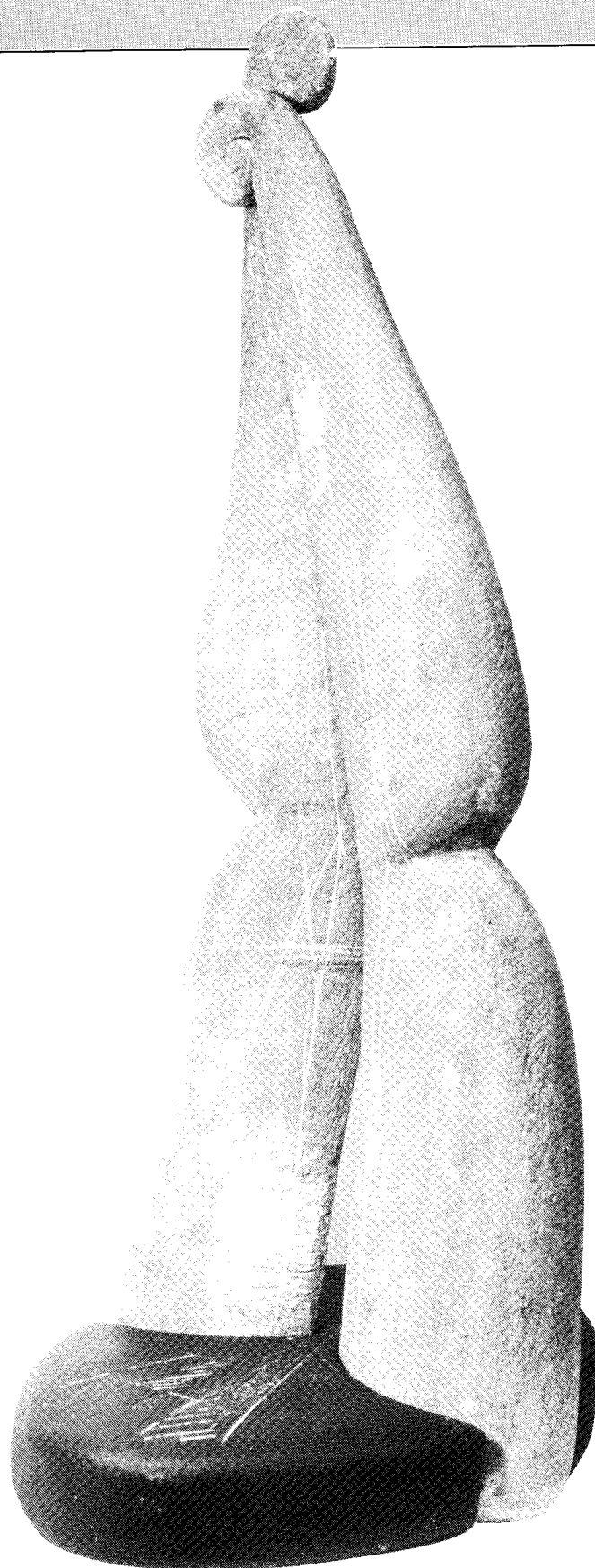
Bu Mary Bennett yn astudio'r ffidil yn yr Academi Gerdd Frenhinol, 1963-66. (Yn rhyfedd ddigon, bu'r grochenwraig adnabyddus Elizabeth Fritsch hefyd yn astudio cerddoriaeth yn yr Academi Frenhinol. Tybed a oes yna ryw berthynas anianol rhwng trin offeryn cerdd athrin clai?) Beth amser ar ôl gadael y coleg cerdd cofrestrodd Mary Bennett ar gyfer dosbarthiadau addysg rhan amser i oedolion mewn crochenwaith yng Ngholeg Morley, oherwydd fod arni awydd rhoi cynnig ar rywbeth na chafodd gyfle i'w wneud yn yr ysgol. Gymaint oedd gafael y gweithgarwch arni nes iddi gynnig am le yn Ysgol Gelf a Chrefft Camberwell, (mae hi'n cofio meddwl ar y pryd y byddai hi wrth ei bodd yn treulio'r diwrnod i gyd yn cynhyrchu crochenwaith), ac fe'i derbyniwyd er nad oedd ganddi hyd yn oed gasgliad o waith i'w ddangos i gefnogi ei chais.

Aeth i Camberwell yn unig am fod arni eisiau dysgu bod yn grochenydd 'ymarferol' da, ond erbyn iddi adael ym 1975, roedd ei gorfwelion ym myd cerameg wedi ymledu. (Mae Camberwell wedi bod yn fagwrfa i lawer o weithwyr cerameg 'traddodiad newydd' - Linda Gunn-Russell, Henry Pim ac Angus Suttie, i enwi dim ond tri.) Bryd hyn, roedd cerameg Mary Bennett i gyd ar ffurf 'cynhwysydd', yn wag oddi mewn a gyda chaead arnynt, er eu bod yn tueddu i ymledu'n llorweddol, ac yn lled goluddol, yn ffurfiau bloc organig llyfn, fel nad oedd llawer o debygrwydd rhyngddynt a dysglau caserol neu lestri ar gyfer tyfu planhigion ynddynt.

Ar ôl gadael Camberwell, sefydlodd stiwdio (gyda chymorth anhepgor grant cychwynnol gan y Cyngor Crefft) yn y '401½ Workshop' yn Wandsworth yn Ne Llundain - magwrfa arall i grefftau arbrofol o bob math. Yma bu'n cynhyrchu jygiau a'u gwerthu, ac hefyd yn dilyn ei gwaith llai confensiynol ei hun, ac o'r diwedd rhoes y gorau i'r ffurf 'cynhwysydd' yn gyfangwbl pan sylweddolodd nad oedd yn **rhaid** i wrthrychau ceramig gael eu llunio bob amser ar gyfer cynnwys rhywbeth o'u mewn.

Ar hyn o bryd mae hi'n rhannu lle penigamp mewn gweithdy ymhlith tryblith o leoedd busnes eraill i lawr stryd ochr ger Clapham Junction, ac yno mae hi'n treulio cymaint o amser ag y gall yn llunio gwrthrychau ceramig cerfiedig digamsyniol unigryw sydd, yn y cyfamser, wedi cyfnwidiol y pwyslais llorweddol blaenorol am bwyslais gwrthgyferbyniol unionsyth.

Mae'r ffurfiau tal, meinion hyn yn tarddu o hoffter a diddordeb maith eu gwneuthurwr mewn offerynnau cerdd, ac yn arbennig y rhai llai cyfarwydd - hen offerynnau'r canol oesoedd a rhai 'ethnig' yn perthyn i diwylliannau eraill. Mae hi'n ymweld yn aml



ag Amgueddfa Horniman - trysorfa hyfryd yn Ne Llundain gyda chasgliad godidog o offerynnau cerdd - ac yno y gwelodd hi'r 'shawms' y cafodd rhai o'i gweithiau ceramig eu henwi ar eu hól. Os ydych chi'n un o'r nifer cynyddol o ddilynwyr 'cerddoriaeth gynnar', dichon y byddwch yn ystyried y 'shawm' fel rhagflaenydd trwynol yr obo, ond dyma hefyd yr enw generig am amrywiaeth byd-eang bron o offerynnau chwyth corsen uchel eu sain. Swynwyd Mary Bennett gan olwg y 'Shawms' o Asia Ganol, lle mae pethau'n tueddu i fod yn flewog ac yn shaministig, wedi eu rhwymo mewn crwyn anifeiliaid a rhisgl coed.

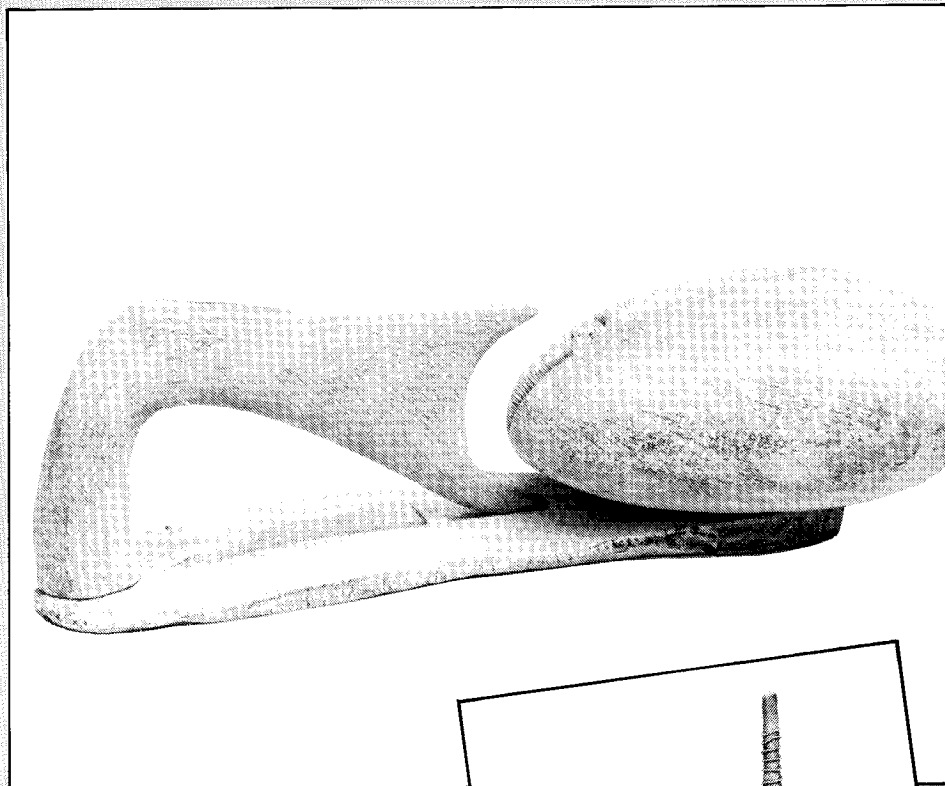
Mae gwahanol rannau'r 'shawms' ceramig hyn fel pe baent wedi eu rhwlio, eu rhwymo neu eu clymu mewn amrywiol ffyrdd, gan ddefnyddio clai o wahanol drwch a ffurf, o dameidiau gwastad gydag ansawdd y wyneb wedi ei fowldio (yn achlysurol yn datod i ffurfio atodiadau fel adenydd) i dresi llinynol. Am ran o'r wythnos mae Mary Bennett yn gweithio gyda phlant o dan anfantais meddyliol, ac fel ym mhob cyd-berthynas addysgol ffurthlon, mae'r plant yn dysgu cymaint iddi hi ag y mae hi'n ei ddysgu iddynt hwythau. Mae hi wedi elwa, er enghraifft, drwy edrych ar eu ffordd rwydd a dilyffethair o rowlio clai - dull o weithio y byddai hi efallai wedi ei 'ddad-ddysgu' drosti ei hun ymhnen amser, ond y byddai hynny wedi digwydd yn fwy graddol.

Ar ben blaenllym pob un o'r ffurfiau main hyn gosodwyd un neu ragor o ddisgiau main sy'n cyfateb i'r diogelydd gweff addurnedig sydd ar y 'shawms' o Asia. Mae'r rhain yn rhoi ffocws o gydbwysedd cywrair i'r ffurf, ac mae eu heffaith rywbeth yn debyg i'r perfforiadau troelli platiau hynny sy'n peri i ddynd dal ei wynt. Nid ydynt yn rhan annatod o'r gwrthrychau; gellir eu cyfnewid â'u gilydd, a'u dewis i gyfateb i hwyl y funud. Yn y pen arall, mae 'genau' y ffurfiau clai hyn yn sefyll ar sylfaen gron, wastad, o ddefnydd mwy trwchus, neu ar ryw fath arall o ddyfais i'w sefydlogi. Mae Mary Bennett yn treulio ei hamser ymysg llawer o offerynnau chwyth yn sefyll i'fyn' yn eu casys, ar standiau pwrpasol, gan fod ei chydymaith hefyd yn offerynnwr chwyth proffesiynol. (Weithiau mae'r 'shawms' clai yn sefyll mewn grwpiau o ddau neu dri a elwir yn 'ddeuawdau' neu'n 'driawdau'.)

Mae gweithiau eraill hefyd ar wahân i'r 'shawms' yn dwyn perthynas ag offerynnau cerdd, gyda rhesi o dyliau ynddynt fel mewn fflwt neu begiau fel mewn ffidil. Yn fwyaf diweddar, cafwyd ffurf ddwbl yn deillio o ffurf ffidilau a'u harwynebedd llyfn wedi ei ysgythr fel cerfiadau neolithig ar graig, sy'n dwyn i gof concerto gan Bach ar gyfer dwy ffidil lle mae'r naill linell gerddorol yn dibynnu ar y llall.

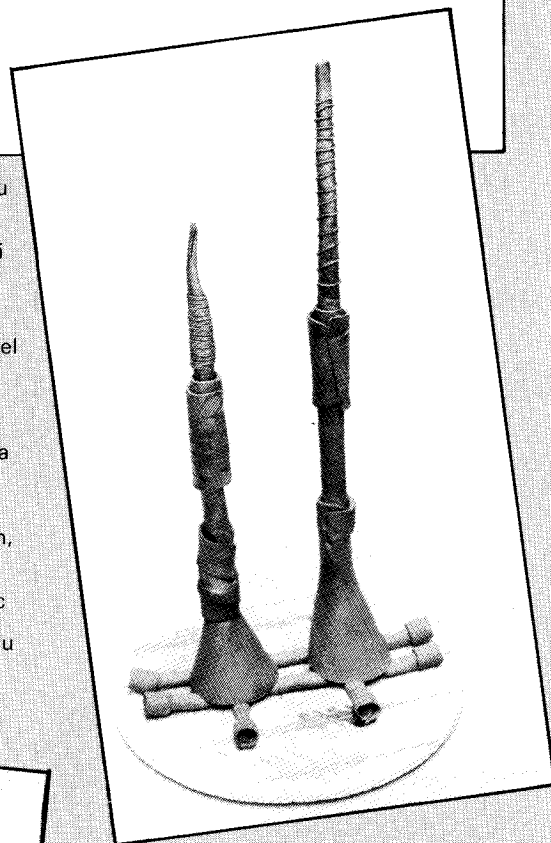
Ond mae hi'n bosibl gornwneud y cysylltiad llythrennol rhwng gwaith Mary Bennett ag offerynnau cerdd. Rhaid i mi gyfaddef ne feddyliais i am offerynnau cerdd o gwbl pan welais rai o'r 'shawms' hyn am y tro cyntaf. Fe ysgogwyd fy nychymyg yn hytrach i feddwl am bethau y gallech eu canfod ar blaned arall, neu gyfuniad rhyfedd o anifeiliaid a phlanhigion a allai fod ynghudd ar wely'r môr neu mewn dryswig - ond dim byd pendant. Maent yn gwyrto'r mymryn lleiaf fel pe'n gwrando, neu fel pe'n symud yn raddol tuag at olau'r haul neu'r lleuad. Mae'n amhosibl peidio ag ymdeimlo â'u presenoldeb. Gallai byw gydag un ohonynt gael effaith ysgytwol anoch, ond fe welech ei golli pe na byddai yno.

Mae ffurfiau ffurthiannol hynafol ac arwynebedd treuliedig hen offerynnau cerdd yn sylfaen hydrin i ymarfer amrywiadau mewnclai. Adlewyrcha'r lliwiau ac ansawdd yr arwynebau a ddefnyddir gan Mary Bennett ystod gyfoethog defnyddiau a 'patinas' hen offerynnau cerdd, ond nid ydynt yn eu hefelychu. Gall un o'r gwrthrychau hyn gael ei lunio o amryw rannau, pob un o fath gwahanol o glai, wedi eu tanio ar dymheredd gwahanol, ac wedi eu haddurno y naill ar ôl y



llall gyda slip, lliw dan wydredd, bwrnais neu lwch llif - proses hirfaith. Yn flaenorol roedd pob rhan o'r gwrthrych mewn lliw clir gwahanol, ond yn fwy diweddar maent wedi eu 'patrymu' mewn dull sy'n perthyn i draddodiad crochenwaith addurniedig yn hytrach na cherflunwaith.

Ond mae'r gwaith 'concerto Bach' i'w weld fel pe bai hi'n dychwelyd at ffurfiau llyfn ei gwaith cynharach, ac yn dangos dylanwad cerflunwyr megis Brancusi. Yn wir mae cerflunwaith yn golygu mwy i Mary Bennett na gwaith gweithwyr eraill mewn cerameg, a does dim i'w golli o alw ei gwaith yn 'gerflunwaith'. Hoffai gynhyrchu gweithiau llawer mwy, ar raddfa 'gerfluniol', ond fe'i cyfyngir gan faint ei hodyn. Does neb na dim, fodd bynnag, ar wahân i gonfensiwn yn ei rhwystro rhag gwneud defnydd o ddefnyddiau eraill mewn cyfuniad â chlai, ac ar hyn o bryd mae hi'n arbrofi gyda choed (bydd yn rhaid aros i weld a fydd canlyniadau yr arbrofion hyn yn cael eu dangos yn Aberystwyth ai peidio). I gymhlethu pethau ymhellach mae hi nawr hefyd yn cynhyrchu



'monoprints' mewn lliw sy'n seiliedig ar ei lluniau o offerynnau cerdd.

Ond pan ymwelais i â'i stiwdio, roedd hi'n brysur yn llunio jwg comisiwn tal ac atyniadol iawn. Mae hi'n dal i gael mwynhad wrth wneud llestri o'r fath pan gaiff gais amdanynt, a does dim awgrym o gwbl mai rhywbeth diflas ond angenrheidiol yw gwaith o'r fath neu ei fod yn wahanol i'w gwaith arall.

Clywir cryn lawer o siarad syrffedus mewn cylchoedd arbenigol am y llinell derfyn rhwng cerameg a cherflunwaith, ond o wynebu ffeithiau, ychydig iawn o artistiaid sydd i'w gweld yn mwynhau llamu'n ôl ac ymlaen dros y bwll cul ond dwfn sy'n gwahanu'r ddau; gwell ganddynt dros yn agos at y ffin ar y naill ochr neu'r llall. Os nad oes geiriau digonol i ddiffinio'n union yr hyn y mae Mary Bennett yn ei wneud, dyw hi ddim yn debyg y boeni am hynny, dim ond bwrw ylaen â'i gwaith a gadael y math yna o drafod i'r ceogddysgedig.

David Briers

