

Ceramic Series

ABERYSTWYTH ARTS CENTRE · No 4

CLIVE BOWEN

You have only to visit the house adjoining Clive Bowen's pottery at Shebbear, in the wilds of North Devon, to see immediately that his declared aim of producing pots to be used is an honest one. Giant bowls and storage jars jostle for position on dressers and mantlepieces, interspersed with birthday cards and domestic trivia. Other pots are in the oven, drying on the draining board, under the sink full of molasses, being eaten out of by cats, or sitting on the table full of windfalls. If their maker's attitude to his 'pots' is not precious, it is at least respectfully affectionate, for here and there a shattered pot or plate, instead of giving up the ghost, has been stuck together again and replaced in position.

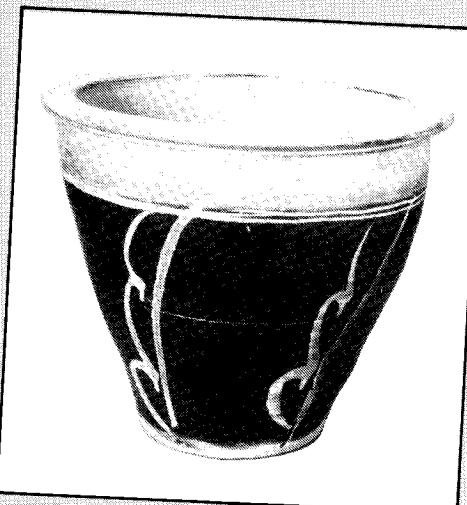
Clive Bowen was born in Wales, as far away from its rural interior as you can get, in a terraced street near the centre of Cardiff. He studied painting at Cardiff College of Art, but in 1965 decided to move to Devon to apprentice himself for four years to the potter Michael Leach, and thence to a small pottery factory in Barnstaple, learning consistency the hard way via twelve months of nothing but 'fast repetition throwing'. At weekends during this time he would visit nearby the potter Michael Cardew, to help fire his traditional wood-fired kiln.

And indeed, you cannot venture far into the province of contemporary British pottery without encountering the monumentally influential names of Bernard Leach and his pupil Michael Cardew. From the received example of the former Clive Bowen became interested in Oriental ceramics, with their embodied attitude towards utility, considered impersonality, and the creative accident. From the direct example of Michael Cardew he learned of other, less refined world traditions of making pottery, and a respect for the "self-willed, flaming kiln".

In 1970 Clive Bowen experimented with a small wood-fired kiln in his own back garden, and the following year, "when the time was ripe", bought the run-down smallholding which is still his home and workplace. In its barn he built a full sized kiln with imposing chimney, and within two months was selling the pots fired in it. At the same time, almost as an antidote to his preoccupation with Japanese and Korean pottery, Clive Bowen developed a great appreciation of traditional British 'country pottery'. But the country pottery trade had already dwindled to nothingness, and despite the example of Michael Cardew, Bowen had to regain contact with its neglected skills through prolonged experiment.

Regular visitors to Aberystwyth Arts Centre have had more opportunities than most to familiarise themselves with the nature of country pottery, most notably in the form of the recent travelling exhibition about North Wales Buckley Pottery, with its robust red earthenware decorated quickly (there is no other way) with liquid clay 'slip' of contrasting colour, dipped in glaze and fired once.

Clive Bowen has followed in the spirit of North Devon's own tradition of country pottery, which specialised in enormous pig salters and cream pans, and commemorative harvest-ware with decorations scratched into the dried slip. For the last fourteen years has used fundamentally the same shapes, the same local materials (one type of clay, three



colours of slip, two sorts of glaze), the same surface decorations, akin to those of country pottery, - and the same traditional method of firing. A wood-fired kiln may sound rather primitive, but Clive Bowen's large, round, 8-foot diameter 'down-draught' kiln is extremely efficient. It is also beautiful, without ever intending to be, the bottle-like shape of its brick chimney echoing the shapes of some of the vessels baked within, like sympathetic magic.

If the word 'kiln' conjures up something the size of a safe standing in the corner of an urban potter's studio, think again. You can walk into Clive Bowen's kiln and stand up in it. The experience is very like entering a neolithic burial chamber, and equally unnerving if one thinks of the enormous heat built up inside when the entrance is closed and the fireboxes stoked. Large stacks of wood (offcuts from a local sawmill placed about the kiln to dry out, add to its arresting aspect.

At full capacity the kiln can hold 2000 pots. Only 5 to 8 firings a year are undertaken, and they are special events, requiring continual attention over a 24-hour period, and then taking four days to cool down. Clive Bowen usually shares the task of overseeing a firing with his neighbour, the potter Svend Bayer, taking turns, in shifts through the night, and offering assistance in return when Bayer fires his own kiln. It is strange to think that when the rest of North Devon is dead to the world, these brickwork beacons are intermittently warming the night air, as their ancestors had done for centuries.

To the uninitiated, the potter's vocabulary is arcane. A 'rubber kidney' is not what you get through drinking too much, but an appliance used for deploying liquid clay. And do you remember, all those years ago, how the panel of *What's My Line?* was completely stumped by a 'saggar maker's bottom knocker'? Well, Clive Bowen makes his own



saggars - they are the simple fireclay supports which separate and protect the stacked pots during firing. Clive Bowen's own saggars are embellished with a simple wavy-line decoration which they don't need - the public will never see them. A small matter, but one which points up the nature of Clive Bowen's **modus operandi**.

The decoration of Clive Bowen's pots has remained consistent since he first started making and selling them - simple borders and all-over designs of trailed lines, sometimes blurred with combing, and fluid line drawings of fish, shrimps and cockerels. Recently, however, without consciously pursuing it, he has begun to uncover a personally distinct attitude to the 'free' application of overlaid trailed lines in different coloured slips, seeming to want to return to his former more Oriental concerns. Potters are more modest than painters, and Bowen freely asserts that the past fourteen years have been a period of learning and preparation for 'turning this corner'.

To strive for originality was none of the country potters' business, nor is it that of Clive Bowen, which is not to say that he does not achieve it, simply by doing what he does, and going against the grain of fine-art oriented current studio pottery practice, both in its overall disposition and in its every practical detail. If his pots are sometimes slightly asymmetrical, or if the decoration has dribbled, or other small 'blemishes' are evident this does not mean that it has evaded quality control, for as long as the utility of the pot is not impaired, small accidents are accepted, in the Oriental manner, and become part of the pot. Indeed, the interplay between accident and design is an integral part of these pots, and the whole undertaking, despite its utilitarian precepts, is a 'risky business'. More 'controlled' accidents occur during firing, achieving deeper coloured rings in the centre of bowls and dishes as a result of concentrations of glaze, and mottled effects when the atmosphere in the kiln is varied.

But though Clive Bowen may throw his pots by hand in a disused cow-byre, he does it to the sounds of rock cassettes, and does not try to pretend that this is not 1984. The hardest part of the country pottery tradition to emulate is the nature of its market. People no

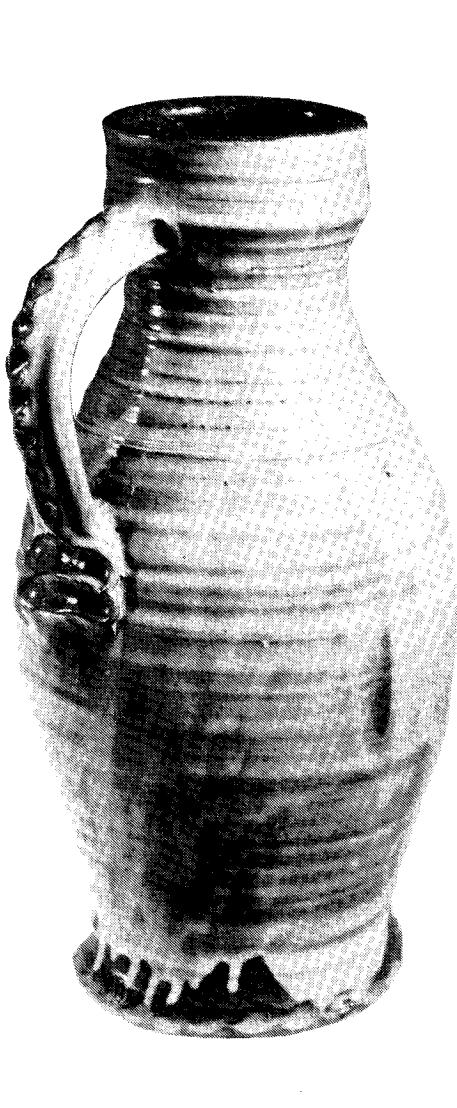
longer salt whole pigs over winter, so the old salters (of which Bowen has picked up several prize examples at local farm sales) have been replaced by plant troughs, and other wares likewise cater for late twentieth century needs, as they should.

If you buy a pot from the showroom at Clive Bowen's pottery, his operation may appear to be the acme of self-sufficiency. And yet this is not so. Even if he does get his red slip from the banks of the stream in the field at the back of his house, he still depends on the availability of all his other materials from local middlemen, and like his predecessors, has to go further afield to secure enough sales to keep him going. Unlike the country potters, however, his wares are no longer the cheapest you can get, and must find a specialised market - a time-consuming business.

The unavoidable economics of running the business to some extent, however, keeps in line the nature of what Bowen makes. In order to keep his prices down, and avoid the necessity of teaching, which he hardly ever does, Bowen must make pots almost every single day - he has no choice, but it is not a rote undergone unwillingly, and repetition has brought with it a deceptive facility. It looks easy, watching him throw half a dozen large cooking dishes on the trot, but it is the sort of rapidity of action which is borne of many years of preparation.

Clive Bowen's mentor, Michael Cardew, distinguished between the pottery tradition of art history, and the tradition of the workshop. Bowen's debt to the former has been marginal, whilst he has embraced the workshop tradition wholeheartedly, to the extent that his 17-year old son has recently begun to assist him in the day-to-day routines of the pottery. Be that as it may, Bowen's pots are more than good enough to stand up to scrutiny in an art gallery display case, and to take pride of place on your dresser, but they will not have begun to serve their purpose until they have been eaten off and washed up, brewed their first cups of tea, or baked their first potatoes.

David Briers



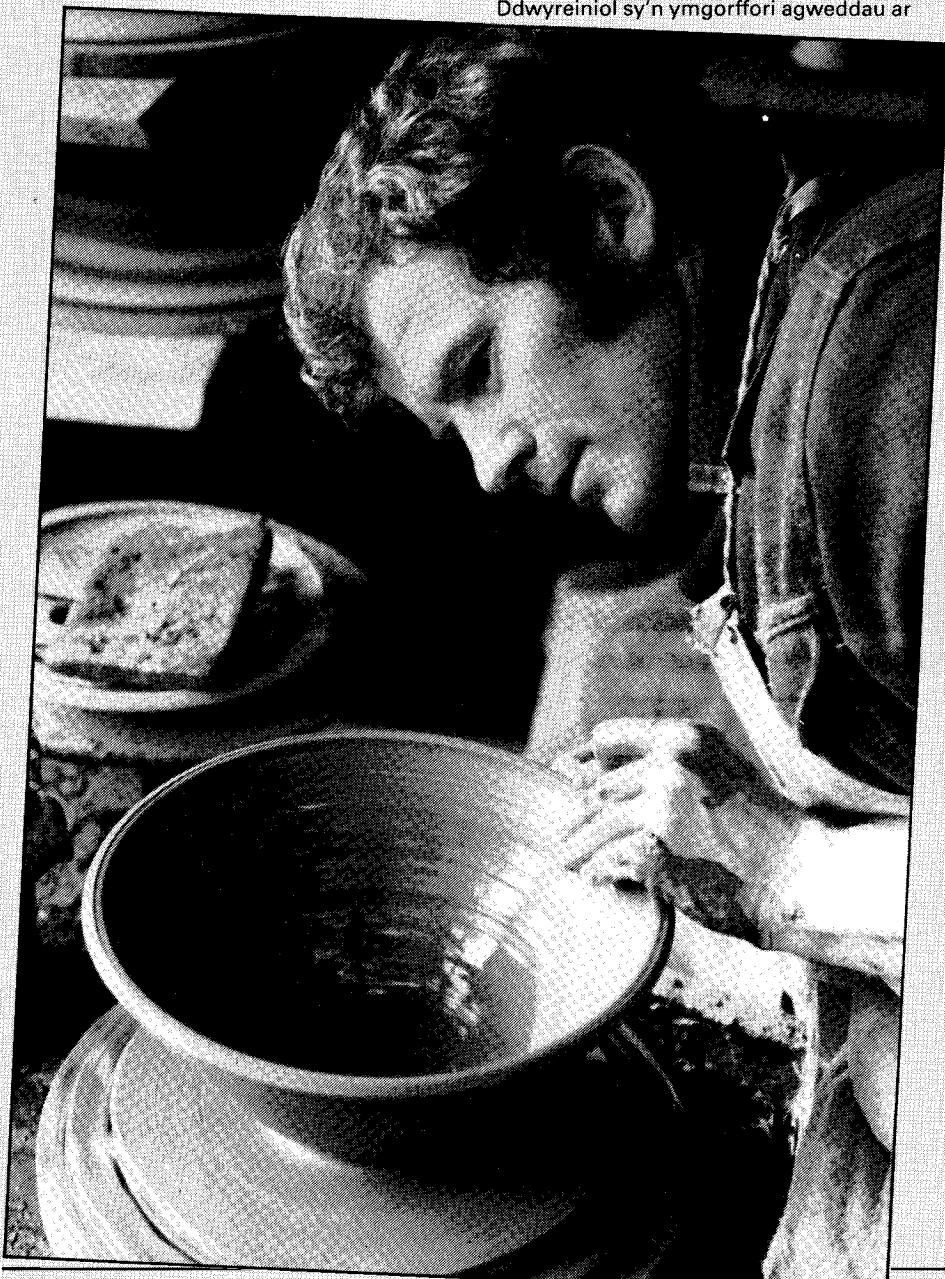
Y Gwyfres Gerameg

CANOLFAN Y CELFYDDYDAU ABERYSTWYTH

Rhif 4

CLIVE BOWEN

Does dim ond rhaid i chi ymweld â'r ty gerllaw crochendy Clive Bowen yn Shebbear, ym mhereddion cefn gwlad Gogledd Dyfnaint, i weld ar unwaith fod ei ddatganiad mai ei nod yw cynhyrchu potiau ar gyfer eu defnyddio yn un diffuant. Mae powlenni anferth a jariau storio yn ymgiprys am le ar dreseli a silffoedd pen tan ymhliith cardiau penblwydd a mân betheuach cartrefol eraill. Mae potiau eraill yn y ffwrn, yn sychu ar y bwrdd draenio, dan y sinc yn llawn triegl, yn dal bwyd cathod neu'n sefyll ar y bwrdd ymhliith afalau a gwmpwyd gan y gwynt. Os nad yw agwedd eu gwneuthurwr tuag at ei botiau yn un gor-ddifrifol, y mae o leiaf yn un sy'n dangos parch ac anwyldeb fel y dengys y ffaith fod ambell i bot neu blât a dorrwyd wedi eu gludio'n gyfan a'u hailosod yn eu lle, yn hytrach na'u bwrw o'r neilltu.



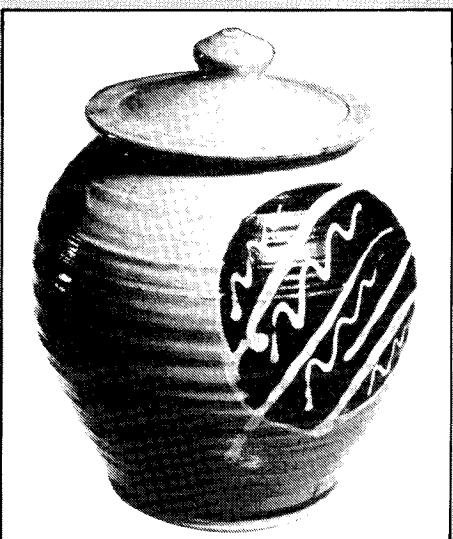
Ganwyd Clive Bowen yng Nghymru, cyn bellodd oddi wrth ei chefn gwlad ag y gellid dychmygu, mewn stryd o dai teras bron yng nghanol Caerdydd. Astudiodd arlunio yng Ngholeg Celf Caerdydd, ond ym 1965 penderfynodd symud i Ddyfnaint i dreulio pedair blynedd yn brentis i Michael Leach. Oddi yno aeth i ffatri crochenwaith fechan yn Barnstaple, ac yno yn ystod deuddeng mis o ddim ond "taflu unffurf cyflym" y dysgodd gysondeb. Yn ystod y cyfnod hwnnw â i fwrw'r Sul gyda'r crochenyyd Michael Cardew a oedd yn byw gerllaw, er mwyn ei gynorthwyo i danio ei odyn goed draddodiadol.

Ac yn wir, ni all neb dreiddio ymhell i faes crochenwaith gyfoes ym Mhrydain heb ddod ar draws enwau Bernard Leach a'i ddisgybl Michael Cardew, dau a gafodd ddyylanwad arathrol ar y maes. Oddi wrth esiampl etifeddedig y cyntaf o'r ddau y tyfodd didordeb Clive Bowen mewn cerameg Ddwyreiniol sy'n ymgorffori agweddu ar

ddefnyddioldeb, amhersonoliaeth fwriadus a'r ddammwain greadigol. Oddi wrth ddyylanwad uniongyrchol Michael Cardew y dysgodd am draddodiadau byd eang eraill llai coeth o lunio crochenwaith, ynghyd â i barch at yr "odyn fflamgoch, cyndyn".

Ym 1970 arbrofodd Clive Bowen gydag odyn goed fechan yn ei ardd gefn, a'r flwyddyn ganlynol, "pan oedd yr amser yn addas", prynodd dyddyn a oedd wedi mynd ar ei waethaf ac sy'n dal yn gartref ac yn weithdy iddo hyd heidi. Yn yr ysgubor cododd odyn llawn faint gyda simnai fawreddog, ac ymhen deufis roedd yn gwerthu'r potiau a daniwyd ynddi. Ar yr un pryd, ymron fel cyfrwng i adweithio yn erbyn ei orhoffedd o crochenwaith Siapan a Korea, dechreuodd Clive Bowen ddatblygu edmygedd mawr o 'crochenwaith gwlad' draddodiadol Prydain. Ond roedd y fasnach mewn crochenwaith gwlad yn barod wedi graddol ddiflannu i ebargofiant, ac er gwaethaf esiampl Michael Cardew, bu'n rhaid i Bowen ailddarganfod y medrau coll drwy hir arbrofi.

Cafodd ymwelwyr cyson â Chanolfan y Celfyddydau yn Aberystwyth fwy o gyfile na'r rhan fwyaf o bobl i ymgyngefino â natur crochenwaith gwlad, yn fwyaf arbennig yn achos yr arddangosfa deithiol ddiweddar yn dangos Crochenwaith Bwcle Gogledd Cymru, gyda'i llestri pridd cochion cryf wedi eu haddurno'n frysio (dyna'r unig ffordd) gyda slip o glai hylif mewn lliwiau cyferbyniol, wedi eu trochi mewn gwydredd a'u tanio unwaith.



Dilynnodd Clive Bowen yn ysbryd crochenwaith gwlad traddodiadol Gogledd Dyfnaint a oedd yn arbenigo mewn creu llestri anferth ar gyfer halltu moch a phadelli hufen, a crochenwaith dathlu cynhaef gydag addurniadau wedi eu crafu i'r slip ar ôl iddo sychu. Yn ystod y pedair mlynedd ar ddeug ddiwethaf defnyddiodd yr un ffuriâu yn eu hanfod, yr un defnyddiau lleol (un math o glai, tri lliw o slip, dau fath o wyrddedd), yr un addurniadau arwyneb, cytras â'r rhai a ddefnyddid gan crochenwyr gwlad, - a'r un dull traddodiadol o danio. Dichon fod odyn goed yn swniuo hytrach yn gyntefig, ond mae odyn 'down-draught' fawr, wyth troedfedd ar draws, yn hynod o effeithiol. Mae hefyd yn hardd, er na fwriadwyd iddi fod, ac mae ffurf potel ei simnai frics ynadleisiau rhai o'r llestri sy'n cael eu tanio o'i mewn, fel dewiniaeth gyd-oddefol.

Os yw'r gair odyn yn eich arwain i feddwl am rywbedd o faint seff yng nghornel stiwdio rhyw grochenydd tref, ystyriwch drachefn. Gellwch gerdded i mewn i odyn Clive Bowen a sefyll yn unionsyth ynddi. Mae'n brofiad cyffelyb i gerdded i mewn i siambr gladdu neolithig, ac yr un mor iasol pan gofiwch y gwres aruthrol sy'n cael ei gynhyrchu o'i mewn pan mae'r fynedfa wedi ei chau a'r blychau tân yn llawn. Mae'r pentyrâu mawr o goed (darnau sbâr o felin goed leol) sy wedi eu gosod o gwmpas yr odyn i sychu, yn ychwanegu at yr ymddangosiad trawiadol.

Gall yr odyn, pan yn llawn, gynnwys 2,000 o botiau. Dim ond rhwng 5 ac 8 gwaith y flwyddyn y caiff ei thanio, ac mae'r tanio yn achlysur arbennig sy'n gofyn gofal cyson dros gyfnod o bedair awr ar hagain, ac yna pedwar diwrnod o aros iddi oeri. Fel rheol bydd Clive Bowen yn rhannu'r dasg o oruchwyllo'r tanio gyda'i gymydog, y crochenydd Svend Bayer, y ddau'n cymryd eu tro, ar yn ail, drwy'r nos, a bydd yn talu'r gymwynnas yn ôl pan fydd Bayer yn tanio'i odyn yntau. Mae'n rhyfedd meddwl fod y coelcerthi bricwaith hyn o bryd i'w gilydd yn cynhesu awyr y nos fel y gwaeth eu rhagflaenwyr drwy'r canriffoedd, tra mae gweddill Gogledd Dyfnaint mewn trymgwsg.

I'r anghyfarwydd mae geirfa'r crochenydd yn ddirgelwch. Nid canlyniad gor-yfed yw'r hyn a elwir yn 'aren rwber' ond cyfarpar ar gyfer defnyddio clai hylif. A thybed a gofiwch chi, flynyddoedd lawer yn ôl, fel y trechwyd panelwyr 'What's My Line?' yn llwyr gan 'sagger maker's bottom knocker'? Wel, mae Clive Bowen yn cynhyrchu ei 'saggers' ei hun, - sef y cynheiliaid clai tân syml sy'n gwahanu ac yn diogelu'r pentyrâu potiau yn ystod y tanio. Addurnir 'saggers' Clive Bowen gydag addurn ar ffurf llinell donnog syml, addurniad cwbl ddiangen - ac un nad yw'r cyhoedd byth yn debyg o'i weld. Mater bach, ond un sy'n dangos natur dull Clive Bowen o weithredu.

Mae'r addurn ar botiau Clive Bowen wedi aros yn ddigfynewid er pan ddechreudd eu gwneud a'u gwerthu - borderi syml a chynllun o linellau crog dros y gwaith i gyd, weithiau wedi eu cymylu drwy gribi, a lluniau llinell rhwydd o bysgod, pedrys a cheiliogod. Yn ddiweddar, foddy bynnag, a hynny heb

unrhwy ymdrech fwriadol, mae wedi dechrau darganfod agwedd gwbl bersonol tuag at rydd-osod llinellau crog wedi eu trosgaenu mewn slip o wahanol liwiau, fel pe bai'n chwilio am ffordd yn ôl at ei hen ddiddordeb yng nghrochenwaith y Dwyrain. Mae crochenwyr yn fwy gwyliaidd na pheintwyr, ac mae Bowen yn datgan yn rhwydd mai cyfnod o baratoi ar gyfer 'troi'r gornel hon' fu'r pedair blynedd ar ddeg ddiwethaf.

Nid oedd ymdrechu i fod yn wreiddiol yn rhan o waith y crochenwyr gwlad, ac nid yw'n rhan o waith Clive Bowen ychwaith, er nad yw hynny'n gyfystyr â dweud nad yw'n gallu bod yn wreiddiol, a hynny'n syml drwy wneud yr hyn y mae'n ei wneud, a nafio'n groes i lanw ffasiwn celfyddyd gain crochenwaith stiwdio gyfoes, yn ei holl duediadau yn ogystal ag ym ei holl fanylion ymarferol. Os yw ei botiau ychydig yn anghymesur ar dro, neu os yw'r addurn wedi rhedeg, neu fod rhyw fan felfâu eraill i'w gweld arnynt, nid dangos fod y rheolaeth ansawdd wedi bod yn esgeulus a wna hyn, oblegid os nad yw defnyddioldeb y pot wedi ei amharu, gellir derbyn, yn y dull Dwyreinioli, fod y mân lithriadau yn rhan o'r gwaith. Yn wir y mae'r cydadwaith rhwng yr hyn sy'n ddamweiniol a'r hyn sy'n fwriadol yn rhan anhepgor o'r potiau hyn ac mae'r busnes, er gwaetha'i ymrwymiad wrth y defnyddiol, yn 'fusnes menstrual'. Digwydd mwya o ddamweiniau 'o dan reolaeth' yn ystod y tanio, gan roi cylchoedd llwyr dyfnach yng nghanol powlenni a dysglau o ganlyniad i grynnodiad o wydred ac effeithiau brith pan amrywir yr awyrgylch yn yr odyn.

Ond er fod Clive Bowen yn 'taflu' ei botiau â llaw mewn hen feudy, mae'n gweithio i gyfeiliant casetiau roc ac nid yw'n ceisio cymryd arno nad 1984 yw'r flwyddyn. Y rhan anoddaf i'w efelychu o draddiodiad y crochenydd gwlad yw natur ei farchnad. Nid yw pobl bellach yn halitu moch cyfan ar gyfer y gaeaf, ac felly mae'r hen lestri halitu (ac mae Bowen wedi cael gafaol ar rai engrheiftiau gwych mewn arwertiannau ar ffermydd lleol) wedi iildio'u lle i gafnau ar gyfer tyfu

planhigion ac mae eitemau eraill yn yr un modd wedi eu darparu ar gyfer anghenion diweddr yr ugeinfed ganrif, ac felly y dylai pethau fod.

Pe baech chi'n prynu pot yn yr ystafell ddangos yng nghrochenwaith Clive Bowen, fe allai ei fusnes ymddangos fel uchafbwynt hunan ddiagonolwydd. Ond nid felly y mae hi. Hyd yn oed os yw e'n cael ei slip coch o lannau'r afon yn y cae y tu ôl i'r ty, mae'n dal i ddibynnu ar fasnachwyr lleol am y cwbl o'i ddefnyddiau eraill, ac fel ei ragflaenwyr, mae'n rhaid iddo fynd ymhellach na'i ardal ei hun er mwyn cael gwerthiant digon da i gynnal ei fusnes. Yn wahanol i'r crochenwyr gwlad, foddy bynnag, nid ei nyddau ef yw'r rhai rhataf ar y farchnad, a rhaid iddo dod o hyd i farchnad arbenigol - busnes sy'n mynd â llawer o amser.

Fodd bynnag mae economeg anorfod rhedeg y busnes i ryw raddau yn pennu natur y gwaith y mae Bowen yn ei gynhyrchu. Er mwyn cadw'i brisiau i lawr ac er mwyn osgoi y rheidrwydd o fynd i ddysgu, rhywbeth na wna ond yn anfynych iawn, mae'n rhaid i Bowen gynhyrchu potiau bron bob dydd - does ganddo ddim dewis, ond nid arferiad syrffedus y mae'n troi ato'n anfoddog mohono, ac mae'r ailadrodd cyson wedi magu deheurwedd twyllodrus. Mae'n ymddangos yn hawdd wrth ei wyllo'n 'taflu' hanner dwsin o ddysglau coginio mawr y naill ar ôl y llall, ond dyma'r math o symud deheuig sy'n dilyn llawer blwyddyn o ymarfer.

Gwahaniaetha Michael Cardew, cynghorwr Clive Bowen, rhwng traddodiad crochenwaith hanes celf a thraddodiad y gweithdy. Prin yw dyled Bowen i'r traddodiad cyntaf, ond mae wedi ymserchu'n llwyr yn nhraffodiad y gweithdy, i'r graddau fod ei fab dwy ar bymtheg oed wedi dechrau ei gynorthwyo'n ddiweddar gyda gorchwylion beunyddol y crochenydd. Boed hynny fel y bo, mae potiau Bowen yn fwy na theilwng i'w gosod ar silfleoedd arddangos unrhyw oriel gelf ac i hawlwr'r prif le ar eich dreser, ond fyddan nhw ddim wedi dechrau ateb eu diben nes bydd rhwun wedi eu defnyddio ar gyfer pryd o fywyd a'u golchi wedyn, neu wedi paratoi cwpanaid o de ynddynt, neu eu defnyddio i goginio tatws.

David Briers

