



BARRETT-DANES

a continuing tradition



Left:
Alan Barrett-Danes
Fungi Form
Porcelain
Abergavenny 1974

Contents

Alan Barrett-Danes and the Development of Studio Ceramics in Britain
Dr Jeffrey Jones

Ruth Barrett-Danes
Maira Vincentelli

Alan as a Teacher
Noel Upfold

Jonathan Barrett-Danes
Sarah Bradford

Alan Barrett-Danes
Untitled
Lustre Pot with Vitreous Slip
Earthenware
Abergavenny 1974



Alan Barrett-Danes and the Development of Studio Ceramics in Britain

Dr Jeffrey Jones

In the 1970s studio ceramics confidently claimed its place at the heart of a wider project to reclaim the crafts for a new generation of makers. In the first year of that decade *Ceramic Review* was founded and from the outset it established a pattern of generous and wide-ranging coverage of the ever-widening spectrum of ceramic activity. The Crafts Advisory Committee (later to be renamed the Crafts Council) was set up in 1971, offering encouragement in the form of grants, advice and exhibiting opportunities to the eager, talented graduates of the metropolitan British art schools as well as to their counterparts following more traditional apprenticeships in rural workshops.

The crafts at this time were characterised by an exciting and often unsettling mix of the old and new; jewellers applied their skills as much to plastics as to precious metals, weavers and embroiderers took the opportunity to reinvent themselves as textile artists, and the practical and ideological distinctions between potters and ceramicists were fought over with considerable passion, although not always with good grace. This richly contentious range of activities and interests was reflected in a book called *Potters on Pottery*, published in 1976, in which a broad selection of makers wrote about their work.

Elizabeth Fritsch eloquently described her ‘illusionistic’ ceramic vessels, deploying musical and architectural metaphors to extend the appreciation of what a pot might be¹. David Leach and Michael Cardew offered more traditional, consolatory understandings of the virtues of pottery, with Cardew emphasising the natural, harmonious qualities of his work, saying that ‘no violence has been done to the material’.²

The first chapter of *Potters on Pottery* is devoted to Alan and Ruth Barrett-Danes who, the editors tell the reader, ‘collaborate on fantasy sculptural pieces made in porcelain’.³ If Michael Cardew had looked at the illustrations of their work he might well have had some cause for concern. Violation – both of the ceramic material itself and of the viewer’s expectations at that time of what a ceramic object should be – was the characteristic quality that gave these pieces their idiosyncratic, creative edge.

Even today the work has lost little of its impact. In the *Cabbage Kingdoms* soft vegetable matter and human and animal organisms appear to invade one another; the fleshy materials bleed, morph and break down, with trails of lustre glaze tracing the damage done. In another group of work, the so-

Left to Right:
Alan & Ruth Barrett-Danes
Cabbage Kingdoms
Porcelain
Abergavenny 1974-76

Alan & Ruth Barrett-Danes
Detail: *Cabbage Kingdoms*
Porcelain
Abergavenny 1974-76



called *Predator Pots*, reptilian creatures crawl over lidded jars, their intentions anything but benign. Paradoxically, the bland, anonymous jars are given life and interest by the very things that threaten to overwhelm them or to cast them aside as they prey on their contents. In this strange world of menace and decay it is as if ceramics is feeding on itself and the deadly, auto-destructive process is arrested and redeemed only by the transformative heat of the kiln.

Such an interpretation might seem overstretched but it is true to the expressed intentions of Alan Barrett-Danes, who talks in *Potters on Pottery* as if there was a kind of psychodrama or struggle for social and physical survival being played out in these pieces. As he comments, there is 'hopelessness' and 'frustration' there and an urgent need to confront a boring, 'utilitarian kind of existence'.⁴ Grotesque as they are, the cabbage heads nevertheless reflect a very human predicament: 'the thoughts and memories

bursting out are their only means of communication'.⁵ This desire on Alan's part to explore the emotive and narrative possibilities of ceramics was encouraged by his wife Ruth's interest in imaginative writers such as Tolkien, C.S.Lewis and Mervyn Peake, and by her training as an illustrator. It is also significant that Ruth had an independent career as a teacher of occupational therapy students, many of whom would go on to work in the field of mental health. In her contribution to *Potters on Pottery*, Ruth says that she is 'concerned with psychiatric patients – a lot of whom have pent-up emotions which you can sense, though they are unable to communicate through normal channels' and she adds that this was often in her mind when modelling in clay.⁶ Ruth's contribution is explored more fully in Moira Vincentelli's essay elsewhere in this catalogue. Here the concern is with the relationship between Alan's family background, training and experience and his unique position within the story of studio ceramics in Britain; a

position which came into sharp focus during the heady days of the mid 1970s.

From early boyhood onwards Alan Barrett-Danes was well aware of the possibility of a life working with clay. His grandfather was Edward Baker who, by the early 1950s, had bought the Upchurch Pottery in Kent where he had worked for various proprietors over the previous four decades.⁷ The pottery had been established in 1913 by Seymour and Sidney Wakely, local businessmen who employed Baker to set up and run their venture. They could hardly have chosen better; Baker was a skilled craftsman and came from a long established family of country potters whose own pottery in nearby Hoo had closed a year or two earlier. At Upchurch he was encouraged to develop a new kind of ware, different to the sturdy earthenware flower pots, chimney pots, baking dishes and washing pans that were the staple production of country potteries at this time. Both Dora Wakely (Seymour's wife) and Edward Spencer (proprietor of the Artificers Guild in London and friend of the Wakely brothers) were keen to take on the role of artistic leadership at Upchurch and had grander ambitions than this.

In 1914 Spencer produced a promotional booklet entitled *The Revival of Pottery at Upchurch*, in which he set out their aims, saying: 'our present experiments have been directed towards

obtaining some of the more beautiful glazes and colour combinations of the Sung period ... future kilns will contain examples of fine crackle in low-toned whites and greys, and perhaps in the long run we may attain to some blue that shall not too distantly resemble the wonderful tint of the 10th century Ch'ai vases'.⁸

Below:
Alan & Ruth Barrett-Danes
Predator Animal Pots
Porcelain
Abergavenny 1975-78





Left to Right: James Baker,
Edward J. Baker, Percy Rayment

This reflects the contemporary taste for Chinese Sung Dynasty ceramics, which were a revelation to a London audience when they were shown at the Burlington Fine Arts club in 1910. It was asking a lot of Edward Baker to emulate such sophisticated work, and although the early Upchurch wares could not compete on the same terms with their Chinese exemplars, they nevertheless showed evidence of a lively artistic mind at work and a curious nature that would seek to explore to the full the possibilities of ceramic materials. This can be seen in the series of glaze and kiln-firing notebooks kept by Edward Baker and his sons, which have fortunately survived. Whatever Edward Spencer and Dora Wakely might have claimed, it was the skill and sensibility of Edward Baker, the master potter at Upchurch, that was chiefly responsible for the pottery's success.

As a young child during the late 1930s, and then as a youth during the wartime years, Alan Barrett-Danes was increasingly drawn into the pottery

environment in which his grandfather Edward and various uncles worked. By the time of Alan's birth in 1935 the Wakeleys were losing interest in the pottery and in 1936 it was bought by Alice Winnicott, the wife of the psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott. During the previous two decades the Bakers, father and sons, had established a high degree of artistic independence and Mrs. Winnicott's ideas were seen as an intrusion. There were arguments about the placing of work in the kiln in order to achieve the best effects and Edward naturally felt aggrieved that his lifetime's experience was being challenged. Employer and employees managed to establish a reasonably steady working relationship which continued until 1951, when Mrs. Winnicott sold the Upchurch Pottery to the Baker family.

At this time there was every expectation that Alan, aged sixteen, would soon be working full time at the pottery, keeping it going for a further generation.⁹ He decided, however, to attend the local Medway



Interior of the Upchurch Pottery, circa 1940
Left to Right: James Baker, Edward J.
Baker, Percy Rayment

College of Art and Design, although he worked at what was now the family business during his vacations. He further confounded the family's expectations by going to Stoke-on-Trent in 1956 to train as a pottery designer. There he stayed for a number of years before starting a career as a teacher of ceramics, eventually moving to the ceramics department at Cardiff College of Art in 1967, where he remained for the rest of his working life, making a major contribution to the establishment of one of the leading departments of ceramics in Britain.

Edward Baker died in 1955 and Upchurch pottery eventually closed in 1963. During its lifetime its reputation had spread much further than the immediate locality, with its hybrid pots successfully straddling the 'art pottery' and 'country pottery' divide and selling to tourists and collectors as well as to a loyal, local clientele. However in its final years conditions at the pottery were still primitive with no gas or electricity supply or running water,

and no-one at Upchurch was ready to take on the considerable task of modernisation.¹⁰ We can speculate why Alan Barrett-Danes was not prepared to do this; a possible factor was that neither of his parents were potters, Edward Baker being Alan's grandfather on his mother's side. It is more likely that Alan was eager to take up the increasing educational opportunities that were opening up for young people in the 1950s and 1960s. Stoke-on-Trent was still a world centre for ceramic industrial design and offered a sound training and an exciting career to anyone with technical ability and creative flair. The field of ceramics was also opening up to Alan in another way, through the increasing expansion and liberalisation of art school degree-level courses. Here long established ways of making ceramics, whether in a rural pottery or an urban factory, were open to challenge. 'Studio ceramics', as encouraged in the art schools, was practised on a small scale and was more about ideas and individualistic expression rather than about design

Images:
Alan & Ruth Barrett-Danes
Figure Bowls
Porcelain
Abergavenny 1977-78



and production. In Cardiff College of Art Alan Barrett-Danes both discovered and nurtured a ceramic environment that was a world away from either Kent or Staffordshire.

Education naturally encourages critical awareness and the pushing of boundaries, and when Alan arrived in Cardiff in the late 1960s he was barely in his thirties and could not help but be aware of a youth culture all around him which enthusiastically celebrated those qualities, sometimes to excess. Ceramicists, like other artists at this time, looked around for ways to extend the language of their chosen medium and within a few years artists such as Elizabeth Fritsch, Jacqui Poncelet, Glenys Barton, Mo Jupp and Geoffrey Swindell were making literate, historically informed work which drew on music, science fiction and pop culture to make an art which was eclectic in its cultural

references and which was also self-reflective in the way that it was influenced by, and at the same time commented upon, the history, processes and forms of ceramics itself.

No-one was better placed than Alan to draw on and push forward the idea or concept, as well as the considerable technical range, of 'ceramics'. For example, he realised early on that the deployment of certain techniques had resonances far beyond their immediate effects. He says in *Potters on Pottery*:

...people liked white cabbages until I lusted them, and then they started to think about the lustre effect. Some potters would not touch it because of the associations with Belleek and art deco, but I think those connotations are probably overcome by the shock of seeing the lustre on ten cabbages

*under fluorescent light in an exhibition case.*¹¹

Although he was a mild-mannered man there was little that was sentimental in Alan's approach to his chosen discipline. He described himself as 'very conservative' in his loyalty to ceramics but within the limits of the genre he took considerable risks.¹² This can readily be seen in a series of simple bowls whose integrity is threatened as diminutive figures fight it out with the walls of clay themselves. It seems reasonable to ask of these pieces whether, in a metaphorical as well as physical sense, the fabric of ceramics is being compromised to the point of destruction. Yet, quietly and insistently the bowls resist, wrapping and holding the figures, refusing to let them go, making a disturbing kind of art out of this collision of the human and material worlds.

The particular set of social and cultural circumstances that formed Alan Barrett-Danes and

his work has gone, never to return. For half a century Upchurch Pottery had been able to adapt to changing artistic and economic conditions but in the end it did not survive and we can only speculate how far its demise was due to its inability to keep hold of Alan, who saw his future elsewhere but who never forgot his pottery roots in Kent as a potter. Stoke-on-Trent, which for a few years offered him a sound technical and design training the like of which was unavailable anywhere else in the world, has since declined to the point where it is no longer a major centre of ceramics manufacture. Fortunately the department of ceramics at Cardiff, which Alan did so much to nurture, is thriving, but this is against the background of a contraction in the provision of ceramics education nationwide. 'Studio ceramics' already sounds like a slightly outmoded term but for thirty years or so it provided a workable label for

Images Left to Right:
Alan Barrett-Danes
Untitled
Lidded Bowl
Stoneware
Maidstone 1954

Alan Barrett-Danes
Untitled
Celadon Bowl with Incised Decoration
Stoneware
Maidstone 1954

Alan Barrett-Danes
Untitled
Ash Glazed Pot
Stoneware
Datchet 1965-66

a mode of practice in which a particularly rich medium could be explored as much through the potentiality of historical precedents as through the technical and creative manipulation of its raw materials.

Working jointly and individually, Alan and Ruth Barrett-Danes made a major contribution to the development of studio ceramics in Britain. For the Barrett-Danes, ceramics has been a tradition spanning six generations and dating back to the early years of the nineteenth century. Over many decades Alan and Ruth Barrett-Danes passed on their skills and enthusiasm to generations of students, to an increasingly well-informed and appreciative audience and also to their son Jonathan whose work shows evidence of their influence while at the same time having a life and

direction of its own. Alan's experiences and training in the mid twentieth century meant that he was uniquely positioned to play a key role in developments in the field of studio ceramics in the later decades of the century. No one else was as well-equipped as he was to take advantage of that moment when ceramics opened itself up to its past and its future. In his life and work we see someone who was able to take the story of ceramics apart and then put it together again in new and challenging ways. Alan Barrett-Danes had felt it necessary to leave Upchurch and Stoke-on-Trent behind him and move on, but many people have cause to be grateful that he continued to wrestle with their legacies for the rest of his career.



Notes

¹ Elizabeth Fritsch in Elisabeth Cameron and Philippa Lewis (editors), *Potters on Pottery*, London, Evans Brothers Limited, 1976, p.64.

² Michael Cardew in Cameron and Lewis, *Potters on Pottery*, p.52.

³ Cameron and Lewis, *Potters on Pottery*, p.8.

⁴ Alan Barrett-Danes in Cameron and Lewis, *Potters on Pottery*, p.11.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Ruth Barrett-Danes in Cameron and Lewis, *Potters on Pottery*, p.9.

⁷ For further information on Edward Baker and the Upchurch Pottery see Victoria Bergesen, 'The Baker Family: Six Generations of Potters', *Journal of the Northern Ceramic Society*, vol.10, 1993, pp.71-113, and Jeffrey Jones, *Studio Pottery in Britain 1900-2005*, London, A&C Black, 2007, pp.22-24.

⁸ Edward Spencer, *The Revival of Pottery at Upchurch*, London, Women's Printing Society, 1914, pp.7-8.

⁹ Tony Birks says that Alan 'defied family pressures to join the workshop'. See Tony Birks, 'Alan Barrett-Danes – Narrative Potter', *Ceramic Review*, no.36, November/December 1975, pp.4-6, p.4.

¹⁰ See Birks, 'Alan Barrett-Danes', p.4 and Bergesen, 'The Baker Family', p.85 and p.94.

¹¹ Alan Barrett-Danes in Cameron and Lewis, *Potters on Pottery*, p.15.

¹² *Ibid*, p.14.

Ruth Barrett-Danes
Supporting the Party
Porcelain
Abergavenny 1996



Ruth Barrett-Danes

Maira Vincentelli

I first interviewed Ruth and Alan Barrett-Danes in 1990 at The Laurels, their home in Abergavenny. The period name, the rambling Victorian house and the beautiful garden seemed to evoke so much of the sources and imagery of their work. A shared passion for ceramics characterised their lives, a passion which both had identified with from their teenage years, Ruth from her choice of course when she attended art college and Alan, from an even earlier age through his family experience when staying with his grandfather at Upchurch Pottery. He recalled his youthful pride in his ability to throw when he first went to Medway Art College. This quintessential potter's skill and his interest in the technical aspects of ceramics continued to be important throughout his life, first in his early career in Stoke-on-Trent and later as a teacher and in his personal work. Ruth, however had a second string to her bow through her love of drawing. When the ceramics department at Plymouth closed down midway through her course she accepted a change in direction and studied illustration. These combined interests have remained throughout her career sometimes very much running against the grain of the ceramic doctrines of the day.

Like many women her career as an artist developed at a steady but gentle pace. While her

sons were young, drawing was always a way of exploring ideas and keeping her hand in. Furthermore, that now much-vaunted 'feminine quality' of multi-tasking has enriched her life: teaching, family, friends, gardening and work with art and occupational therapists have all played their part. Much less predictable is the strong element of black humour that runs through her oeuvre. In a rather solitary early childhood she found solace in the world of the imagination. 'It was something that you created for yourself.' She recounts vividly hours spent in the dark during wartime air raids in Plymouth.

... when you are sitting there in the pitch black you had to be quiet. My mother did not allow us to talk because you had to listen all the time to hear where the bombs were landing.

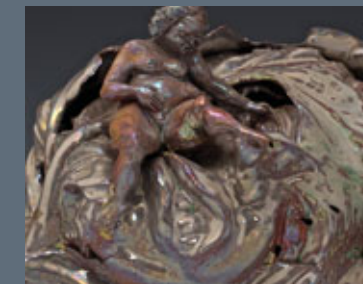
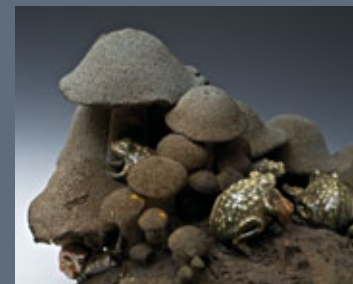
She has always loved literature of fear and fantasy: Edgar Allan Poe, Dickens, Alice in Wonderland and Tolkien. The varied sources of her work draw on visual traditions of the grotesque from Japanese netsuke and Romanesque carvings such as those at Kilpeck in Herefordshire to the Martin Brothers' wally birds. Nineteenth century illustrators must also be noted: Gustave Doré, John Tenniel and the French caricaturist J.J. Grandville (1803-1847).¹ His anthropomorphic fusions of insect, plant and

animal forms and social satirical figures with animal heads resonate in many different aspects of the work in this exhibition from fungi forms to sculptural figures. For years she hid her predilection for a literary and illustrative approach knowing that it would find few sympathisers in the field of ceramics. Looking back, she feels that attitudes began to change in the 1970s. It was particularly noticeable among young art students who questioned the old dogmas and dared to use a wider variety of techniques in new and creative ways. Her contact with this younger generation, including students at Cardiff College of Art where Alan was teaching, was, she recalls, a liberating experience.

In the late 1960s she again took up ceramics and during the 1970s and early eighties she worked in collaboration with Alan. Although it was a radical departure from making or designing functional domestic ware, the basis of his training and early career, he had extensive technical knowledge and an interest in experimentation and innovative ways

of working. This, combined with Ruth's imaginative ideas and fascination for narrative and dark humour, formed the basis of a sustained and fruitful working partnership.

Both have recalled the pressure to conform to the doctrines of the studio pottery tradition but, for different reasons, neither was ever comfortable with it. Small scale sculptural forms are hard to situate within the context of ceramic practice in the UK. However looking further afield to Europe we can find many more relationships. Significantly in the summer of 1975 a month-long International Symposium was held in Cardiff.² Of the fourteen participating artists eleven worked in a sculptural/conceptual way and a number were using figurative form including Lillemor Petersson (Sweden), Achiel Pauwels (Belgium), Jeff Salter, Frances Woodley and Alan Barrett-Danes from the UK.³



Left to Right:
Alan & Ruth Barrett-Danes
Fungi Form with Frogs
Porcelain
Abergavenny 1975

Alan & Ruth Barrett-Danes
Cabbage Kingdoms
Porcelain
Abergavenny 1974-76

The earliest sculptures were inspired by mushroom and toadstools found on family outings and these pieces were made by Alan. Then came the *Cabbage Kingdom* series where Ruth's strange little figures pull themselves out from between the leaves. Gradually the figures take on a more important role in the piece. Between 1975-8 they worked on a series of *Predator Pots* where frogs, hybrid creatures or misshapen humanoids climb around the globular vases. In the *Armchair Struggles* series of the following year the figure seems to be engulfed in the form - the cosy armchair has become a trap, like a dream where you run in terror but make no progress. Finally the pot disappears, the vessel walls have become leaves transforming into human limbs mutating into a bird's head: nature takes over culture. In all of these series there is a consistent mood of macabre angst, or a feeling of entrapment.

For twenty-five years from 1969 she was Tutor in Arts and Crafts on an innovative course at the

Welsh School of Occupational Therapy. Drawing on this experience, in an interview in 1976 she discusses the need of psychiatric patients to find ways of communicating. 'You have to find ways through to those inner feelings...Those are some of the things I am thinking about when I am modelling in clay.'⁴

Later on in that article Alan talks about the difficulties of working together 'The problem is to find the form that can somehow express what Ruth wants to say.'⁵ At the same time Ruth was very conscious that her work disrupted the formal qualities of Alan's original. As she put it to me in 1990,

When you are working with someone else's work you feel that you are imposing on it and you are beginning to destroy what someone else has done. So it is quite a step to start softening the shape and imposing the animal on it.

Left to Right:
Alan & Ruth Barrett-Danes
Predator Animal Pots
Porcelain
Abergavenny 1975-78

Alan & Ruth Barrett-Danes
Armchair Struggles
Porcelain
Abergavenny 1978-79



Eventually the collaboration had to break up. It became too limiting for each individual. Many years later they were to find a way of resolving this conflict in a very different body of work.

Although never mentioned by Ruth in our conversations it is easy to see that in the literature of the 1970s the collaborative work sometimes went under the name of Alan Barrett-Danes, at very least in the title even if Ruth is mentioned in the article.⁶

The new-found independence gave both a spring-board for fresh developments. Ruth gained confidence in modelling and, around 1984, the figures became the subject in themselves. She began to try out different clay bodies used for sculptural form but later returned to her preferred medium of porcelain, one that has long

associations with the ceramic figurine. She was never tempted to make large figures and the size remained on an intimate level appropriate for a domestic setting.

Initial ideas were explored through half-size maquettes to capture the effect but for the full-scale works she used a traditional potter's modelling system starting from a hollow form. Anatomical details were sometimes explored on paper although she rarely worked from life. By preference she used other images including the photographs of Eadweard Muybridge whose photographic analyses of moving figures provided a rich source of detail. The modelling of the heads were a favourite part and the most specific and detailed. They set the spirit of the piece. In thinking about these figurative pieces she draws a parallel with the concept of masquerade in which people reveal an



Alan & Ruth Barrett-Danes
Animal Vessels
Porcelain
Abergavenny 1983-84

alter-ego through disguise. The faces are almost like masks or an expression that people wear.

To avoid any lightening of the meaning through decorative effects such as glazes she incorporated stain and colour into the clay itself only occasionally adding colour to the surface which was finished by spraying with a fine slip as in a *terra sigillata* technique. This creates a slight sheen on the matt surface enlivened in places by staining or scoring. Only the eyes were given a shiny glaze in a note of realist detail. The dominance of matt over shiny

surface is crucial to the meaning distancing them from the decorative effect and light hearted mood of most porcelain figurines. The matt surface alludes to the state of clay and might even suggest stone sculpture. Thus it lends the work gravitas appropriate to the expressive intentions.

In her figurative works the artist does not attempt to control the meaning. In 'So far so good' the grasping hand of the great beaked figure clutches the head of a smaller figure. Do we read this as a child? Are its intentions benign or malignant? The power of the work lies in its ambiguity and suggestiveness.

Sometimes the sensual qualities spill over into more specific sexual connotations. Dance, especially free expressive dance was a constant source of inspiration giving rise to a number of works. The wild posturing of the figures in 'Dancing Contest' with thrusting forms and orgiastic gestures are reminiscent of German

Expressionist depictions of dance. They suggest the primeval forces of nature that lie beneath human relationships.

Titles, too, such as ‘Troubled Waters’ or ‘Fish out of Water’ evoke unease and tension. As in the tale of Beauty and the Beast, we can be repelled by his ugliness and awkwardness yet empathise with his unhappy plight.

Female figures occur more rarely but one such is ‘Innocence goes for a Ride’. A subset of the chubby cherub motif, the figure clings to the goat-like horns, one arm flung in the air. It resonates with references to the classical tradition and subjects such as ‘The Rape of Europa’ or ‘Apollo and Daphne’. It conveys a sense of human predicament but ultimately the interpretation is open ended, the meaning created in the space between the artist and the viewer.

Ruth Barrett-Danes’ figurative works are poised precariously between different ceramic traditions – studio pottery, porcelain figurines and clay sculpture. Like all mythological representations her subjects draw on an inner reality lurking behind external appearance. They feed on imagery of previous eras to create a fresh imaginative experience. The sculptural forms brought Ruth Barrett-Danes considerable acclaim after 1985 and she exhibited widely in the UK, Germany and the USA.

But this is not the end of the story. After his retirement Ruth and Alan Barrett-Danes developed a completely new range of work which used their complementary skills in a particularly harmonious way. Returning to domestic ware, the pottery was thrown in red earthenware and decorated with slip and sgraffito decoration and sometimes modelling. Here Ruth’s graphic skills are fore-grounded with the joyful line drawings of leaping hares. They are a delightfully light-hearted postscript to their earlier ceramic collaborations.

Since Alan’s death in 2004 Ruth has moved to live near her son Jonathan in Hampshire. I visited Ruth again at the house in Abergavenny just before she moved. On that October day, the garden was peaceful, still beautiful though tinged with a touch of autumn melancholy only contrasted with the excited twittering of birds as they pecked at the many bird feeders hung on the branches of the trees. It reminded me that this natural world of plant and animal remained a fount of inspiration for Ruth’s work but ever intertwined with the deep-seated imaginings of the subconscious mind.



Left to Right:
Ruth Barrett-Danes
Dancing Contest
Porcelain
Abergavenny 1996

Ruth Barrett-Danes
Troubled Waters
Porcelain
Abergavenny 1998-99

Ruth Barrett-Danes
Fish out of Water
Porcelain
Abergavenny 1997-98

Notes

¹ J.J. Grandville (1803-1847) a pseudonym for Jean Ignace Isodore Gerard was a caricaturist whose work was influential on the writer Lewis Carroll and the best known illustrator of *Alice in Wonderland*, Tenniel. In the 20th century Max Ernst and the Surrealists also found inspiration in his imagery.

² Of fourteen artists there was one Japanese six UK mostly from Cardiff and Wolverhampton and the rest from Europe. There were no London based makers nor any from the USA.

³ Although only Alan is shown in the publication with a ‘Cabbage Kingdom’, they are joint pieces and Ruth also worked at the event as is recorded in the *Ceramic Review* report of the Symposium (Jan/Feb 1976, no.37:13-14).

⁴ Elizabeth Cameron and Philippa Lewis *Potters on Pottery*, Evan Bros London 1976 pg 9

⁵ Ibid pg 16

⁶ *Ceramic Review* 1975; Tony Birks *The Art of the Potter* 1976 and the catalogue for the *International Ceramic Symposium* 1975.

Alan & Ruth Barrett-Danes
Untitled
Bowls
Raku, Stoneware
Abergavenny 1989-92



Alan as a Teacher

Noel Upfold

Traditionally art colleges recruited practising artists and designers to teach their students. However, successful artists do not necessarily make good teachers. The students who were in contact with Alan Barrett-Danes throughout his many years at Cardiff College of Art were fortunate to be taught by an artist who was not only a critically acclaimed practitioner but also a sensitive and committed teacher.

All the students I contacted prior to writing this essay expressed their gratitude to him for introducing them to the potential of clay and giving them the technical means to exploit it.¹ They were also unanimous in praising his ability to tailor his tuition to their specific, individual development. The range of the current work of those who spoke to me included traditional studio pottery, public commissions and figurative work and is a testimony to Alan's catholic influences and enthusiasms.

I was fortunate to work alongside Alan in the late 1960s and early 1970s when college budgets permitted the luxury of weekly tutorials at which three members of staff, including one from the History of Art department, would see individual students in their studio space to discuss their work. During these tutorials I was impressed by the quiet and gentle manner in which Alan elicited

important information from the student and guided him or her forward. It was interesting many years later to talk to past students who recalled his teaching manner and to have my impressions confirmed. 'Humane', 'sympathetic', 'gentle' were typical responses. The words 'humour', 'fun' and 'enthusiasm' were also frequently included as they remembered their tutorials with Alan.² These kindly qualities were however leavened with an acknowledgement of his attention to detail and his 'abhorrence of bull shit.'

There was of course another and equally important element to Alan's teaching abilities which complemented the qualities outlined previously. This was his immense practical knowledge of the material and technical processes necessary for ceramic practice and which had been garnered over a number of years prior to his arrival at Cardiff. One student from the early 1970s described Alan as 'the glaze guru'. The same person who is currently preparing work for a major craft fair stressed that Alan's quiet mentoring of students' development was underpinned by a 'rigour' which insisted on focussing upon the practicalities of the project in hand. He was 'equally at home discussing the esoteric as he was the merits of a teapot spout.'

Alan Barrett-Danes
Untitled
Industrial Design Work
Earthenware
Crown Clarence, Stoke 1959-60



Alan's contribution to the ceramic department was valuable in that it helped to inform the often heated debates about the nature of ceramic practice which have been commented upon in the accompanying essays. The potential confrontation between two approaches to working with ceramics was, in Alan's case, because of his

background and his willingness to explore new concepts, transformed into a creative tension. As a consequence the students were encouraged by Alan to negotiate the differing cultural and ideological positions individually and with confidence.

It is commonplace now to refer to the radical transformation of art education that occurred in the UK in the late 1960s, the time when Alan began to teach at Cardiff.³ Alan's appointment to the ceramic's department coincided with the arrival of Tom Hudson as Director of Studies of the college. Tom was in part responsible for the traumatic reorganisation of art and design education in the UK and unsurprisingly used Cardiff as a proving ground for his art educational theories. Significantly Alan engaged, but on his own terms, with the often bitterly contested theoretical discussions and saw opportunities for his students to develop and enlarge their own creative boundaries. As one past student who has exhibited widely and is currently



Left to Right:
Alan Barrett-Danes
Untitled
Lustre Pot with Painted Decoration
White Stoneware
Abergavenny 1989-91

Alan Barrett-Danes
Untitled
Lustre Pot with Raised Slip
White Stoneware
Abergavenny 1985-87

lecturing in a college of art put it 'Alan's insistence on my responding to the language of material... kick-started a continuing range of formal concerns. He encouraged me not to worry about what the end product would be.'⁴ Alan's independent spirit has been mentioned elsewhere in this catalogue and it was this quiet confidence in his own creative judgements that allowed him to make the most of what, in retrospect, could be seen as an unsettling but exciting creative environment.

One other important fact must be born in mind when assessing Alan's contribution to the teaching of ceramics at Cardiff. He was a member of a team. A team that for a number of years included Peter Starkey as Course Director, Geoffrey Swindell and Michael Casson, (the latter in a part time capacity.) By any standards it was a formidable educational force and one that produced a significant number of established and successful contemporary practitioners. Alan's ability to cooperate and engage with his fellow teachers,

colleagues and support staff combined with his knowledge and skills as a communicator and teacher ensured that he played a crucial role in the success of the department over a number of years.

Everyone that I have spoken to about Alan's time at Cardiff has commented upon his generosity of spirit, his enthusiasm, his willingness to explore new ideas, his professionalism and his shrewd, critical judgement. It is little wonder that he is remembered with affection by so many, and his influence on a large number of contemporary practitioners continues.



Alan Barrett-Danes
Untitled
Lustre Pot with Vitreous Slip
White Stoneware
Abergavenny 1985-87

Notes

¹ Amongst the many people I spoke to when preparing this essay I would particularly like to thank Neil Brownsword, Brian Dickenson, Michael Flynn, Frances Woodley and Graham Williams.

² See *Ceramic Review*, July/August 1989 for Michael Flynn's acknowledgement of the support he received from Alan and Ruth Barrett-Danes.

³ Robert Strand's book *A Great Deal of Freedom*, CNA, 1987 summarizes the key debates and events of this period.

⁴ See Note 1.

Jonathan Barrett-Danes

Sarah Bradford

In the early 1990s soon after starting up a new gallery, we approached Ruth and Alan Barrett-Danes to offer them an exhibition. We visited their home in Abergavenny and on the low table in the living room amongst Ruth's 'beasts' and Alan's pouting 'pigeon' pots there was a range of domestic ware made by their son, Jonathan. Clever parents! We bought it all, ostensibly for the gallery, but most ended up at home. There were echoes of the late 19th Century Wedgwood cream-ware catalogues that Jonathan mentions as inspiration but also the influence of both parents in the fine throwing, attention to detail and thin runny glazes that express and enhance the simple classic shapes. We have used the bowls every day since; a testament to their making.

It has been interesting to watch the developments in Jonathan's work since. He has found his own voice with the 'animals'. They have allowed him to exploit his undoubted modelling abilities and marry his interest in glazes exemplified by the Tang style horses where very fluid earthenware glaze is sprayed carefully over the biscuit fired body onto which thicker glazes and oxides are randomly applied. Fired again, this creates a luscious dripping and depth of colour that perfectly illuminates their

form. The single piece of ceramics in our collection that everyone comments on is our horse.

We bought a pig, 'Pascal', over a decade ago for the garden. He is a cross breed with recognisable piggy features but with cartoon inclinations. He has particularly large ears and tiny trotters. Over time, the realism and size of the pigs, bulls, sheep and chickens has increased. They have become more idiosyncratic with distinct personalities to match. Humour is still an important ingredient. Our two larger than life chickens with attitude are in permanent 'stand-off' amongst the flowers. And we have a near full size sheep leaning under a cherry tree gazing beguilingly upwards. Jonathan emulates the various textures and surfaces of the animals by experimenting with glazes, oxides and tools finding modelling equivalents. The dense unglazed 'woo' looks typically sheep-like and mucky!

Jonathan describes his methods of construction as 'simple', starting 'from the bottom' and working his way up. However, the journey will not have been without setbacks. The failure rate in the early days must have been quite high as he wrestled with the problem of a large body mass atop slim legs. The sheer size and weight of his enterprise

Jonathan Barrett-Danes
Untitled
Tall Jar
Stoneware with Salt Glaze Decoration
Bristol, 1985



meant pushing against the material's limits. He uses a 'reliable' white stoneware clay which is able to withstand the variable thickness of the work during firing, devising means by which the legs are allowed to dry just enough to take the further weight, building these onto a base that can be sunk in the ground to give greater stability. Jonathan relishes problem solving and is not afraid of hard work. He seems intent on pursuing the Barrett-Danes tradition with outcomes that have become more challenging and daring... And make you smile.

Left to Right:
Jonathan Barrett-Danes
Untitled
Lidded Soup Cups
Stoneware with Oxidised Glaze (To simulate Salt Glaze effect)
Abergavenny, 1992

Jonathan Barrett-Danes
Untitled
Horse
Earthenware
Liss, Hampshire, 2008



Alan Barrett-Danes
Untitled
Tenmoku Pot
Stoneware
Cardiff 1970



Alan Barrett-Danes
Untitled
Tenmoku Flared Pot
Stoneware
Cardiff 1969-70



Alan & Ruth Barrett-Danes
Fungi Form with Frogs
Porcelain
Abergavenny 1975

Alan Barrett-Danes
Bird Jugs
Raku/ Raku Clay
Abergavenny 1988-90



Alan & Ruth Barrett-Danes
Predator Pot
Porcelain
Abergavenny 1977





Alan & Ruth Barrett-Danes
Mad March Hare
Red Earthenware
Abergavenny 1992-2003



Alan & Ruth Barrett-Danes
Chasing Birds
Red Earthenware
Abergavenny 1992-2003

Alan & Ruth Barrett-Danes
Animal Vessels
Porcelain
Abergavenny 1983-84



Ruth Barrett-Danes
Innocence Goes For a Ride
Porcelain
Abergavenny 1989



Jonathan Barrett-Danes
Untitled
Horse
Earthenware
Liss, Hampshire, 2008



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Right:
Alan & Ruth Barrett-Danes
Figure Bowl
Porcelain
Abergavenny 1977-78

