



C E R A M I C  
S E R I E S •

**Bennett Cooper**

**Aberystwyth Arts Centre**



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# Bennett Cooper

Benn Cooper is not your average Essex man. To start with he is quick to point out that he lives, literally, on the very edge of the county, occupying a three hundred year old workshop on the edge of the Suffolk Stour, a broad flow of water edged by industry and port life. Neither does Cooper hail from Essex. Born near Liverpool, his parents moved to this part of the county when he was nine, and he has more or less stayed ever since. His pottery, in a pretty building reputed to have been painted by Constable, evokes the flavour of the area, an intriguing blend of the old and picturesque and the highly mechanised and modern industries of port activity.

There are much the same sort of qualities in Cooper's ceramics. His handsome fish dishes, baking vessels, bowls, jugs and tea sets, have a strong relationship with tradition, but are essentially modern in feel, their simple, unfussy shapes well-complemented by the richness of the painted decoration. The pots themselves, whether thrown on the wheel or made by laying extruded cylinders into press-moulds, are a combination of the functional and the decorative. The recent acquisition of a Dragon extruding machine and the possibilities it offers, with its ingenious use of low technology, is proving to be highly successful in simplifying making processes and opening up new possibilities. But one of the most characteristic aspects of Cooper's pots is their painted decoration - a challenge he longed to take on for many years before having the nerve to paint his first fish on a pot and find that, much to his delight, customers liked it. Demand has continued ever since.

At art school, Cooper was undecided whether to opt for textile design or pottery, but having got his hands on clay he decided that that was his metier. Interviews at West Surrey College of Art and Design at Farnham and Hornsey School of Art proved instructive. At Farnham, when he said that some of his favourite pots were Japanese Oribe ware. Henry Hammond dismissed his choice as, 'nothing more than seventeenth century pop art'. Cooper opted for Hornsey, at that time, in the early 1970's, becoming part of Middlesex Polytechnic. The ceramic department had just moved into lavish, purpose built premises with virtually every facility available. For Cooper, it also seemed to offer

a more exciting and challenging staff. Here Cooper made oxidised stoneware on a smooth-firing white body, some decorated with screen printed images in platinum - 'colleges were relatively well-off in those days', he observed. The feel and decorative qualities of the work reflected his own love of the watercolours he painted in his spare time.

The Royal College of Art followed, and Cooper still debates whether the three years he spent there were worthwhile. For much of the first year, while recovering from an injury sustained in a road accident, he was unable to handle clay, but spent the time researching William de Morgan's lustre recipes, producing with the help of a technical lecturer Joe Shipley some fine if elusive results. 'One day I'm going to use those on my pots', he says. For Cooper, the problem was that as a studio potter he felt he never fitted in. 'I fell between two stools, being neither an industrial designer nor an art potter. David Queensberry seemed to have little feeling for my work, and my tutor, Eduardo Paolozzi, though a great inspiration, had little to say about my reduction-fired stoneware'. Mick Casson was brought in to offer advice, but it was not an atmosphere conducive to the slow pace of throwing tableware on the potters' wheel.

The big break came with the Queen's Jubilee in 1977. Inspired by the handsome slip-trailed chargers of Thomas Toft, often decorated with commemorative designs, Cooper collaborated with Clive Higginbottom to produce dishes in the Toft style portraying the Queen on the balcony of Buckingham Palace waving to the crowd. Prince Charles gave the pots his approval, and with the profit from these jokey, tongue in cheek plates, Cooper was able to spend the year following college without any financial worries.

Attracted by the idea of urban potting, Cooper took a workspace, little more than 6' by 12', at 4011/2 workshop in Wandsworth Road, making earthenware with slip-trailed designs. However, the studio proved too small for practical production, and Cooper soon discovered that the hot-house atmosphere of London was not for him, and he moved to Essex, teaching at Southend School of Art two or three days a week. Eventually he found the building on Mistley Quay, and he together with two musical instrument makers and a furniture maker, set up the Mistley Quay Workshop. A tea shop was opened in part of the building, a new roof was added, and ten years ago they bought the freehold, in a venture which has proved to be financially and artistically viable.

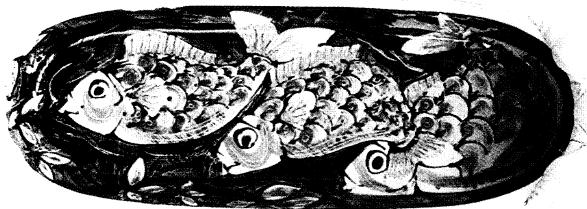
For Cooper it is an ideal spot. Here he can gaze into the diving and ducking swans, admire the passing ships, and, up river, even moor his own small craft. On good days he can slope off to do a day's fishing, an interest made evident in

the books in his workshop, where Leach's *A Potter's Book* jostles with *The Art of Salmon Fishing*, *Freshwater Fishes* and *Sea and Shore Birds*. The workshop on the first floor has magnificent views across the water, and houses the main making area. On the day I visited, through the glass some twenty inches across, sat slowly drying, a tile panel was in the process of being painted, while long narrow dishes waited to be decorated with characteristic Cooper fish designs. Downstairs is a 36" cube top-loading kiln built by Cooper thirteen years ago to Robert Fournier's design and has proved to be economical, efficient and practical. Cooper's clay body, a combination of red earthenware and fireclay, plus a little sand for cooking pots, is prepared in an old dough mixer which stands next to a table holding the moulds for his dishes. The body itself matures at 1160 C into a strong, medium dark red which looks good on unglazed areas.

A white slip serves as the base for decoration. This, he says, enables him to re-enact the process of water-colour painting, for some of the applied pigment burns away slightly to leave translucent washes of colour which add depth to the design. Patterns are built up with slip and pigment. Trailed lines of slip first create the design, then further slip is applied with sponge or brush. Pigments, often the same colour, are then put over the top of the slips to ensure a rich tonal range. Finally, the surface is sgraffitoed to add life and movement. A glossy, lead based glaze brings out the colours and produces a practical surface. The designs themselves are derived from nature. Juicy fat fish seem to swim effortlessly across the surface of dishes, while the sides of jugs are adorned with huge growing bunches of fox gloves and other flowers. A deep ultramarine background gives the work added richness, intensifying the colours used.

Benn Cooper is one of those rare creatures, a full-time potter. Teaching was abandoned in favour of potting some years ago, and to be financially viable Cooper decided that 'you have to make a range of functional ware'. A catalogue was put together and sent to craft shops and galleries round the country, and slowly orders came in. Acceptance as a Fellow of the Craft Potters Association proved a significant recognition, and now a happy compromise has been struck between making an established range of table and kitchen wares and one-off pieces for exhibition or to serve as a catalyst for new work. 'I am', says Cooper, 'a slow developer, it took me ten years to develop my fish designs, but at some point I'm going to experiment with the reduction-fired lustres, and put that on my pots. If that takes a further ten years they will be pots well worth waiting for.'

## Emmanuel Cooper



'Large Fish Dish' 24 inches x 10 inches



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C Y F R E S O

G E R A M E G

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IONAWR rhif 87

# Bennett Cooper

Nid un o ddynion traddodiadol Swydd Essex mo Benn Cooper. I ddechrau, fel y dywed o'i hun wrthych chi'n ddigon buan, byw ar ymyl eithaf y sir y mae o, mewn gweithdy trichanmlwydd oed ar lan y Stour - afon lydan â bwrlwm diwydiant a phorthladd ar hyd ei glannau. Nid yw Cooper yn hanner o Swydd Essex chwaith. Fe'i ganed yn Lerpwl, ond symudodd ei rieni i'r sir honno pan oedd o'n naw oed ac yn fan honno y buodd o, fwy na heb, ers hynny. Mae'i grochendy, adeilad tlws yr honnor iddo ymddangos mewn llun gan Constable, yn cynnal naws yr holl ardal - cymysgedd diddorol o'r hen a'r tlws â'r gweithgaredd modern, mecanyddol y porthladd.

Digon tebyg yw nodweddion gwaith cerameg Cooper. Mae perthynas agos gan y dysglau pysgod, llestri pobi, powlenni, siwgiau a llestri te hardd â'r traddodiadol, ond teimlad modern sydd iddynt. Mae eu siapiau syml, di-lol yn cael eu cyfannu'n wych iawn gan gyfoeth yr addurniadau peintiedig. Cyfuniad o'r hyn y gellir ei ddefnyddio a'r addurniadol yw'r potiau, p'un ai ydyn nhw wedi'u taflu ar y droell, neu wedi'u gwneud drwy osod silindrau allwythiedig i'w gwasgu mewn mowld. Mae'r peiriant allwthio Dragon a gafwyd yn ddiweddar, gyda'i holl bosibiliadau a'i ddefnydd clyfar o is-dechnoleg, yn ei brofi'i hun yn hynod lwyddiannus wrth symleiddio'r gwahanol brosesau ac wrth agor posibiliadau newydd. Ond un o'r agweddau mwyaf nodwediadol ar botiau Cooper yw'u haddurniadau peintiedig. Cymerodd hi ddeng mlynedd ar hugain cyn iddo fagu digon o blwc i gwrdd â'r her a pheintio'i bysgodyn cyntaf, a darganfod, er mawr difyrwch fod cwsmeriaid wrth eu boddau hefo fo. Bu'r gofyn yn ddi-baid ers hynny.

Yn yr ysgol gelf, bu Cooper rhwng dau feddwl p'un ai dewis cynllunio tecstiliau neu grochenwaith, ond wedi iddo gael ei ddwylo ar y clai, penderfynodd mai dyna fyddai'i grefft. Bu cyfweliadau yng Ngholeg Celf a Dylunio yn Swydd Surrey, yn Farnham ac Ysgol Gelf Hornsey yn ddefnyddiol. Yn Farnham, pan soniodd mai llestri Oribe Siapan oedd rhai o'i hoff botiau, dyma Henry Hammond yn wffio'i ddewis fel "dim byd amgenach na chelf bop yr ail ganrif ar bymtheg". Hornsey oedd dewis Cooper, a oedd, yr adeg honno, yn gynnar yn y 1970au, yn dod yn rhan o bolytechnig Swydd Middlesex.

Roedd yr adran gerameg newydd symud i adeilad pwrsol, gwych, gyda bron pob cyfleustra ar gael. I Cooper, roedd hefyd yn cynnig her llawer iawn mwy cyffrous. Yma, bu wrthi'n gwneud llestri caled wedi'u hocsideiddio ar gorff gwyn, rhai addurniadau mewn platinwm gyda delweddau wedi'u printio ar sgrin. - "Roedd y colegau'n gymharol gyfoethog yr adeg honno," yn ôl Cooper. Roedd teimlad a phriodweddau addurniadol ei waith yn adlewyrchu ei gariad yntau tuag at y dyfrliwiau y byddai'n peintio â nhw yn ei amser hamdden.

Ar ôl hynny, aeth i'r Coleg Celf Brenhinol, ac mae Cooper yn dal i ddadlau a oedd y tair blynedd y treuliodd yn y fan honno o unrhyw werth. Yn ystod y rhan fwyaf o'i flwyddyn olaf yno, tra y bu'n gwella o anaf a gafwyd mewn damwain ffordd, ni allodd drafod y clai, ond treuliodd ei amser yn ymchwilio rysaids gloywedd William de Morgan gan gynhyrchu, gyda chymorth y darlithydd technoleg, Joe Shipley, rai canlyniadau eithaf llwyddiannus os braidd yn annelwig. "Ryw ddiwrnod, dwi am ddefnyddio'r rheina ar fy mhotiau," meddai. Problem Cooper oedd nad oedd yn teimlo ei fod yn ffotio i mewn fel crochenydd stiwdio. "Roeddwn i'n cloff i rhwng dwy stôl gan nad oeddwn i nac yn ddylunydd diwydiannol na chrochenydd celf. Nid oedd fel pe bai gan Stephen Queensberry fawr o deimlad tuag at fy ngwaith, ac er bod fy nhiwtor, Edward Paloi'n dipyn o ysbyrdoliaeth, nid oedd ganddo yntau fawr i'w ddweud am fy llestri caled wedi'u taniad lleiahol."

Daethpwyd â Mick Casson i mewn i gynnig cyngor, ond nid oedd yr awyrgylch yn addas ar gyfer y broses araf o daflu llestri bwrdd ar y droell.

Cafwyd y cyfre mawr gyda Jiwbil'r Frenhines ym 1977 wedi'i ysbyrdoli gan waith llwybro slip hardd Thomas Toll, a oedd yn aml wedi'u harddurno gyda chynlluniau coffaoal, dyma Cooper ar y cyd â Clive Higginbottom yn mynd ati i gynhyrchu dysglau yn null Toll gan bortreadu'r Frenhines ar falconi Plas Buckingham yn codi llaw ar y dorf. Derbyniodd y potiau sêl bendith y Tywysog Charles a chyda'r elw o werthu'r platiau smala yma, galloedd Cooper dreulio'r flwyddyn ar ôl gadael y coleg heb unrhyw waith cyflogedig. Wedi'i ddenu gan y syniad o grochenwaith trefol, dyma Cooper yn cymryd lle i weithio, fawr ddim yn fwy na 6' wrth 12' yng ngweithdy 1011/2 ar Ffordd Wandsworth, lle y bu'n gwneud llestri pridd gydag addurniadau llwybro slip. Fodd bynnag, roedd y stiwdio'n rhy fach at ddibenion cynhyrchu ymarferol, ac yn fuan iawn, darganfu Cooper nad oedd

awyrgylch prysur Llundain yn dygymod ag o. a symudodd i Essex gan ddysgu yn Ysgol Gelf Southend am ddiwrnod neu ddau bob wythnos. Yn y diwedd, cafodd hyd i'r adeilad ar Gei Mistley lle, yng nghwmni dau wneuthurwr offerynnau cerdd a saer dodrefn, y sefydlodd Gweithdy Cei Mistley. Agorwyd caffi yn rhan o'r adeilad, ychwanegwyd to newydd, a deng mlynedd yn ôl, dyma nhw'n prynu'r brydles ar fenter sydd wedi'i phrofi'n un gynhaliol yn ariannol ac yn gelfyddydol.

Dyma fangre ddelfrydol i Cooper. Fan hyn, gall syllu ar yr eleirch yn dowcio, edmygu'r llongau wrth iddynt fynd heibio a hyd yn oed mwriad i'w gwch bach ei hun ymhellach i fyny'r afon. Ar ddiwrnodau braf, gall sleifio o'r gweithdy i bysgota, diddordeb a amlygir gan y llyfrau a geir yn y gweithdy, lle y mae A Potter's Book gan Leach i'w weld ochr yn ochr â The Art of Salmon Fishing, Freshwater Fish a Sea and Shore Birds. O'r gweithdy ar y llawr cyntaf, ceir golygfeydd diguro ar draws y dŵr a dyma lle mae rhan fwya'r gwaith creu'n digwydd. Ar y diwrnod y bûm i'n ymweld ag o, roedd 'na bowlenni wedi'u taflu, ryw ugain modfedd ar draws, yn sychu'n ara' deg, panel yn cael ei beintio, tra oedd yna ddysglau hirgul yn aros cael eu harddurno gyda dyluniau pysgod nodweddiadol Cooper. I lawr grisiau, ceir odyn 36" ciwb a lwythir o'r top a adeiladwyd gan Cooper dair blynedd ar ddeg yn ôl ar sail cynllun Robert Fournier, ac mae wedi profi'n economaidd, effeithiol ac ymarferol. Bydd corff clai Cooper, cyfuniad o bridd coch a chlai tanio ynghyd ag ychydig dywod ar gyfer potiau coginio. Bydd y corff ei hun yn aeddafedu ar 1160 C yn gyfrwng cryf, coch tywyll, sy'n edrych yn wych ar fannau sydd wedi'u gwydro.

Slip gwyn yw cysail y gwaith addurno. Yn ôl Cooper, mae hyn ei alluogi i ailgreu'r broses o beintio a dyfriwiau, gan fod peth o'r pi gment a ddefnyddir yn llosgi ymaith ryw ycnydig gan adael golchiadau lliw, tryloyw sy'n rhoi trwch i'r cynlluniau. Bydd y patrymau'n cael eu hadeiladau gyda slip a phigment. Llinellau wedi'u llwybro o slip sy'n y cynllun i ddechrau, yna, defnyddir rhagor o slip gyda sbwng neu frwsh. Yna, rhoddir pigmentau, yn aml o'r un lliw, dros y slipiau er mwyn sicrhau amrediad tonaid cyfoethog. Yn olaf, bydd yr wyneb yn cael ei sgraffinio er mwyn ychwanegu bywyd a symudiad. Mae gloywedd sgleiniog wedi'i seilio ar blwm yn helpu i amlygur lliwiau gan greu arwyneb ymarferol. Deillia'r cynlluniau eu hunain o natur. Ymddengys pysgod mawr, tewion fel pe baent yn nofio'n ddiyndrech ar draws arwyneb y dysglau, tra bydd ochrau'r siwgiau'n cael eu haddurno â phwysi mawr o glatsh-y-cwâñ a blodau eraill. Rhydd cefndir



'Cups and Saucers' approx 1/2 pint

uwchfarân tywyll gyfoeth ychwanegol i'r gwaith, gan ddwysau'r lliwiau a ddefnyddir.

Aderyn prin yw Benn Cooper - crochenydd llawn-amser. Rhoddwyd y gorau i'r dysgu ar draul crochenwaith ychydig flynyddoedd yn ôl, ac er mwyn bod yn gynhaliol yn ariannol, penderfynodd Cooper fod yn rhaid i chi wneud amrediad o lestri y gellir eu defnyddio. Rhoddwyd catalog at ei gilydd ac fe'i danfonwyd at siopau crefft ac orielau o gwmpas y wlad, ac, yn ara' deg, daeth yr archebion. Bu cael ei dderbyn yn Gymrodor o Gymdeithas y Crochenwyr Crefft yn gydnabyddiaeth bwysig, ac, erbyn hyn, trawyd ar gyfaddawd dedwydd rhwng gwneud amrediad sefydledig o lestri cegin a bwrdd ac ambell eitem unigol ar gyfer arddangosfeydd neu fel catalyddion ar gyfer gwaith newydd. Yn ôl Cooper, datblygu'n ara' fydd o. "Mi gymerais i ddeng mlynedd i ddatblygu cynllun y pysgod, ond, ryw dro, dwi am arbrofi gyda'r gloyweddau tanio lleiau a'u rhoi ar fy mhotiau." Os bydd hyn'n a'n cymryd deng mlynedd arall, wedyn, mi fydden nhw'n potiau gwerth aros amdanynt.

### **Emmanuel Cooper.**