

ABERYSTWYTH ARTS CENTRE

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# CERAMIC SERIES

MICHAEL FLYNN

by Paul Greenhalgh



"Night" 1992 (Raku)

I think that Michael Flynn's work has two main driving forces behind it. These are the European traditions of sculpture and literature. Specific debts and references flow from these. I stress European, in that whilst the medium at the core of his practice is Raku, an Oriental invention, the essence of the form and iconography wells out of the European mainland. I use the word tradition deliberately also, and wish it to indicate the long memory of the individual pieces, rather than a term which provides the opposite to 'original' or 'innovative'. Flynn's work is original and innovative whilst being traditional.

I think the aim of his work, and again I sound tentative because he has never actually confirmed this to me, is to take the emotions which result from our day-to-day lives, the jealousies, lusts, joys and sadnesses, and to pump them up onto a larger stage. Through the use of iconography, classical and religious symbolism, and through the transformation of the specific into the general, he attempts to say something about feelings which has wide and deep cultural resonance. Thus he has the same approach as many hundreds of artists over the past five centuries, but we must be clear that there are alternative approaches which are just as common. Indeed, these are at present in the ascendent. Historicism and eclecticism, or post-modernism as we collectively call these,



Crow 1992 Raku

eschew the emotions as a starting point. Realists achieve their power through specificity, without recourse to the general; abstractionists, on the other hand, achieve theirs by avoiding specificity at every juncture.

Flynn's reputation as a maker rests mainly on a prolonged period of work in which the modelling is dominated by flowing, dramatic movement. Groups of figures and animals run and dance their way through space, held together by invisible compositional lines that have been the ploy of a certain kind of painter from Tintoretto through to Lautrec. But perhaps it is the last stages of the Baroque, where the French, Germans and Italians begin to creep into the strange *politesse* of the Rococo, that Flynn's work is most in sympathy with. The raucousness of Boucher, the gnawing sadness of Watteau, the sheer sexuality of Fragonard, the height and elegance of Tiepolo. This was the age of swirling architecture, where the oval replaced the circle and where one artform spilled into another with ease and arrogance. It was also the great age of the figurine. Whilst in one sense the rough surfaces of Flynn's work seem to be a universe away from the hard-paste smoothness of Meissen, the scale, modelling and gestures of the great porcelain figures of the eighteenth century have made their mark on his practice. He is part of the continuing tradition of small scale sculpture in clay which has become one of Europe's greatest genres. A key subject of that period, the *Comedia Dell'Arte*, also seems to me to have a strange kind of relevance to Flynn. So much of what he does plays on the pathos and sadness which underlies comedy.

The clay appears to be pushed and pulled at speed and at times it seems to know where it is going before it gets there; the artist playing Sorcerer's Apprentice to the interminable insistence of his clay, which is the broomsticks. Yet all this frenzied action results in a peculiar kind of stasis. It is perhaps best described as a kind of classical



Without a Shadow 1991 (Stoneware)

impressionism, if such a thing is imaginable.

Then there is literature I can confirm, as one who has supped with him often, that the artist is never short of quotations from his favourite contemporary writers. Czechoslovakia, I recall, provides recent favourites, which is peculiarly appropriate to the current mood of his work. The tragic-comedy which typifies say, Milan Kundera, the sense of history — or lost history — that haunts his and other Mid-European writer's work, is everywhere in Flynn. It is very much a Shakespearian sense of life; a crashing together of gains and losses, of trivia and profundity, a seamless fusion of dirty jokes and heartfelt prayers.

He is well travelled. He spent a lot of his youth in Germany, has recently been in France, Hungary and Holland, and is hoping to cast bronze in Poland. All this adds to his obvious ease with the European context, for which his Irish roots prepare him well. There is a sizeable list of Irish artists who, on leaving home, have aimed for the heart of Europe. Catholicism frequently leads to cosmopolitanism.

It would be a mistake to think that the literary aspect means that the objects somehow illustrate stories, or illuminate anecdotes. Rather, they are literary in the sense that they are deeply representational, and so are designed to be read. I wouldn't want to underplay the dynamism of the forms, but perhaps "reading" is as good a word as "looking" in this context. There is a tremendous feeling of *aboutness* in the objects, not so much because each individual piece has a story to tell, but rather because the whole oeuvre has at its core a set of intentions.

The last few years has seen a shift in his work, which gets more pronounced as time goes on. He has on an increasing basis eliminated the movement which has been his hallmark and has worked in a more static, monumental style. His compositions with large, brutal (and brutalised) heads, his isolated figures, and especially his large scale commissions, have exuded an immobile solidity. He has experimented with forms which those who do not know him would think were abstract compositions. In fact they are representational, using a mixture of images, doors, weapons, traps, to create Kafkaesque centre-pieces. Perhaps all this has something to do with the times we are in. The atmosphere is millennial, and so, correspondingly, is his work. Artists who work with an agenda like Flynn's usually absorb rather than observe, the tensions of his times entering into his work as a mood rather than a statement.

The work rolls on; this exhibition is a snap-shot of how the artist looks at this time. And as a snap-shot, it is a daunting glimpse at the extent of his achievement.



"The Power of Music" 1992 (Raku)



Michael Flynn with 'Fighting Cock' 1990

Photo: Paul Constant

# GYFRES GERAMEG

MICHAEL FLYNN

gan Paul Greenhalgh



*'Fallen Leaf'* Crochenwaith caled 1991

**C**redaf fod dau brif rym yn ysgogi gwaith Michael Flynn. Traddodiadau Ewropeaidd cerflunwaith a llenyddiaeth yw'r rheini. Mae dyledion a chyfeiriadaeth benodol yn tarddu ohonynt. Rwy'n pwysleisio'r gair Ewropeaidd oherwydd er mai'r cyfrwng sydd wrth graidd ei waith yw Raku, sy'n ddfais ddwyreiniol, mae hanfod y ffurf a'r iconograffiaeth yn deillio o dir mawr Ewrop. Rwyf hefyd yn defnyddio'r gair traddodiadol yn fwriadol, ac rwyf am iddo gyfleo cof hir yr eitemau unigol, yn hytrach na bod yn derm sy'n golygu'r gwrtwyneb i 'gwreiddiol' neu 'rywbeth sy'n torri tir newydd'. Mae gwaith Flynn yn 'wreiddiol' ac 'yn torri tir newydd' ac yn draddodiadol ar yr un pryd.

Rwyf o'r farn mai nod ei waith, ac unwaith eto rwy'n swnio'n betrus gan nad yw erioed wedi cadarnhau hynny wrthyf, yw cymryd yr emosiynau sy'n codi o'n bywydau beunyddiol, y configennu, y trachwantu, y llawenhau a'r tristu, a'u chwyddo ar lwyfan ehangach. Drwy ddefnyddio iconograffiaeth, symboliaeth grefyddol a chlasurol, a thrwy drawsffurfio'r penodol i'r cyffredinol, mae'n ceisio dweud rhywbeth am deimladau y mae iddynt adleisiau diwylliannol eang a dwfn. Yr un felly yw ei ffordd o fynd ynglŷn â'i waith â channoedd o artistiaid yn ystod y pum canrif ddiwethaf, ond mae'n rhaid i ni gofio bod yna ddulliau eraill sydd yr un mor gyffredin. Yn wir, y rhai hynny sydd fwyaf amlwg ar hyn o bryd. Mae hanesiaeth ac eclectiaeth, neu bost-foderniaeth fel y cyfeiriwn atynt ar y cyd, yn gochel defnyddio'r emosiynau yn fan cychwyn. Mae'r realwyr yn ennill eu grym drwy fod yn sbesiffig, heb wneud defnydd o'r cyffredinol; ar y llaw arall mae'r haniaethwyr yn ennill eu grym hwy drwy osgoi'r sbesiffig ar bob achlysur.

Mae'r enw a enilloedd Flynn fel lluniwr yn dibynnu gan mwyaf ar gyfnod hir o waith lle mae'r modelu yn cael ei ddominyddu gan symudiad llifeiriol, dramatig. Ceir grwpiau o ffigurau ac anifeiliaid yn cydrededig mewn gofod a'r rheini wedi eu cyslltu â'i gilydd gan linellau cyfansoddiadol anweledig fel y rhai a fu'n rhan o dechneg un math arbennig o beintiwr o Tintoretto hyd Lautrec. Ond efallai mai â chyfnodau olaf y Baroque, lle mae'r Ffrancwyr, yr Almaenwyr a'r Eidalwyr yn dechrau cropian i gyfeiriad politesse rhyfedd y Rococo, y mae gwaith Flynn yn fwyaf cydnaws. Gerwinder cras Boucher, tristwch ingol



'Without a Shadow' (Crochenwaith caled) 1991

o stasis. Efallai mai'r ffordd orau i'w ddisgrifio fyddai fel math o argraffiadaeth glasurol, os gellir dychmygu'r fath beth.

A dyna lenyddiaeth wedyn. Gallaf gadarnhau, fel un sydd wedi mwynhau aml i lymaid yn ei gwmni, nad yw'r artist hwn byth yn brin o ddyfyniadau o waith ei hoff awduron cyfoes. O Tsiecoslofacia, rwy'n cofio, y daw'r ffefrynnau diweddaraf, ac mae hynny'n rhyfedd o addas i naws bresennol ei waith. Mae'r trasigomedi sy'n nodweddu Milan Kundera, er enghraift, yr ymdeimlad o hanes - neu hanes coll - sy'n ymthio i'w waith ef ac awduron eraill o ganolbarth Ewrop, i'w ganfod ymhobman yng ngwaith Flynn. Rhyw ymdeimlad hynod Shakesperaidd o fywyd ydyw; colli ac ennill, y dwys a'r dibwys, uniad di-wniad o gellwair anllad a gweddiau diffuant, a'r cyfan wedi eu hyrddio ynghyd.

Mae wedi teithio'n eang. Treuliodd grym lawer o'i lencyndod yn yr Almaen, bu yn Ffrainc, Hwngari a'r Isalmaen yn ddiweddar, ac mae'n gobeithio mynd i Wlad Pwyl i gasto efydd. Mae hyn i gyd yn cyfrannu at y ffaith ei fod mor amlwg gartrefol yn y cyd-destun Ewropeaidd, ac mae ei wreiddiau Gwyddelig wedi bod yn baratoad da at hynny. Mae cryn restr o artistiaid Gwyddelig sydd, ar ôl gadael cartref, wedi anelu'n syth at galon Ewrop. Mae Catholigaeth yn aml yn arwain at gosmopolitaniaeth.

Camgymeriad fyddai tybio fod yr agwedd lenyddol yn golygu fod y gwrthrychau yn darlunio storïau neu'n taflu goleuni ar haneson mewn rhyw fod. Maent yn hytrach yn llenyddol yn yr ystyr eu bod yn gwbl gynrychiadus ac felly maent wedi eu bwriadu i gael eu darllen. Hoffwn i ddim dibrisio nerth dynamig y ffurflau, ond dichon fod 'darllen' yn gystal gair ag 'edrych' yn y cyd-destun hwn. Mae rhyw deimlad cryf iawn o fod 'yn ymwneud â rhywbeth' yn perthyn i'r gwrthrychau, a hynny nid yn gymaint am fod gan bob eitem unigol storï i'w hadrodd, ond yn hytrach am fod casgliad o fwriadau wrth hagraidd yr holl beth.

Yn ystod yr ychydig flynyddoedd diwethaf gwelwyd newid yn ei waith, ac mae'r newid hwnnw'n dod yn fwy amlwg o hyd. Mae wedi cynyddol ddileu'r symud sydd wedi bod yn nodwedd mor amlwg o'i waith ac wedi gweithio mewn arddull fwy statig a swmpus. Mae ei greadigaethau gyda'u pennau erchyll (a doluriedig), ei ffigurau neilltuedig, ac yn arbennig ei gomisiynau ar raddfa fawr, wedi bod yn gyforio o soletrwydd disyfl. Mae wedi arbrofi gyda ffurflau y byddai'r sawl sydd ddim yn ei adnabod yn credu mai cyfansoddiadau haniaethol ydynt. Mewn gwirionedd rhai cynrychioladol ydynt, ac yn defnyddio cymysgedd o ddelweddau, drysau, arfau, trapiau,

Watteau, rhywioldeb pur Fragonard ac uchelder a choethder Tiepolo. Dyma oes y bensaerniaeth droellog lle cymeryd lle'r cylch gan yr hirgrwn a lle roedd un ffurf ar gelfyddyd yn llifo i mewn i'r llall yn hyderus ac yn drahaus. Dyma hefyd oes fawr y mân gerfluniau. Tra'i bod yn ymddangos ar un ystyr bod arwynebau garw gwaith Flynn fil o filltiroedd oddi wrth lyfnder past caled Meissen, mae graddfa, modelu ac ystum ffigurau porslen gwyth y ddeunawfed ganrif wedi gadael eu hôl ar ei ddull o weithio. Mae ef yn rhan o'r traddodiad parhaol o gerflunio clai ar raddfa fechan sydd wedi dod yn uno brif genres Ewrop. Mae'n ymddangos i mi yn ogystal fod gan un o bynciau allweddol y cyfnod hwnnw, y Comedia Dell'Arte ryw fath o berthnasedd rhyfedd i Flynn. Mae cymaint o'r hyn y mae'n ei wneud yn chwarae ar y pathos a'r tristwch sy'n sail i gomedu.

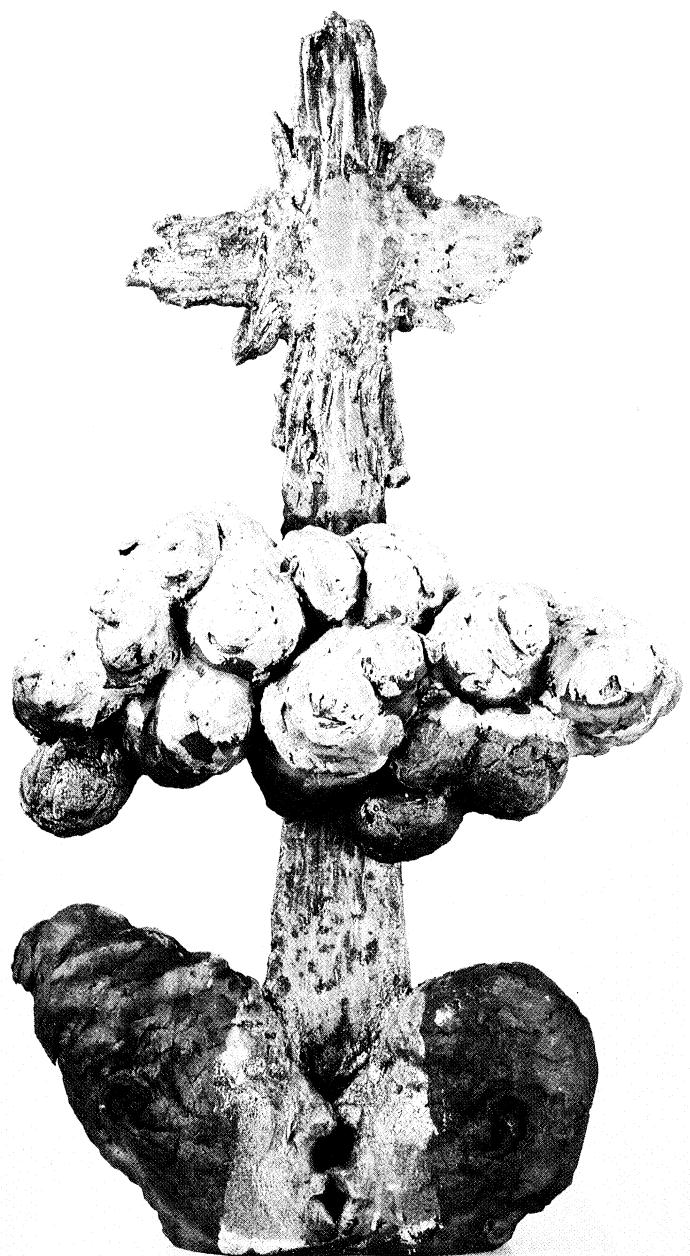
Ymddengys fod y clai wedi ei wthio a'i dynnu'n gyflym ac ar brydiau mae fel pe bai'n gwybod i ble mae'n mynd cyn iddo gyrraedd; yr artist yn chwarae rhan Gwas y Dewin yn ôl cymhelliad di-baid ei gyfrwng, y clai. Ac eto mae'r holl brysurdeb gwyllt yn arwain at ryw fath hynod



'Controlling the 4 Winds' 1991 (Crochenwaith caled)

i greu canolbwytiau Kafkaesg. Dichon fod a wnelo hyn rywbeth â'r oes rydyn ni'n byw ynnddi. Mae'r awyrgylch yn filflwyddiannol ac felly mae ei waith yntau yn cyfateb i hynny. Mae artistiaid sy'n gweithio gydag agenda fel un Flynn fel arfer yn derbyn pethau yn hytrach na dim ond sylwi arnynt, mae tensiynau ei oes yn dod i mewn i'w waith fel ymdeimlad yn hytrach nag fel gosodiad.

Mae'r gwaith ym mynd rhagddo; braslun o'r ffordd mae'r artist yn ymddangos ar hyn o bryd yw'r arddangosfa hon. Ac fel braslun, mae'n gipolwg syfrdanol ar faint ei gyrhaeddiad.



'Sunlight & Shadow' 1991 (Raku)