

# Ceramic Series

ABERYSTWYTH ARTS CENTRE No. 34

MIKE FRANCIS by David Briers



**M**ike Francis only decided that he wanted to be a full-time potter at a relatively late stage of his life, after he had already completed his training as a fine artist. This is not to say that his attraction to ceramics came completely out of the blue, for more than an inkling of such interests had been raised by the proximity of the painting studios at the Royal College of Art, where he was a student, to the stimulating treasure troves of the V & A, not to mention the fascinations of the Geological Museum. When he set up his first small studio in a shed in his garden in Cambridgeshire, he had already begun to make some pottery as well as abstract paintings.

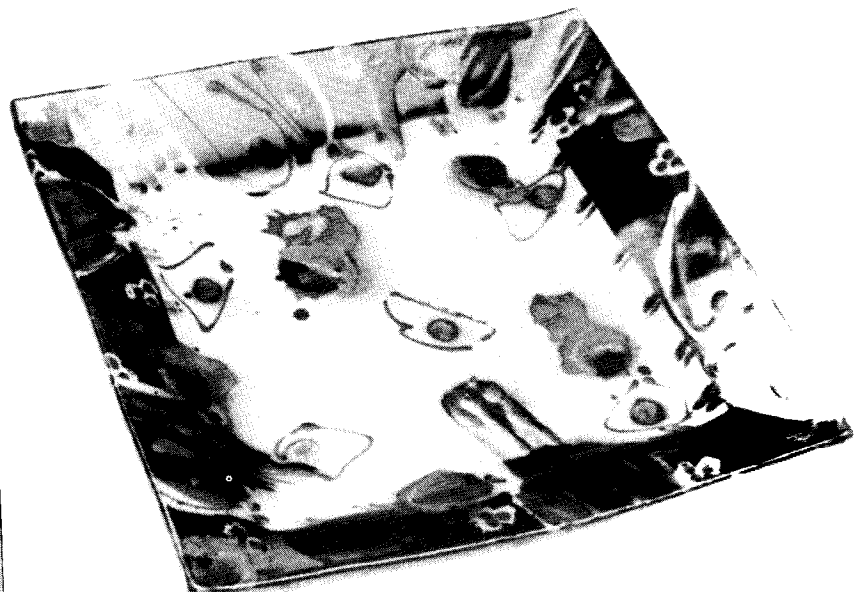
It was not until 1981, however, after he had been troubled for some time by his encounters with the enclosed world of contemporary art elitism, that he saw clearly what his future was to hold, and returning from a visit to the United States he suddenly and decisively made his mind up to give up painting and become a full-time potter. He still sometimes feels that it was rather audacious to establish himself as such without any specialised training whatsoever, though his reservations are clearly completely unfounded. To cut a long story short, the increasing success of the pottery run by Mike and his wife Carol Francis made voracious demands upon space and required a new home. After much searching, including several exploratory visits to Wales, they have settled happily in a farmhouse at the village of Llanfyrnach in North Pembrokeshire.

Mike Francis makes contemporary decorated domestic ware, comprising a range of requisites such as jugs, bowls, teapots, casseroles, serving dishes, storage jars, and the like. They are priced low enough not to make you afraid to use them, but each item is entirely handmade, so that two teapots may have the same basic form with detailed differences of emphasis, for example, though they are quite likely to have completely different sorts of decoration.

That is quite enough unpredictability to have 'built into' his working process, Franics says, and so he chooses to work with a commercial white body clay which is stable and consistent. A basic shape is usually thrown on the wheel, then altered or added to in various ways to make a fluid and vigorous form. It might be scored with the fingers, like the big jugs, or dented with a pointed stick, like the small fluted bowls. The large, confident spouts are added rather than pulled from the body of the pot. Some of the handles are figurative jokes, like the asparagus handles on some of the teapots, and the clusters of fruit on casserole lids — others are simply formally exhilarating, like the twisty handles on the storage jars, or the big looping handle on the 'Georgian' jugs, which give them a bird-like aspect. If the resultant forms are not quite as refined in detail as some of their contemporary domestic ware counterparts, it is because they are not an end in themselves but serve for their maker as "a surface to receive further consideration and embellishment".

After biscuit firing in a small electric kiln, the pots are glazed and decorated with a mixture of oxides and glaze washes brushed, trailed and splashed on. Often a wax "resist" is brushed on, working rather like the Batik process to make a negative shape protected from subsequent overglazing. Latex is also used to the same end — it is cleaner, more fluid, peels off, and makes "lovely splash marks."

The overall feel of the decoration of Mike Francis' pots is quite various. Some of the decoration is articulated over a white ground, while on other pots the decoration appears 'in negative' over a dark, even blue-black ground covering the whole pot. Stars, strawberries, fishes, flowerheads, vine-like traceries, and other figurative elements crop up amongst the repertoire of elements making up the decorations, but



much of it is wholly or nearly abstract, and develops like a painting from a few initial random marks. In general, the decoration balances repeating shapes against relatively "wild" asymmetry.

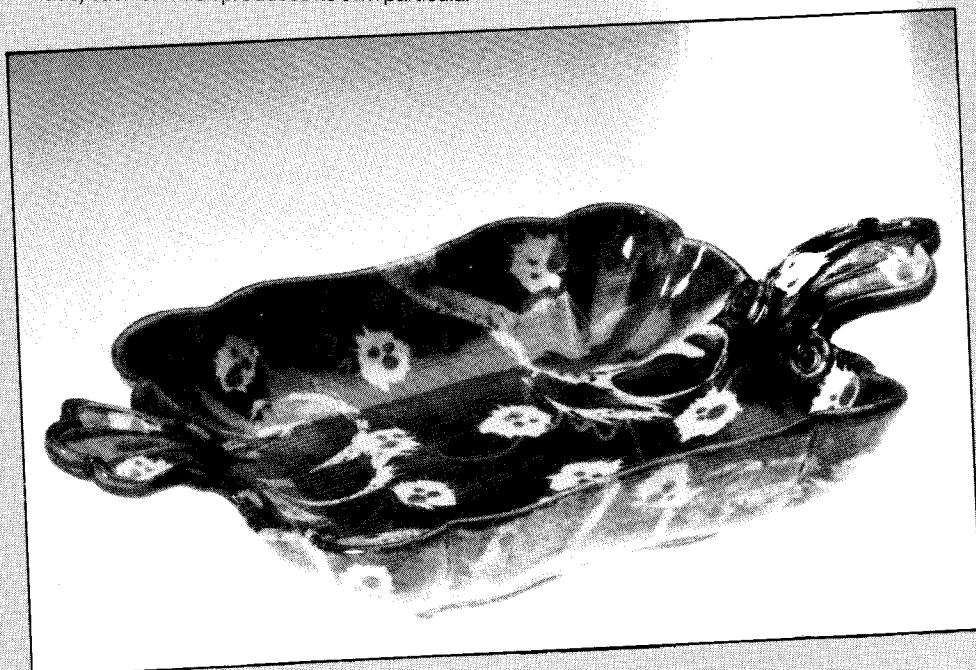
The subsequent "high-firing" of the pots to stoneware temperature softens the colours and renders them subtler than a slower firing process would do. But the colours are fairly subtle to begin with, for Francis mixes oxides in different proportions on a trial and error basis, rather than using them "straight". "Perhaps what I *ought* to do is weigh everything exactly and keep a detailed record", he says, though in fact he enjoys and maximises the potential to come up with colours after firing that he would never have expected.

Mike Francis is not at all pretentious about his pots, but to hear him talk about everything that is going on within one corner surface area of a preferred serving dish is like hearing a painter discussing one part of an abstract canvas. But then, as Carol points out, some of the marks Mike is using now to decorate his pots have become very similar to those he was making as a painter in the late sixties. And she will also tell you that he probably still uses some of the same brushes, for he has a long-standing assemblage of much-used stubby brushes (some homemade) each of which produces its own particular

variety of stroke, blob or splash.

This makes it all sound rather Zen, which it is not. The associations which these pots carry with them are very contemporary and therefore quite disparate. Like the people who will use them, they seem to have encountered in quick succession a number of influences from different world cultures at different times in history, as we all do nowadays when changing TV channels with the remote control or roaming through a remainder bookshop. The influences of Georgian silverware, Japanese rice jars, early slipware, wrought ironware, comic strip iconography and Abstract Expressionist painting, amongst other things, have all gone into these pots. The shape of the recent large jugs was sparked by mediaeval jugs seen at the *Age of Chivalry* exhibition at the Royal Academy, while some of his earlier jugs came about through watching a Clint Eastwood Western out of the corner of his eye on the television and spotting some good-looking Mexican jugs in the background to the action. But again, if this makes these vessels sound like thoughtless far-faragos put together for effect, that is far from the case. They have a strong, contemporary, and very attractive identity. A Mike Francis pot looks like a Mike Francis pot.

David Briers

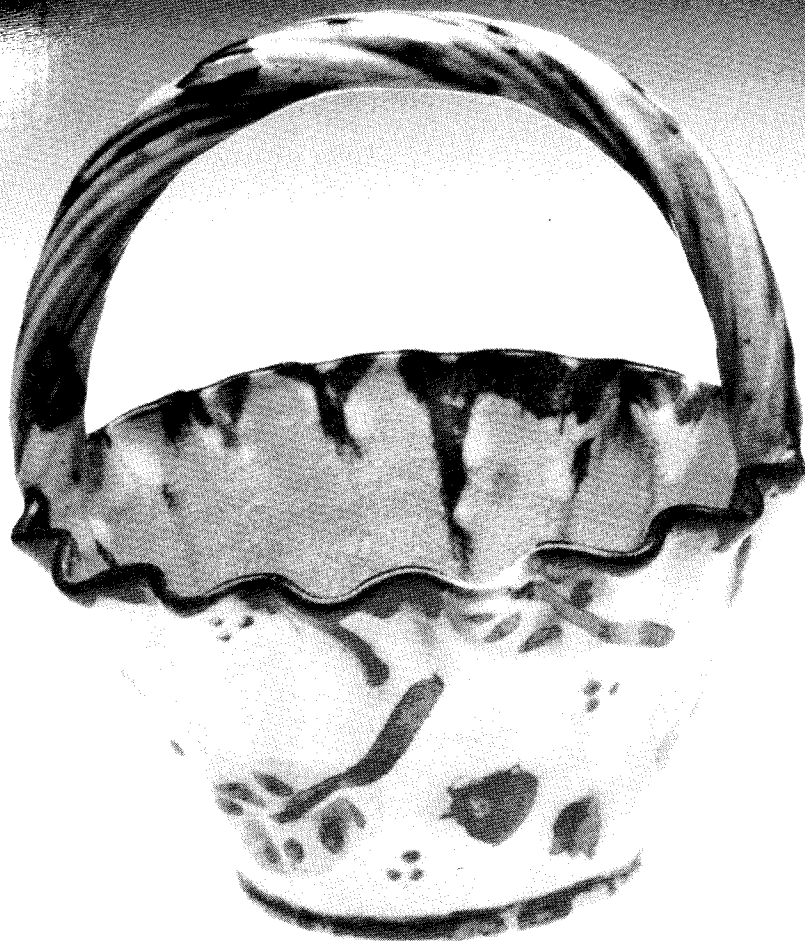




# Y Gwylfres Gwernaweg

CANOLFAN Y CELFYDDYDAU ABERYSTWYTH RHIF 34

MIKE FRANCIS gan David Briers



**D**im ond yn gymharol ddiweddar yn ei fywyd, pan oedd eisoes wedi cwblhau ei hyfforddiant yn y celfyddydau cain, y penderfynodd Mike Francis fod yn grochenydd llawn amser. Nid yw hyn yn gyfystyr â dweud i'w ddiddordeb mewn cerameg egino'n gwbl di-rybudd, gan fod mwy nag awgrym o'r fath ddiddordeb wedi ei ennyn gan agosrwydd y stiwdios peintio yn y Coleg Celf Brenhinol, lle roedd yn fyfyrwr, i holl drysorau cyffrous Amgueddfa Fictoria ac Albert, heb sôn am atyniadau'r Amgueddfa Ddaearogol. Pan roddodd gychwyn ar ei stiwdio fechan gyntaf mewn sied yn ei ardd yn Swydd Caergrawnt, roedd eisoes wedi dechrau llunio peth crochenwaith yn ogystal â pheintiadau haniaethol.

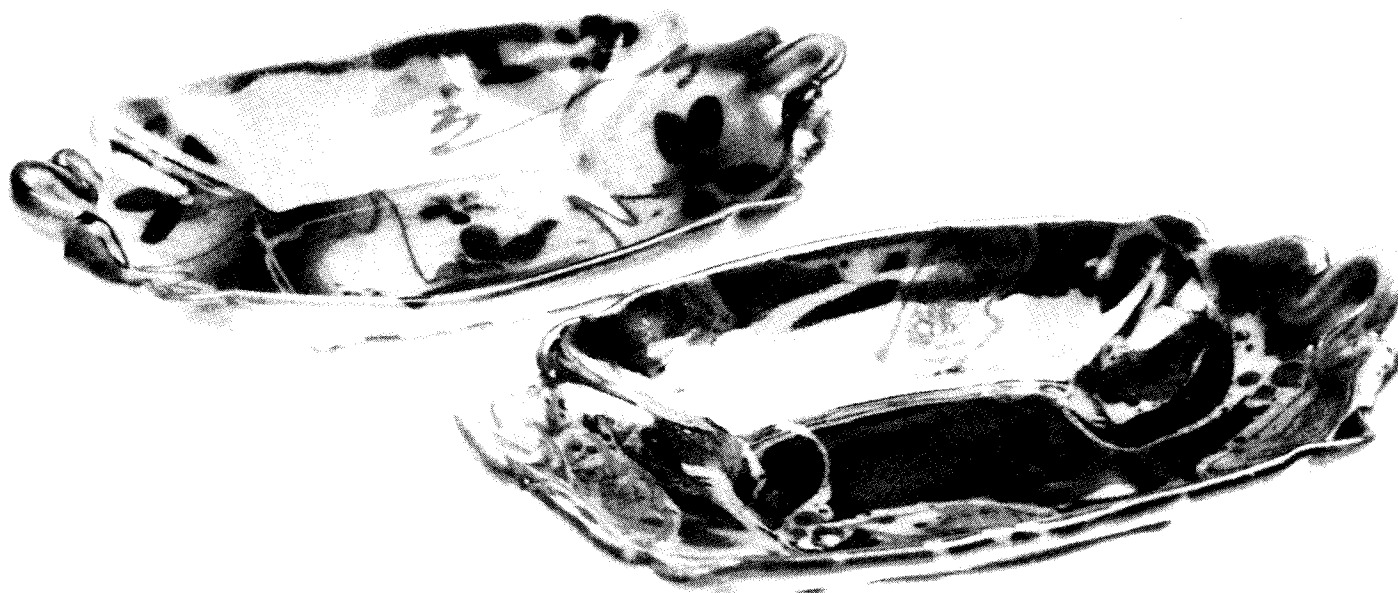
Roedd hi'n 1981, fodd bynnag, wedi iddo gael ei ddiflasu am beth amser gan ei wrthdaro â byd caeedig elitaeth celfyddyd gyfoes, pan welodd yn glir beth fyddai ei ddyfodol, ac ar ôl

dychwelyd o ymweliad â'r Taleithiau Unedig, penderfynodd yn sydyn ac yn bendant y byddai'n rhoi'r gorau i beintio ac yn dod yn grochenydd llawn amser. Mae'n dal i deimlo ar adegau iddo fod braidd yn feiddgar wrth gymryd cam o'r fath, heb hyfforddiant arbenigol o unrhyw fath, er ei bod yn amlwg nad oes unrhyw sail i'w amheuo. I dorri stori hir yn fyr, roedd llwyddiant cynyddol y crochennydd dan ofal Mike a'i wraig, Carol Francis, yn peri galw rheibus am ragor o le ac yn mynnu cartref newydd. Ar ôl hir chwilio, gan gynnwys sawl ymweliad ymchwilol â Chymru, maent wedi ymgartrefu'n hapus mewn ffermdy ym mhentref Llanfymach yng ngogledd yr hen Sir Benfro.

Mae Mike Francis yn llunio llestri domestig cyfoes addurnedig, sy'n cynnwys ystod o bethau angenrheidiol megis, jygiau, bowlenni, tebotiau, caserolau, llestri gweini, jariau storio a phethau cyffelyb. Mae eu prisiau yn ddigon rhesymol i beidio â pheri i chwi ofni eu defnyd-

dio, ond mae pob un ohonynt wedi ei lunio'n gyfangwbl â llaw, fel y gall dau debot ac iddynt yr un ffurf sylfaenol gyda gwahaniaeth pwyslais mewn manylion, er enghraifft, fod wedi eu hadurno'n gwbl wahanol.

Dywed Francis fod hynny'n llawn digon o'r elfen annisgwyl i'w cynnwys yn ei broses o weithio, a mai dyna pam y mae'n dewis gweithio gyda chlaw gwyn masnachol sy'n gyson a sefydlog ei ansawdd. Caiff y ffurf sylfaenol ei lunio ar y droell fel rheol, ac yna'i newid neu ychwanegu ato mewn amryfal ffyrdd er mwyn creu ffurf egniol a hylif. Gall gael ei ricio â'r bysedd, fel yn achos y jygiau mawr, neu ei fylchu â thamaid o bren pigfain, fel yn y bowlenni bach rhychiog. Ychwanegir y sbowltiau mawr, hyderus, yn hytrach na'u tynnu a'u hymestyn o gyrff y potiau. Jôc ffigurol yw rhai o'r dolenni, megis y dolenni merllys ar rai o'r tebotiau, a'r clwstwr ffrwythau ar gaeadau caserolau — tra nad yw eraill yn ddim ond ffurfiau boddhaus, fel y dolenni cor-deddog ar y jariau storio, neu'r dolenni mawr



ymddolennog ar y jygiau 'Georgaidd', sy'n rhoi agwedd tebyg i adar iddynt. Os nad yw'r ffurfiau a gynhyrchir yn union mor gain eu manylion â chyffresi llestri domestig rhai o'i gymheiriaid, y rheswm am hynny yw nad ydynt yn gyflawn ynddynt eu hunain ond yn gyfrwng i'w gwneuthurwr fel "arwyneb i dderbyn ystyriaeth ac addurn pellach".

Ar ôl y tanio cychwynnol mewn odyn drydan fechan, caiff y potiau eu gwydreddu a'u hadurno â chymysgedd o ocsidiau a golchiadau gwydredd wedi eu brwshio, eu llinellu neu eu tasgu arnynt. Yn aml caiff 'gwrthydd' cŵyr ei frwshio arnynt, gan weithio fel yn y broses Batik i wneud ffurf negyddol wedi ei warchod rhag y troswydreddu dilynol. Defnyddir latecs hefyd i'r un pwrpas — mae'n lanach, yn fwy hylif, yn plicio i ffwrdd ac yn creu "smotiau tasgu hardd".

Mae argraff gyffredinol addurn potiau Mike Francis yn hynod amrywiol. Mae peth o'r addurn wel ei osod ar gefndir gwyn, tra ar botiau eraill mae'r addurn yn ymddangos 'fel negydd' ar gefndir du, neu ddulas hyd dyn oed, sy'n gor-chuddio'r pot i gyd. Ymhlith yr elfennau ffigurol sy'n ymddangos ymhlith y stoc o elfennau sy'n rhan o'r addurniadau, ceir sêr, mefus, pysgod, pennau blodau, treswaith fel gwinydd, ond mae llawer ohono'n gyfangwbl haniaethol neu'n ymylu ar fod felly, ac yn datblygu, fel peintiad, o ychydig farciau cychwynnol ar antur. Yn gyffredinol, mae'r addurn yn cydbwysu ffurfiau sy'n cael eu hailadrodd yn erbyn anghymesuredd cymharol "wylt".

Mae'r tanio sy'n dilyn ac yn dod â'r potiau i dymheredd crochenwaith caled yn goleddfu'r lliwiau ac yn eu gwneud yn fwy cynnil nag y byd-

dai proses arafach o danio yn ei wneud. Ond mae'r lliwiau yn weddol gynnil i gychwyn, gan fod Francis yn cymysgu ocsidiau mewn cyfraneddau gwahanol ar sail hap a damwain, yn hytach na'u defnyddio'n "uniongyrchol". "Efallai mai'r hyn y dylwn ei wneud yw pwyso popeth yn ofalus a chadw cofnod manwl," meddai, er ei fod mewn gwirionedd yn mwynhau ac yn macsimeiddio'r potensial i ddod â lliwiau i'r amlwg ar ôl y tanio na fyddai byth wedi disgwyl eu gweld.

Nid oes dim byd yn ymhongar ynglŷn â Mike Francis lle mae ei botiau yn y cwestiwn, ond mae ei glywed yn siarad am bopeth sy'n digwydd o fewn i ryw gornel arbennig o arwynebedd llestr gweinili y mae'n arbennig o hoff ohono, fel clywed peintiwr yn trafod rhan arbennig o gynfas haniaethol. Ond wedyn, fel y dywed Carol, mae rhai o'r marciau y mae'n eu defnyddio ar hyn o bryd i addurno ei botiau wedi dod i ymdebygu'n fawr i'r rhai a ddefnyddiai fel peintiwr ar ddiwedd y chweddegau. Ac fe aiff hi ymlaen i ddweud ei bod yn debyg ei fod yn dal i ddefnyddio rhai o'r un brwshys, gan fod ganddo hen gasgliad o frwshys pytiog (rhai wedi eu gwneud gartref) sydd wedi gweld cryn ddefnydd, ac mae pob un ohonynt yn cynhyrchu ei fath arbennig ei hun o farc, smoty neu sblash.

Mae hyn i gyd yn peri iddo ymddangos braidd yn Zen, ond nid gwir mo hynny. Mae'r cysylltiadau sy'n perthyn i'r potiau hyn yn gwbl gyfoes ac o'r herwydd yn bur amrywiol. Fel y bobl fydd yn eu defnyddio, maent fel pe baent wedi dod i gysylltiad o fewn byr amser â nifer o ddylanwadau o wahanol ddiwylliannau'r byd ar wahanol gyfnodau mewn hanes, fel y gwnawn ni i gyd y dyddiau hyn wrth newid y sianeli ar y teledu heb godi o'n cadeiriau neu wrth chwiliota

mewn siop llyfrau ail-law. Mae dylanwadau llestri arian Georgaidd, jariau reis Siapaniaidd, slip-waith cynnar, gwaith haearn gyr, iconograffiaeth stribedi comig a pheintio Mynegiadaeth Haniaethol, ymhlith pethau eraill, i gyd yn rhan o'r potiau hyn. Ysbrydolwyd ffurf rhai o'r hygiau mawr diweddar gan jygiau Canoloesol a welwyd yn yr arddangosfa *Age of Chivalry* yn yr Academi Frenhinol, tra deilliodd rhai o'i jygiau cyntaf o wyllo Clint Eastwood mewn ffilm cowboi ar y teledu drwy gil ei lygaid a dal sylw ar jygiau Mecsicanaidd trawiadol yng nghefnidir y llun. Eto, os yw hyn gwneud i'r llestri hyn swnio fel rhyw gymysgwrch difeddwl wedi eu llunio i greu argraff, mae hynny'n bell o fod yn wir. Mae ganddynt eu hunaniaeth gref a chyfoes hynod ddeniadol. Mae pot gan Mike Francis yn edrych fel un o botiau Mike Francis.

David Briers.