

# Ceramic Series

ABERYSTWYTH ARTS CENTRE · NO. 17

## ANNA NOEL and SARAH NOEL

**F**ifteen minutes from the centre of Swansea, down a lane which turns into a track and ends up at a farmyard where furry little cats rush about excitedly at your arrival, Anna and Sarah Noel have their ceramics studio, in a converted cow byre to one side of the old farmhouse which is their family home, almost literally a stone's throw from romantically named Brandy Cove.

Separate doors lead to Sarah and Anna's workplaces, but it is impossible to go through the wrong door, as they both lead into the same room, where their closely adjacent areas are separated only by a set of shelves and a gas heater. Thus, in architectural form, is embodied their unusual symbiotic working relationship, fruitfully combining separateness and commonality.

Anna and Sarah are almost contemporary sisters, who share a lot of interests. They both chose to study ceramics at art college, but in different places — Anna at Bath Academy in Corsham, and Sarah in Bristol Polytechnic. In the relatively short time since leaving college, they have both established a firm predilection for making non-utilitarian 'figurative ceramics', predominantly (though not exclusively) exploiting the crisp, light quality of 'raku' firing.

Sometimes, even their subject matter coincides, though it is not difficult to tell their work apart, for like its makers, it has its own distinct character. Although they have sometimes shown their work together, as here, at other



Anna Noel

times they have preferred to promote their work through separate outlets. Anna has sold work through the **Beaux Arts** gallery in Bath, for example, and Sarah through **Anatol Orient**'s in London — both at the top of the ceramics gallery league table, by the way.

Anna specialises in making raku animals, which are usually more rounded and modelled than Sarah's work, which is most often made from single flat slabs of clay, and involves more linear surface drawing. But Anna's animals too sometimes have legs or tails cut from slabs of clay, reflecting her enjoyment of such things as tin toys and folk art. Indeed, the range of influences which makes itself felt on both Sarah and Anna's work draws from a mish-mash of many visual traditions, though mostly those which have tended to be marginalised through their anonymity by being called 'ethnic', 'folk', or 'mediaeval' art — toys, circuses, ikons, Inca ceramics, Assyrian art — that sort of thing.

Some of Anna Noel's raku cats are small and discreet, sitting on their haunches with their ears back looking slightly distraught. None of them, in fact, is the cuddly, chocolate box sort of cat, and some of them, with incised spots or stripes, in dry yellows, greys, or carbon blacks, are more like votive objects or temple guardians. The larger cats, standing on all fours, sometimes become like indefinable mythical beasts with rows of fearsome teeth. Some of them really are lions, with 2D 'cut-out'

manes, legs and tails, like Anna's other circus animals, hovering between theatrical and mythical fantasy, where a circus horse can become a Pegasus.

The architecture of fantastically conjectured theatres is another theme with which Anna is currently preoccupied. A basic slab-made box form is given a roof with flat cut-out finials, flags, or onion domes, while other architectural details are drawn and then incised on the surfaces. A stage, like that of a toy theatre, is cut into one side, complete with players.

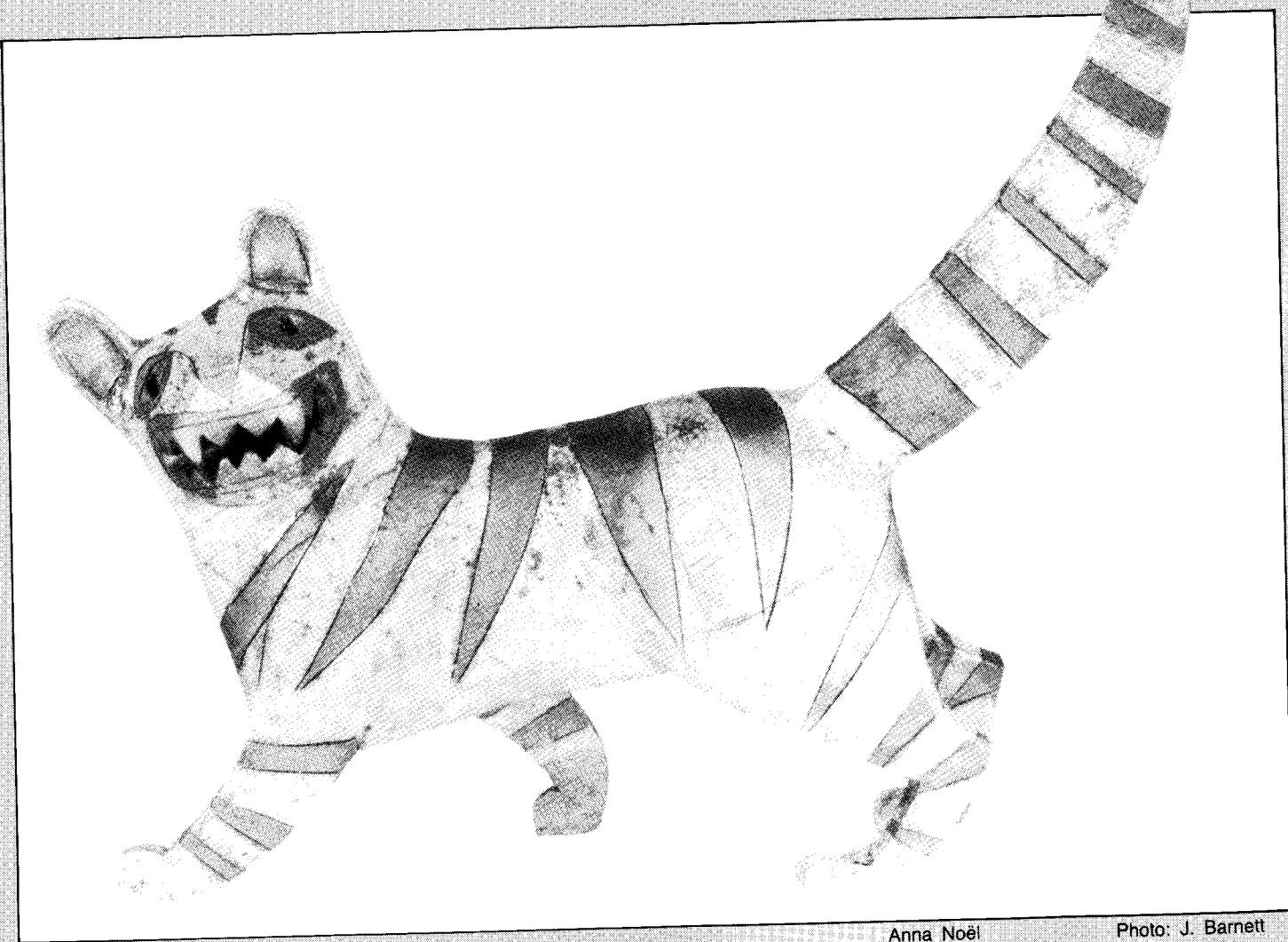
Although she seldom makes vessels, Anna is not at all averse to so doing when asked, and has made to commission recently, for example, a teapot version of her recurrent theme of a walking cat holding a whole fish in its mouth, though here a much smaller cat (the teapot lid) sits on the larger cat's back.

Sarah Noel has always liked drawing, and still fills sketchbooks with Rotring pen and ink drawings of buildings, boats, angels, and ecclesiastical grotesques, with an economy of line reminiscent of the sort of graphic expression which seems to be second nature to artists in Eastern Europe. It is not surprising, perhaps, that ikon paintings appeal to Sarah enormously, and she never tires of looking at them.

Most of Sarah's pieces are relatively large free-standing figurative images, comprising two



Anna Noel



Anna Noël

Photo: J. Barnett

Identically shaped cut flat slabs of clay, which are worked on separately to an almost complete pre-glazed stage before being 'sandwiched' together with the top edges meeting exactly, and the straight bottom edges held apart to form a base on which the piece stands. Though it may not be obvious when viewing these free-standing pieces in a display cabinet, they are double-sided, with an equal amount of incidence on each surface.

These pieces fall into several series, which include mermaids, singly or in couples, some

sitting on their tails which form a support for the piece; boats glazed in metallic reds and blues, ploughing through curly waves with sailors and gulls (including a recent series based on drawings made in Swansea docks); and a lady violinist, sometimes on horseback.

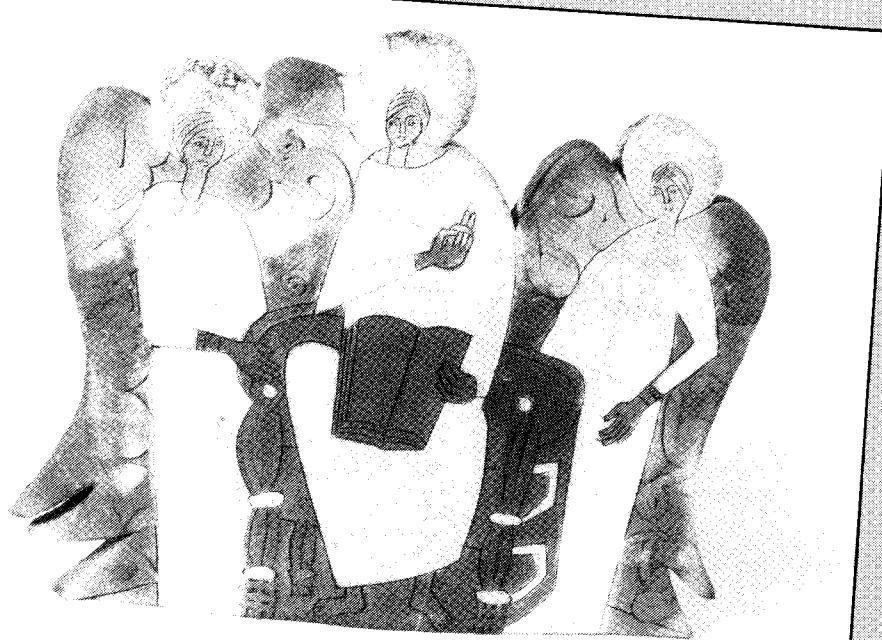
Sarah also makes one-sided wall plaques. Lately she has been making these in several parts, to avoid warping during firing, and this practical device has added its own formal, pictorial quality to the final result, producing economical, hieratic images in smoky unglazed

raku greys, with blue and turquoise extremities. Other, smaller plaques, on similar themes, are given a shiny all over thick alkaline glaze, usually reserved for tiles, as it can only be applied to a piece which can be glazed flat, and would run off the sides of a vessel.

Sarah and Anna fire their work together in a gas-fired kiln in a brick shed in their back garden. Together, using pairs of long tongs, they remove the pieces from the kiln whilst they are still glowing hot, and plunge them into an old tin bath full of sawdust. There, the fired clay continues to 'reduce' as long as it is covered with sawdust, becoming 'carbonized' black. With experience and ingenuity, Sarah and Anna have learned how to exploit the subtle greys, blacks, and crazing effects produced by this ancient technique, so that even an unglazed 'monochrome' piece is replete with wonderful subtleties of tone and surface texture.

Many potters make 'non-functional' ceramics as a less numerous parallel activity to their main output, but Anna and Sarah Noel's unequivocal pursuit of making almost entirely non-functional figurative ceramics is quite unusual. It is what they want to do most, and what they do best, and the most uplifting thing about what they do is that it could so easily have been awful. They might have worried too much about whether or not it was art, and overstepped themselves into pretentiousness. Or their work might have become little more than a pastiche of the many influences which go into it, and might have become, at worst, whimsical giftware. Instead, Sarah and Anna's work, in its different ways, treads an invigorating tightrope, being playful and enjoyable but with an 'edge' to it, both in terms of character and technique.

David Briers



Sarah Noel

# Y Gwffres Gerameg

CANOLFAN Y CELFYDDYDAU ABERYSTWYTH  
RHIF 17

## ANNA NOEL a SARAH NOEL

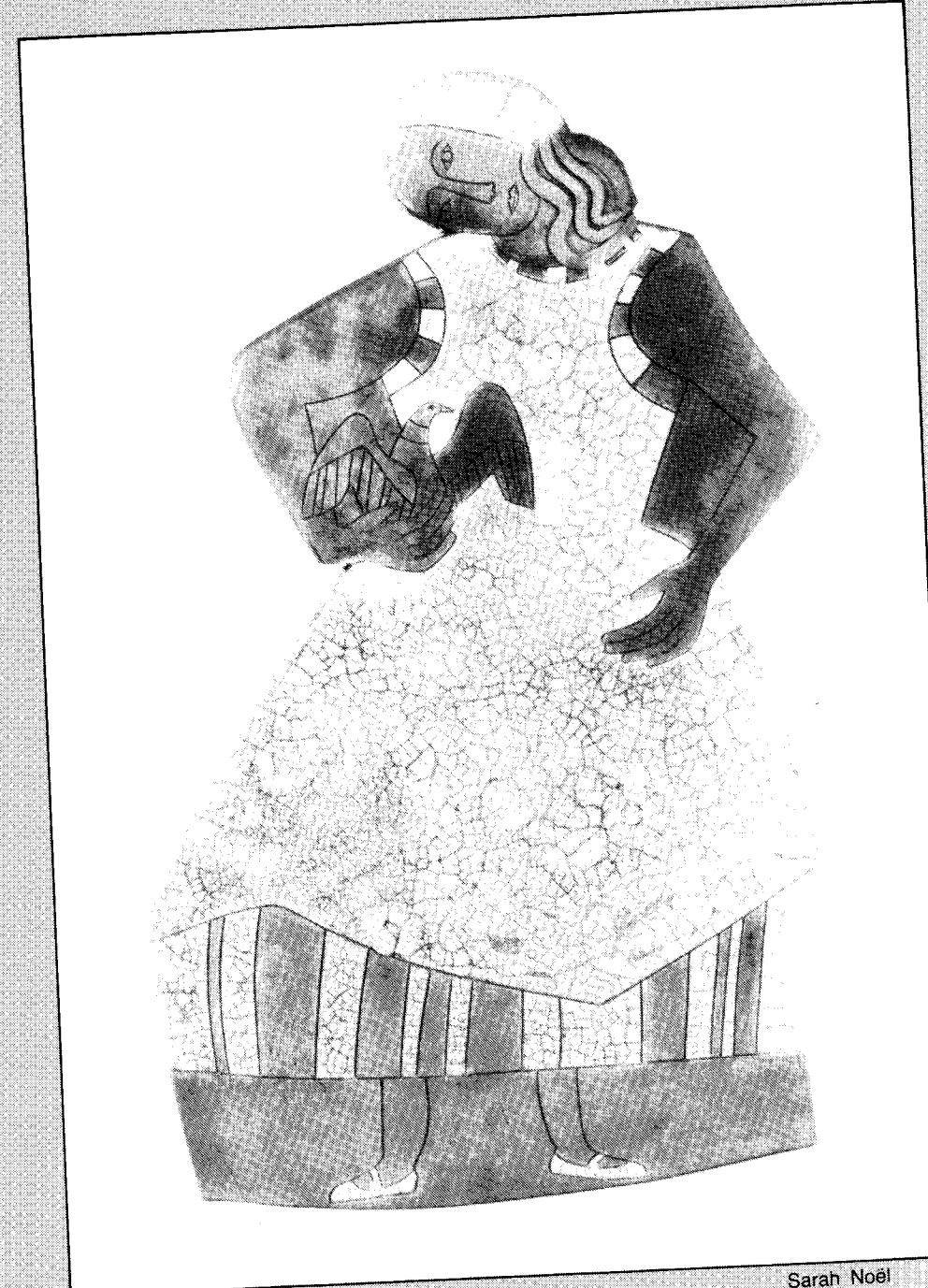
**C**harter awr o ganol Abertawe, i lawr ffordd sy'n dirywio'n llwybr ac yn arwain i fuarth fferm lle mae cathod bach blewog yn rhuthro'n gynhyrflus o gwmpas wrth i chi gyrraedd, mae stiwdio gerameg Anna a Sarah Noel. Beudy wedi ei addasu yw'r stiwdio ac mae'n sefyll wrth ochr yr hen ffermdy sy'n gartref iddynt, bron i dafliad carreg o'r bae sy'n dwyn yr enw rhamentus 'Brandy Cove'.

Mae dau ddrws gwahanol yn arwain i mewn i weithdai Sarah ac Anna, ond does dim posibl i chi ddewis y drws anghywir gan fod y naill a'r llall yn arwain i'r un ystafell, ac yno mae libart y ddwy yn agos iawn i'w gilydd heb ddim ond ychydig o silffoedd a gwresogydd nwy yn eu gwahanu. Dyma sut, mewn termau pensaerniol, yr ymgorfir perthynas waith symbiotig y ddwy, gan gyfuno arwahanrwydd a chyffredinrwydd mewn modd ffrwythlon.

Dwy chwaer oddetut i'un oed yw Anna a Sarah ac mae ganddynt lawer o ddiddordebau yn gyffredin. Dewis y ddwy oedd astudio cerameg mewn coleg ceff, ond mewn lleoedd gwahanol — Anna yn Academi Caerfaddon yn Corsham a Sarah yn Mholytechneg Bryste. Yn y cyfnod cymharol fyr ers iddynt adael coleg, mae'r ddwy wedi magu hoffter arbennig o gynhyrchu 'cerameg ffugurol' addurnol, gan ddefnyddio'n fwyaf arbennig (ond nid yn gyfangwbl) ansawdd ysgafn, bendant, tanio 'raku'.

Weithiau, mae hyd yn oed eu pynciau yr un fath, er nad yw'n anodd gwahaniaethu gwaith y naill oddi wrth y llall, oherwydd, fel eu gwneuthurwyr, mae iddynt eu cymeriad arbennig eu hunain. Er eu bod yn achlysuol wedi arddangos eu gwaith gyda i gilydd, fel y gweir yma, ar adegau eraill bu'n well ganddynt geisio hyrwyddo eu gwaith mewn mannau gwahanol. Er enghraift mae Anna wedi gwerthu ei gwaith drwy oriel **Beaux Arts** yng Nghaerfaddon, a Sarah yn **Anatol Orient's** yn Llundain — y naill le a'r llall gyda llaw ar frig tabl yr orielau cerameg.

Mae Anna'n arbenigo ar gynhyrchu anifeiliaid raku, sydd fel rheol yn fwy crwn a modelaidd na gwaith Sarah, sydd gan amlaf wedi ei lunio o slabiau unigol gwastad o glai ac yn cynnwys mwy o ddarlunio llinelog ar yr arwyneb. Ond weithiau mae gan anifeiliaid Anna hefyd goesau neu gynffonnau wedi eu torri allan o slabiau o glai, sy'n adlewyrchu ei mwynhad o bethau megis teganau tun a chelfyddyd gwerin. Yn wir, mae'r ystod o ddylanwadau sydd i'w ganfod ar waith Sarah ac Anna yn deillio o gymysgfa o draddodiadau gweledol, er mai rhai sydd gan mwyaf yn tuedd i fod yn ymylol ydyst oherwydd eu bod yn cael eu cuddio y tu ôl i enwau fel celfyddyd 'ethnig', 'gwerin' neu 'ganol oesol' — teganau, syrcas, econau, cerameg yr Incas, celfyddyd Asyria — y math yna o beth.



Sarah Noel

Mae rhai o gathod raku Anna Noel yn fychan ac yn arwahanol, yn eistedd i fyny gyda'u clustiau tuag yn ôl a golwg braidd yn anesmyth arnynt. Yn wir nid oes yr un ohonynt yn edrych fel y cathod a welir ar flychau siocled, y math o gath y gallid ei mythy, ac mae rhai ohonynt, gyda smotiau neu streipiau wedi eu hendorri, mewn llisiau melyn sych, llwyd neu ddu carbonig, yn debyg i wrthrychau cysegrnid neu warchodwyr temlau. Mae'r cathod mwyaf, sy'n sefyll ar eu traed, weithiau'n ymddangos fel bwystfilod chwedlonol anffiniadwy gyda rhesi o ddannedd

brawychus. Mae rhai ohonynt yn wirioneddol debyg i lewod, gyda'u mynygau dau ddimensiwn wedi eu torri allan a'u coesau a'u cynffonnau, fel anifeiliaid syrcas eraill Anna, yn hofran rhwng ffantasi theatrig a chwedlonol, lle gall ceffyl syrcas droi'n Begasws.

Thema arall sy'n mynd â bryd Anna ar hyn o bryd yw pensaerniaeth theatrau rhyfedol o ddychmygus. Rhoddir to ar ffurf blwch symwl wedi ei wneud o slabiau, ac arno ffinialau, baneri a chromennau ffurf nionyn, tra mae manylion pensaerniol eraill wedi eu darlunio a'u

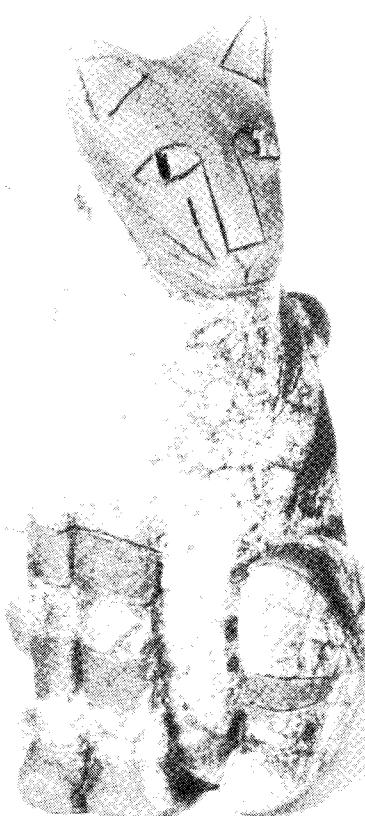
hendorri ar yr arwyneb. Mae llwyfan gydag actorion arno, fel mewn model o theatr, wedi ei dorri i un ochr y blwch.

Er mai anaml y bydd Anna'n cynhyrchu llestri, nid yw hi'n amharod i wneud hynny pan ofynnir iddi ac yn ddiweddar mae hi, er enghraift, wedi ymateb i gomisiwn drwy lunio fersiwn ffurf tebot o'i thema gyson o gath yn cerdded gyda physgodyn cyfan yn ei cheg, er fod yma gath llawer llai (caead y tebot) yn eistedd ar gefn y gath fawr yn yr enghraift yma.

Bu Sarah Noel bob amser yn hoff o ddarlunio, ac mae hi'n dal i lenwi Ilyfrau arlunio gyda lluniau pin ac inc Rotring o adeiladau, cychod, angylion a cherfluniau eglwysig grotesg, a hynny mewn arddull gynnil sy'n atgoffa rhywun o'r math o fynegiant graffig sydd fel pe bai'n ail natur i artistiaid yn Nwyrain Ewrop. Nid rhyfedd efallai fod peintiadau ac eiconau yn apelio cymaint at Sarah, ac nid yw hi byth yn blino edrych arnynt.

Mae'r rhan fwyaf o gynnrych Sarah yn ddiweddu ffigurol cymharol fawr, wedi eu llunio o ddau slab gwastad o glai wedi eu ffurio'n union fel ei gilydd, y gweithir arnynt ar wahân nes eu bod bron yn barod i'w gwydro, ac yna eu gosod wrth ei gilydd gyda'r ymylon uchaf yn cyfarfod yn berffaith a'r ymylon union ar y gwaedol ar wahân i ffurio bâs i'r gwaith sefyll arno. Er nad yw hynny bob amser yn amwng pan welir y gweithiau hyn mewn cabinet arddangos, maent yn ddwy ochrog gyda'r naill ochr cyn bwysiced â'r llall.

Mae'r gweithiau hyn yn rhannau o amryw gyfresi gan gynnwys mor-forynion, rhai unigol neu'n gyplau, a rhai ohonynt yn eistedd ar eu cynffonnau sy'n cynnal y gwaith; cychod wedi eu gwydro mewn coch a glas metalig, yn brwydro drwy donnau cyrliog gyda llongwyr a gwylanod arnynt (gan gynnwys cyfres ddiweddar seiliedig ar luniau a dynnwyd yn



Anna Noel



Anna Noel

Photo: J. Barnett

nociau Abertawe); a gwraig yn chwarae ffidl, weithiau gan farchogaeth ceffyl.

Mae Sarah hefyd yn cynhyrchu placiau un ochrog i'w harddangos ar furiau. Yn ddiweddar bu'n gwneud y rhain fesul rhan ar y tro, er mwyn eu harbed rhag camu yn ystod y tanio, ac mae'r ddyfais ymarferol hon wedi dod ag ansawdd ddarluniol. Ffurfiol i'r cynnyrch terfynol, gan gynhyrchu delweddu cynnil, graddediad mewn llwyd 'raku' di-wyddedd gyda'r ymylon yn wahanoi fathau o las. Caiff placiau eraill llai, ar themâu cyffelyb, eu gorcheddio a gwyddedd alcaliaidd trwchus, disglaer, a ddefnyddir fel rheol ar y gweithiau gan na ellir ei ddefnyddio ar ddim ond arwynebau gwastad gan y byddai lifo oddi ar ochrau llestr.

Mae Sarah ac Anna yn tanio eu gwaith ar y cyd mewn olyn nwy mewn sied frics yn eu gardd gefn. Gan weithio gyda'r gilydd a defnyddio gefeiliau hirion maent yn tynnu'r gwaith o'r odyn tra mae'n wynias ac yn ei ddoti mewn hen dwba tun yn llawn o llwch llif. Yna, mae'r clai yn parhau i rydwytho cyn bellied â'i fod wedi ei orchuddio â llwch llif nes ei fod wedi ei garboneiddio'n ddu. Drwy eu profiad a'u dyfeisgarwch, dysgodd Sarah ac Anna sut i fanteisio ar y lliwiau du a llwyd cynnil a'r

effeithiau cracellog a gynhyrhir gan y broses hynafol hon, nes bod hyd yn oed waith 'uniliw' heb ei wydro yn llawn amrywiaeth arlliw rhyfeddol ac arwynebedd patrymog.

Mae llawer o grochenyddion yn cynhyrchu cerameg 'an-nefnyddiol' fel gwaith cyfochrog ar raddfa lai na'u prif gynnrych, ond mae ymlyniad diwyro Anna a Sarah Noel wrth eu gwaith o gynhyrchu cerameg ffigurol 'an-nefnyddiol' brob yn gyfan gwbl, yn hynod anghyffredin. Dyma'r hyn y maent eisiau ei wneud a'r hyn y maent yn ei wneud orau, a'r hyn sydd fwyaf calonog ynglŷn â'r hyn a wrânt yw y gallai'n hawdd fod wedi bod yn drychnebus. Gallent fod wedi bod yn or-bryderus ynglŷn â'r cwestiwn a oedd eu gwaith yn gelfyddyd a'i peidio, a gallent fod wedi gorweud pethau a throi'n rhodresgar. Neu gallai eu gwaith fod wedi datblygu yn ddim byd mwy na **pastiche** o'r amryw ddyliwanadau sydd arno, a gallai, ar ei waethaf, fod wedi datblygu'n nwyddau anrhed mympwyol. Yn hytrach na hynny, mae gwaith Sarah ac Anna yn eu fflydd gwahanol, fel pe'n cerdded yn gynhyrfus ar ymhlidibyn, yn chwareus a phleserusr aond gydag 'awch' amo yn nhermau cymeriad a thechneg.

David Briers