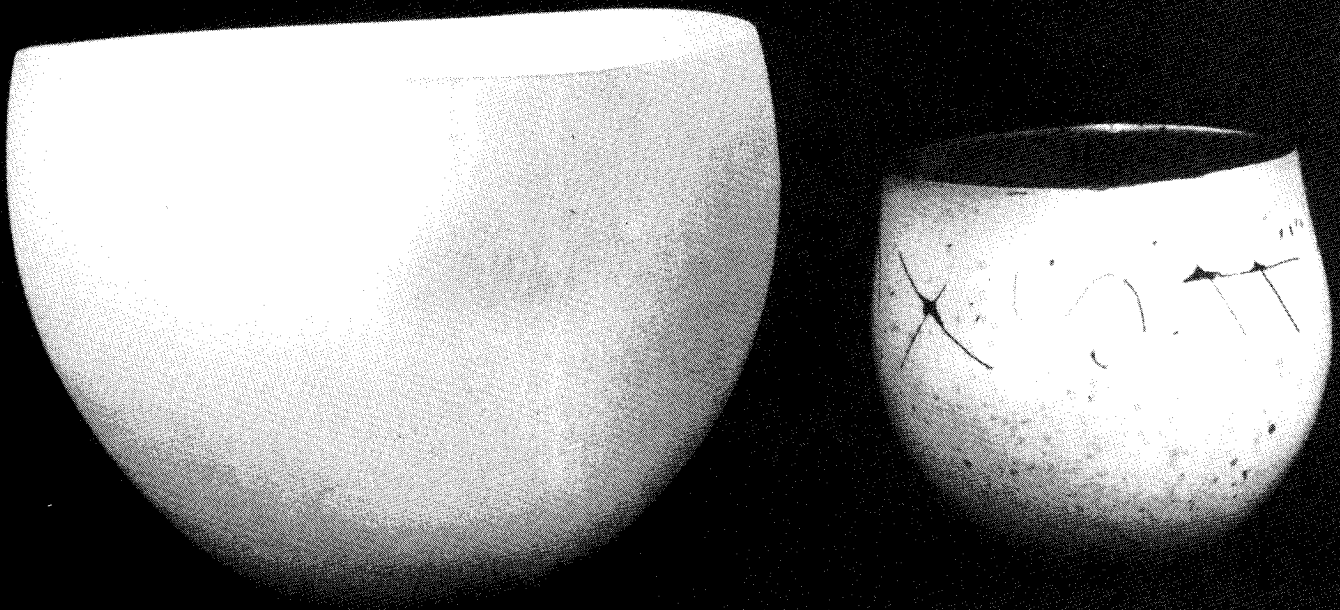


# Ceramic Series

ABERYSTWYTH ARTS CENTRE No. 30

"Take Utopia to be where you are now" Elspeth Owen



I first saw Elspeth Owen's pots at the 1987 Potter's Camp held at Aberystwyth Arts Centre. We sat on the grass by her tent whilst she carefully unwrapped them. Thin-walled, with surfaces that looked naturally resolved rather than decorated, small enough to cup in the hand, they had a fragile intensity. I suspect that many people try, and fail, to make pots like these when they first attempt handbuilding. They are the kind of pots that look timeless, with an affinity with stones, shells and bird's eggs. Though employing quite different techniques Katherine Pleydell Bouverie made pots of this kind. My first thought was a protective one. Would their undoubted beauties be perceived? In what kind of context would they properly be appreciated? Both shops and galleries seemed inappropriate.

As we shall see these instinctive responses were not altogether irrational.

Elspeth Owen began to make pots in the early seventies. She had read history at university, had worked as a student counsellor and for Peter Lazlett's Cambridge Group, studying the family and population. By then she had two small sons. Academic life can be simultaneously absorbing and sterile and she turned away from it to train as a psychotherapist and began an active thorough going involvement with the woman's movement.

In 1973 she started going to pottery evening classes (taught by Zoe Ellison). It was natural for her to handbuild (though she had done a little throwing whilst teaching history at Dartington Hall as a young postgraduate). In 1975 she went to New Guinea with her husband and sons. Her

commitment to psycho-therapy dropped away in this fresh environment. She was interested in the material culture of the islands, in the wood carving, the feather work and body decorations. The pots she saw seemed crude and heavy. But she had already begun to see herself as a potter. At that point this was something of an imaginative leap but before leaving England she already found a studio — the beautiful wooden pavilion at Granchester where she still works — and in New Guinea a year of enforced leisure was to build up a head of creative steam for the new kind of work she was about to undertake. She made the mental transition from enthusiast to professional during this period. Later, when she first glimpsed Ruth Duckworth's pots in Tony Birk's *The Art of the Modern Potter* she responded with a feeling of recognition and reassurance. She felt that she could continue along that path.

Soon after her return to England she took some pots to show to Henry Rothschild — at that time she barely appreciated his importance in the studio ceramic world. He liked her work and put pieces straight into a large show in the gallery attached to Kettle's Yard. It was, as she saw it, a "ridiculously lucky break". A few years later in 1983 the V&A bought one of her pieces from a Kettle's Yard show. By 1986 she had had a memorable show at the V&A craft shop. During this time her pots became increasingly delicate and more resolved — they were still made entirely by pinching and scraping and fired at lower and lower temperatures. One motive for this was economy, another was the difficulty of introducing foreign elements into the electric kiln she was then using — for these together with oxides mixed into the clay created the beautiful unpredictable surfaces of her work.

All through this period of technical growth there was an important parallel text to her work. It can often seem heavy handed and awkward to link works of art to political activity but the special art forms and kinds of excellence associated with the woman's movement have definite echoes in Elspeth Owen's work. The kind of sensibility I am referring to is intelligently discussed by Guy Brett in his chapter on Greenham Common in *Through Our Own Eyes: Popular Art and Modern History*. In 1981 Elspeth Owen was on that first walk to Greenham Common which was to result in the permanent camp there. Together with other Cambridge women she was to put together a selection of women's writings on peace and war — *My Country Is The Whole World* (Pandora Press 1984). Certain political acts were to be directly alluded to in her pottery whilst we may guess at others.

In 1982 she was arrested for cutting the fence at Molesworth. After leaving the magistrates court at Huntingdon on 16th December she made a private decision to walk the hundred miles to Greenham in order to arrive there on a Christmas Day. She made her way there as directly as possible cross country, sleeping rough, taking photographs of her route, but because she was a woman alone, travelling quickly and fearfully. The subsequent pots shaped by wrappings wound round them were elegaic commentaries on the self reliance of the traveller, carrying her house on her back, carefully wrapping and unwrapping the necessities she needs to carry.

But her pieces also relate to Greenham in less direct ways. There is an affecting photograph by Tim Malyon in Guy Brett's book of an egg placed between the coarse mesh of the fence at Greenham. On it someone has written "For Peace". Like most of the unselfconscious art which decorated the fence the egg and its inscription made a powerful point about ephemerality and fragility. One cannot push the comparison too far — most of the art of the fence tended to be simply made and much of its strength lay in its context. Elspeth Owen's pots are, of course, more sophisticated in facture. Nonetheless, like a number of other women potters — Sue John for instance — she prides herself on the straight-forwardness of her equipment and the freedom this brings. In the winter months she has taken to working away from Granchester. For that reason the portable gas kiln which she designed and built with some friends is crucial to her work.

In her studio Elspeth Owen keeps a considerable body of work that is so autobiographical that she does not intend to sell it. These pieces share space with every kind of found object. Superficially this ambience seems familiar enough. Pebbles, driftwood, shells, are part of the early modernist aesthetic of these islands, dominant in the studios of Hepworth, Moore and Nicholson and preserved intact in Jim Ede's house in Cambridge (co-incidentally the Kettle's Yard in whose attached gallery Owen had her first exhibitions). But in fact her sensibility is

rather different — with a powerful sense of private rituals and with an intensity that is quite different from the middle class purities of Kettle's Yard.

Elspeth Owen feels that Bernard Leach and indeed most orientally inspired pottery has had very little influence on her. Even though much studio pottery looks to the past, she in particular appears to be working in another time set. Of course her techniques reflect those of the non-wheel potters of many pre-industrial cultures.

But her pots have quite a different charge to that of Magdalene Odundo and Fiona Salazar who take the forms of African or South American pots and heighten their presence with starker shapes and feats of burnishing.

Instead, Elspeth Owen follows what appears to me to be a more difficult path, creating work which makes its strength through a special kind of tenderness and lack of obvious structure. Her most recent work, which is slab built and asymmetrical, looks set to pursue this demanding aesthetic still more profoundly.

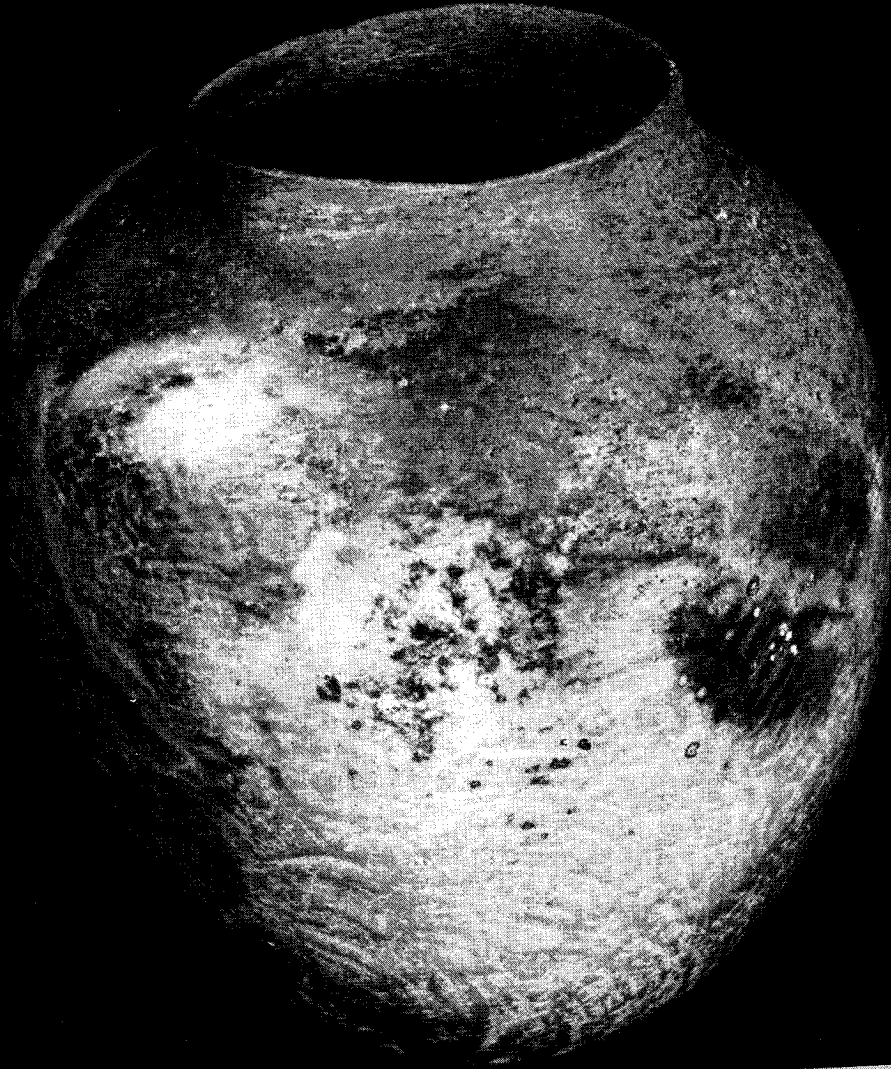




# Y Gwres Gerameg

CANOLFAN Y CELFYDDYDAU ABERYSTWYTH RHIF 30

“Boed eich paradwys yn y man lle'r ydych” Elspeth Owen



**Y**tro cyntaf i mi weld crochenwaith Elspeth Owen oedd yn y Gwersyll Crochenyddion a gynhaliwyd yng Nghanolfan y Celfyddydau Aberystwyth ym 1987. Roedden ni'n eistedd ar y borfa y tu allan i'w phabell tra oedd hi'n dad-bacio ei gwaith yn ofalus. Yn ddigon bychan i'w dal yng nghleddr llaw, a chydag ochrau meinion ac arwynebau a edrychent fel pe'n gynnyrch natur yn hytrach nag yn ganlyniad addurno, roedd rhyw angerdd bregus yn perthyn iddynt. Gallaf gredu i lawer o bobl geisio, a methu, llunio potiau fel hyn wrth roi'r cynig cyntaf ar lunio â llaw. Dyma'r math o botiau sy'n ymddangos fel pe na baent yn perthyn i unrhyw oes arbennig, ac fel pe bai perthynas rhyngddynt â cherrig a chregyn ac wyau adar. Er ei bod hi'n defnyddio technegau hollol wahanol, mae Katherine

Pleydell Bouverie yn cynhyrchu yr un math o botiau. Teimlad amdiffynol oedd fy nheimlad cyntaf. A fyddai pobl yn canfod eu prydferthwch digamsyniol? Ym mha fath o gefndir y gellid eu gwerthfawrogi'n briodol? Roedd siopau ac orielau fel pe baent yn anaddas. Fel y gwelir, nid cwbl afresymol mor ymateb greddfol hwn.

Dechreuodd Elspeth Owen lunio potiau yn y saithdegau cynnar. Roedd hi wedi astudio hanes yn y brifysgol, wedi gweithio fel cyfarwyddwr myfyrwyr ac wedi astudio'r teulu a'r boblogaeth gyda Grŵp Caergrawnt Peter Lazlett. Erbyn hynny roedd ganddi ddau fab bychan. Gall bywyd academiaidd fod yn hynod ddiddorol ac yn gwbl ddiffwrth ar yr un pryd, ac fe droes ei chefn arno er mwyn mynd i dderbyn hyfforddiant fel seicotherapydd ac fe dechreuodd gymryd rhan weithredol egniol ym

mudiad y merched hefyd.

Ym 1973 dechreuodd fynychu dosbarth nos mewn corchenwaith (dan hyfforddiant Zoe Ellison). Roedd yn naturiol iddi hi lunio pethau â llaw (er ei bod wedi rhoi cynnig ar weithio ar y droell pan oedd hi'n dysgu hanes yn Dartington Hall yn fuan wedi iddi ennill ei gradd). Ym 1975 aeth i New Guinea gyda'i gŵr a'i meibion. Cilioedd ei hymroddiad i seicotherapi yn yr amgylchfyd newydd hwn. Ymddiddorodd yn niwylant materol yr ynysoedd — y crefiadau coed, y gwaith plu a'r addurniadau corfforol. Rhai a ymddangosai'n amrwd a thrwm oedd y potiau a welodd.

Ond roedd hi eisoes wedi dechrau ystyried ei hun yn grochenydd. Ar y pryd roedd hynny'n gofyn cryn dipyn o ddychmyg, ond cyn iddi adael Lloegr roedd hi wedi dod o hyd i stiwdio — y pafiliwn pren hyfryd yn Granchester lle mae



hi'n dal i weithio — ac yn ystod y flwyddyn o hamddena gorfodol yn New Guinea magodd awydd cryf am gael mynd i'r afael â'r math newydd o waith yr oedd hi ar fin ymgymryd ag ef. Yn ystod y cyfnod hwn y cymerodd hi'r cam ymenyddol, o fod yn amatwr bwrwdfrydig i fod yn grochenydd proffesiynol. Yn ddiweddarach pan gafodd ei chip cyntaf ar grochenwaith Ruth Duckworth yn *The Art of the Modern Potter* gan Tony Birk, ei hymateb oedd teimlad o adnabyddiaeth ac o anogaeth. Teimlai y gallai hithau droedio'r llwybr hwnnw.

Yn fuan wedi iddi ddychwelyd i Loegr aeth â rhai o'i photiau i'w dangos i Henry Rothschild — ar y pryd, prin ei bod hi'n gwerthfawrogi ei bwysigrwydd ym maes crochenwaith stiwdio. Hoffodd Rothschild ei gwaith a chynnwys enghreifftiau mewn arddangosfa fawr yn yr oriel sy'n gysylltiedig â *Kettle's Yard*. Roedd hynny, yn ei geiriau hi, yn "gyfle chwerthinlyd o ffodus". Ychydig flynyddoedd yn ddiweddarach, ym 1983, prynwyd eitem o'i gwaith gan Angueddfa Fictoria ac Albert o arddangosfa yn *Kettle's Yard*. Erbyn 1986 roedd hi wedi cael arddangosfa gofiadwy yn siop crefft Angueddfa Fictoria ac Albert. Yn ystod y cyfnod hwn datblygodd ei photiau yn fwyfwy cain a phendant — roeddynt yn dal i gael eu ffurfio'n gyfangwbl drwy bwsio a sgraffellu ac yn cael eu tanio ar dymheredd is ac is. Darbodaeth oedd un rheswm dros wneud hynny, rheswm arall oedd y. anhawster o roddi elfennau diethr yn yr odyndrydan roedd hi'n ei defnyddio ar y pryd — oherwydd roedd y rhain ynghyd â'r ocsidiau a gymysgid â'r clai yn rhoi arwynebedd hardd ac amhosibl ei ragweld i'w gwaith.

Drwy gydol y cyfnod o ddatblygiad technegol hwn yn ei gwaith roedd datblygiad cyfochrog pwysig yn digwydd iddi. Mae ceisio cysylltu gwaith celf â gweithgarwch gwleidyddol yn aml yn gallu ymddangos yn ddigon trwsgei a lletchwith, ond mae i'r ffurfiau celf a'r math o ragoriaethau sy'n gysylltiedig â mudiad y merched adleisiau pendant yng ngwaith Elspeth Owen. Ceir trafodaeth ddeallus ar y math o synwriadrwydd rwyf yn cyfeirio ato mewn pennod ar Gomin Greenham gan Guy Brett yn *Through Our Own Eyes; Popular Art and Modern History*. Ym 1981 roedd Elspeth Owen ar y belrerindod gyntaf honno i Gomin Greenham a arweiniodd at sefydlu gwrsyll parhaol yno. Mewn cydweithrediad â merched eraill yng Nghaergrawnt bu'n paratoi detholiad o erthyglau am heddwch a rhyfel gan wragedd — *My Country Is The Whole World* (Gwasg Pandora 1984). Cyfeiriwyd yn uniongyrchol at rai gweithredoedd gwleidyddol yn ei chrochenwaith a gallwn ninnau ddyfalu ynglyn â rhai cyfeiriadau eraill.

Ym 1982 cafodd ei restio am dorri'r ffens yn Molesworth. Ar ôl gadael llys yr ynadon yn Huntingdon ar Ragfyr 16eg daeth i benderfyniad preifat y byddai'n cerdded y can miltir i Greenham er mwyn cyrraedd yno ar ddydd Nadolig. Anelodd tuag yno ar draws gwlad ar hyd y ffordd fyrfaf posibl, gan gysgu allan a thynnu lluniau o'i thaith, ond am mai merch ar ei phen ei hun oedd hi, teithiai'n gyflym ac yn ofnus. Roedd y potiau a ddilynodd y daith hon, ac a ffurfiwyd drwy eu hamlapio, yn sylwebaethau galarnadol ar hunan-ddibyniaeth y teithiwr sy'n cludo'i dŷ ar ei gefn ac yn pacio a dadbacio yr angenrheidiau y mae'n eu cario yn ofalus.

Onid mae perthynas lai uniongyrchol â Greenham yn cael ei datgelu yn ei gwaith. Ceir ffotograff trawiadol iawn gan Tim Malyon yn llyfr Guy Brett sy'n dangos wy wedi ei osod rhwng gwifrau croes y ffens yn Greenham. Mae rhywun wedi ysgrifennu'r geiriau "Dros Heddwch" ar yr wy. Fel y rhan fwyaf o'r gelfyddyd ddistadl oedd yn addurno'r ffens, mae'r wy a'r arysgrif sydd arno yn gwneud pwynt pwerus am ddarfedigaeth a breuder bywyd. Nid doeth fyddai mynd â'r gymhariaeth yn rhy bell — 7% roedd y rhan fwyaf o'r gwaith celf oedd ar y ffens wedi ei lunio'n gwbl syml ac roedd ei gryfder yn dibynnu

ar ei gyd-destun. Wrth gwrs, mae potiau Elspeth Owen yn llawer mwy soffistigedig eu gwneuthuriad. Er hynny, fel nifer o ferched eraill sy'n grochenyddion — Sue John er enghraifft — mae hi'n ymfalchio yn symylrwydd ei hoffer ac yn y rhyddid sy'n dod yn sgîl hynny. Yn ystod misoedd y gaeaf mae hi wedi dechrau symud p Granchester i weithio. Dyna pam mae'r odyndrydan symudol a gynlluniwyd ac a wnaed ganddi, gyda chymorth rhai o'i chyfeillion, yn hanfodol i'w gwaith.

Yn ei stiwdio ceidw Elspeth Owen gryn swm o waith sydd mor hunanogfianol fel nad oes ganddi unrhyw fwiad i'w werthu. Mae'r eitemau hyn yn gymysg â phob math o bethau y mae hi wedi dod o hyd iddynt. Ar yr wyneb mae amgylchfyd o'r fath yn ymddangos yn ddigon cyfarwydd. Mae cerrig mân, broc môr a chregyn wedi bod yn rhan o estheteg fodernaidd gynnar yr ynysoedd hyn, ac wedi cael lle blaenllaw yn stiwdios Hepworth, Moore a Nicholson, ac wedi eu cadw'n gyfan yn nhgaref Jim Ede yng Nghaergrawnt (drwy gyd-ddigwyddiad dyma'r *Kettle's Yard* lle mae'r oriel lle cafodd Elspeth Owen ei harddangosfeydd cyntaf). Ond mewn gwirionedd mae ei synwriadrwydd hi dipyn yn

wahanol — gydag ymdeimlad cryf o ddefodau preifat ac o angerdd sy'n hollol wahanol i burdeb dosbarth canol *Kettle's Yard*.

Mae Elspeth Owen yn teimlo mai ychydig iawn o ddylanwad a gafodd Bernard Leach, nag yn wir unrhyw grochennydd a ddylanwadwyd gan y dwyrain pell, ar ei gwaith hi. Er fod llawer iawn o grochenwaith stiwdio yn edrych tua'r gorffennol, mae hi'n arbennig yn ymddangos fel pe bai hi'n gweithio mewn cyfnod gwahanol. Mae'n wir fod ei thechnegau yn adlewyrchu technegau crochenyddion di-droell llawer i ddiwylliant cynddiwydiannol. Ond mae gwefr gwbl wahanol yn perthyn i'w photiau hi, o'u cymharu â gwaith Magdalene Odundo a Fiona Salazar sy'n dilyn ffurfiau potiau Affrica a De America ac yn ychwanegu at eu heffaith gyda siapau digyfaddawd a bwrneisio gorchestol. Yn lle hynny, mae Elspeth Owen fel pe bai'n ddilyn llwybr anodach, gan greu gwaith sy'n magu cryfder o'i dynwch arbennig ei hun ac o'i ddiffyg fframwaith amlwg. Mae ei gwaith diweddaraf, sydd wedi ei lunio o dafellau o glai ac sydd yn anghymesur, yn edrych fel pe bai am ddilyn y trywydd esthetig anodd hwn hyd yn oed ymhellach.

