

# Ceramic Series

ABERYSTWYTH ARTS CENTRE No. 37

MOLLIE WINTERBURN by David Briers

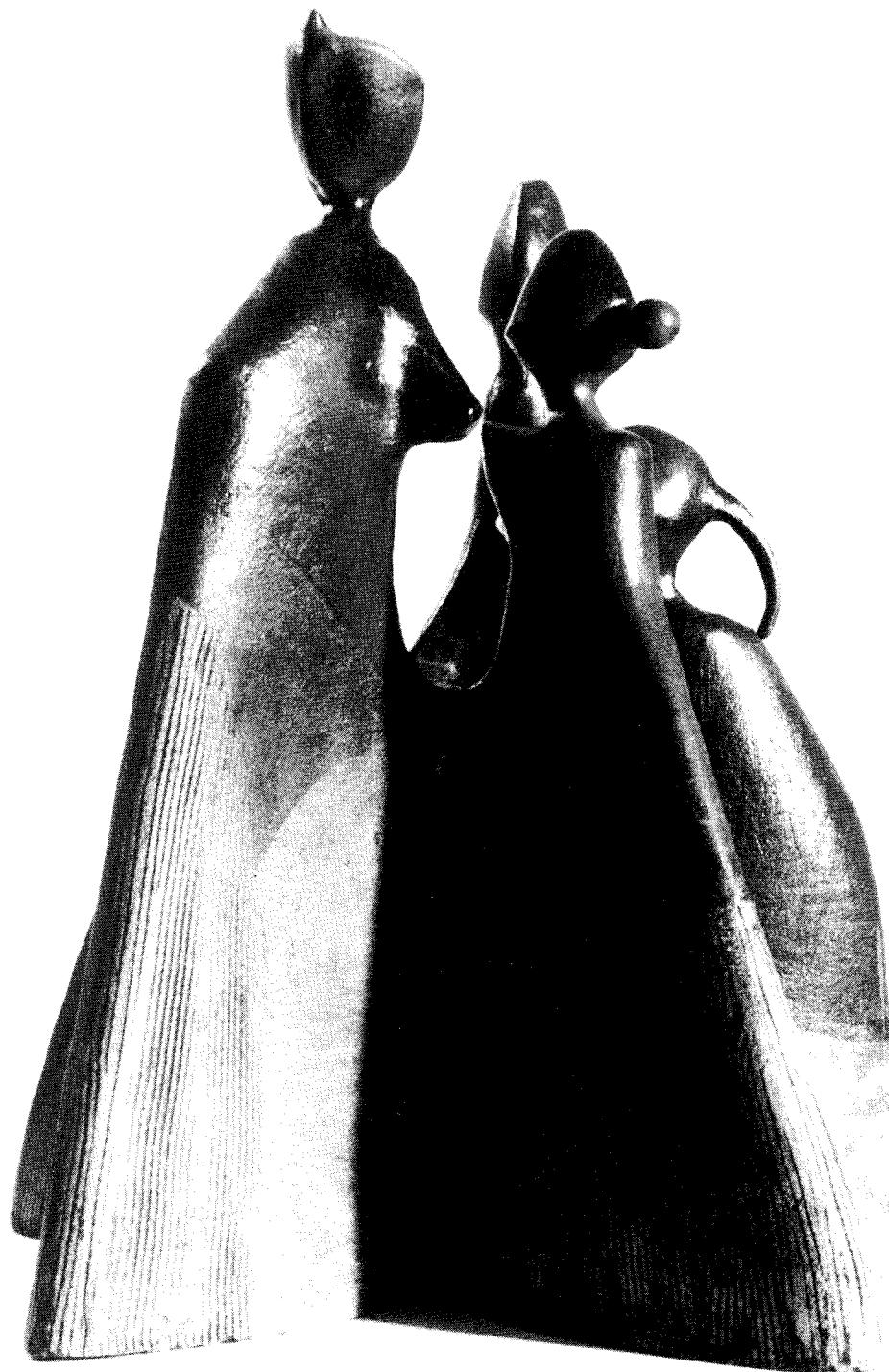
**M**ollie Winterburn became interested in pottery at an early age, but her entry into the world of ceramics did not proceed as it might have done had she been born a generation later, for there were no college courses, and certainly no grants, to support her interest. She started out as a P.E. teacher, but tried unsuccessfully to persuade her school to provide her with a wheel and a kiln, only succeeding in doing so when her art inspector saw the evidence of pots she had handbuilt and fired on a bonfire in the playing field. Subsequently she found out as much as she could about pottery by visiting every available potter, "from a plant-pot maker to Leach", and was determined to become a pottery teacher herself.

She has subsequently spent a large part of her working life in the world of art education, as teacher in a London comprehensive school, O and A Level examiner, senior college lecturer, and deviser and tutor of creative ceramic sculpture courses for art-trained teachers. She has published two books on handbuilt pottery techniques, on the cover of which she is justifiably described as a "distinguished British crafts educator".

But she has always found the time to pursue her own work as a ceramicist. In fact, she feels, her career in art education has freed her from the alternative obligation to make "a hundred and fifty identical mugs" in order to remain solvent. Making batches of repeated designs has never interested her, and her own ceramics are all unique "one-offs". They are to be seen, not to be picked up and used. Some of them are unequivocally sculptural in nature, except that their size is always restricted to what can fit her kiln. Although she loves the fact that people want to buy her work, like many painters and sculptors she is very sad when it has to leave her studio.

This Ceramic Series exhibition is quite an event, both for the exhibitor and for her audience, because it marks the end of a seventeen year gap during which Mollie Winterburn has not made or exhibited many ceramics. There are many factors which might cause a short or long hiatus in an artist or maker's output — a temporary drying up of ideas, a feeling of neglect, as well as the desperate necessity to earn money in some other way. But none of these was responsible for the prolonged gap in Mollie Winterburn's ceramic work. It was something more unforeseen, for an unfortunate accidental injury prevented her from using those muscles and joints called upon in the making of ceramics. Being the indefatigable woman that she is, however, this has not prevented her from pursuing some of her parallel creative work, notably painting and photography, both of which she has exhibited regularly during the same period.

Ten years ago she retired to a house lost down a lane near Ystrad Meurig. She has not retired in any other way, however, and having converted a cow byre into a ceramics workshop,



the frustration can easily be imagined of possessing at last the wherewithal to devote all her time to her primary interest, whilst not possessing the physical capability to do so. Even now she still cannot throw pottery on the wheel, but prefers anyway to hand build.

What she has made for this exhibition, she feels, is 'experimental', in that she has had to come to terms not only with a seventeen year gap in working, but also with using new materials in a new climate — both mentally and literally, for the notorious wetness of Wales affects

how clay behaves. But these new pieces do not seem at all tentative, being, like their maker, clear and forthright, but by no means dull.

The ceramic forms which Mollie Winterburn makes divide into 'families' of objects. A group of bottles with different but related forms, decorated similarly, have been made to stand together, tall ones next to squat ones, and like a real family, it is a shame to split them up. Her very first pots were bottles, and thin-necked bottle forms still make up part of her output, though the crossover point between objects based on functional forms and sculptural forms is a blurred one. When exactly, after all, does a 'candlestick' become a 'tall standing form'?

A literally figurative element is evident in almost all of Mollie Winterburn's ceramics, even when they look quite abstract. "Basically, they're all people", she will tell you. What at first seems like a completely abstract sculptural piece is in fact based on a group of people walking hand in hand to an unknown destination. The "communication of shapes", joining to become one shared shape, is a preoccupying theme.

Another recurring subject is that of the bust of an 'Edwardian woman', reduced to a vessel-like form, with the head dwindle to a formal neck, and a swathe of necklaces decorating the body of the vessel shape. A recent raku jar (an unusual exception to the mostly stoneware work) is one of these Edwardian women. One is unlikely to spot that fact unless told, but that does not matter, for the figurative reference has been used as a device to bring forth an unusual but satisfying form, with an attractive blue, pink and grey chequered decoration, the glaze partly stripped off to reveal the raku crackling.

Other themes come from the natural world — such as the lines of ploughed fields and the shapes of seedpods — but such influences are always formalised, without tying them too

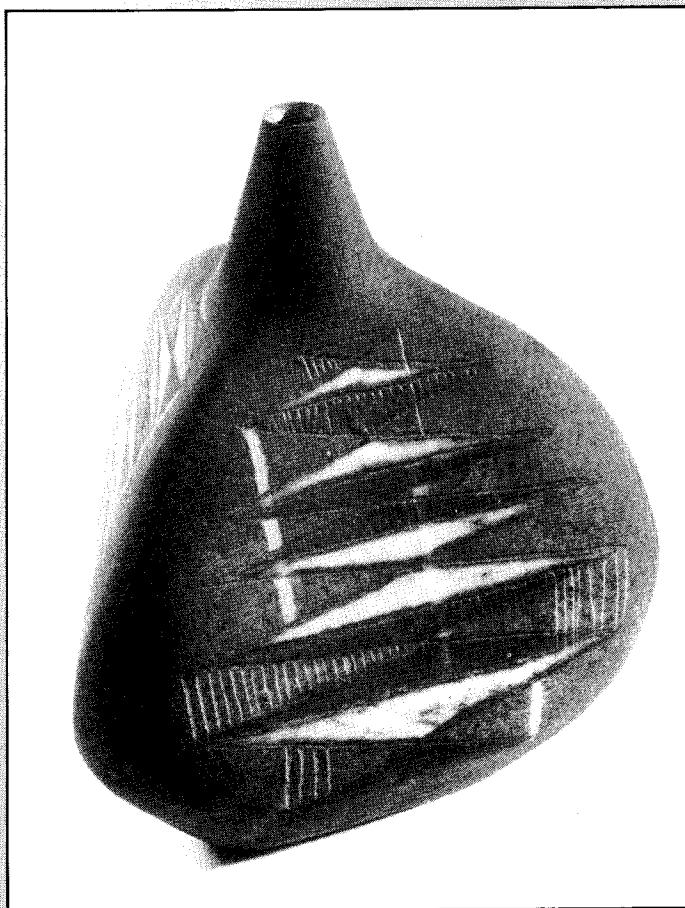


closely and literally to their initial impetus. Further sources of inspiration are manifold, from axe heads and the rudimentary form of the Christian cross, to Cycladic and Pacific art. But all of these influences do service to the concern for producing a viable, vigorous and exciting form.

It must be said that the overall aspect of Mollie Winterburn's work is that of her generation — how could it be otherwise? — an aspect which has been somewhat overtaken for a while by younger and gaudier ceramic trends, but which (dare one say it) is suddenly becoming

fashionable again! But beneath the transitory veil of fashion there is something here of immensely greater durability, and we are extremely fortunate that, as this exhibition demonstrates, Mollie Winterburn is once again firmly on the road to the full expansion of her "non-stop ideas" in the ceramic medium.

David Briers



# Y Gwyfres Gerameg

CANOLFAN Y CELFYDDYDAU ABERYSTWYTH RHIF 37

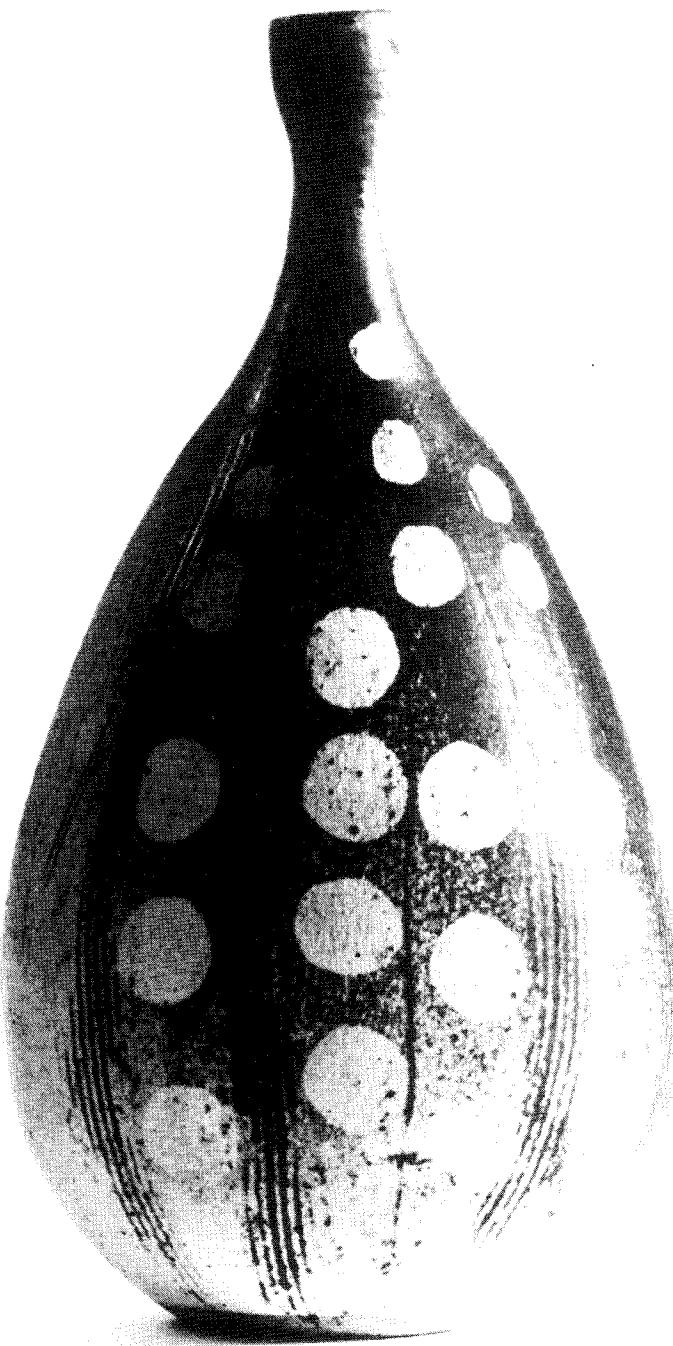
MOLLIE WINTERBURN gan David Briers

**D**echreuodd Mollie Winterburn ymddiddori mewn crochenwaith pan oedd hi'n bur ifanc, ond gan nad oedd cyrsiau coleg, ac yn sicr dim grantiau, i hyrwyddo ei diddordeb, ni lwydodd i fynd i mewn i fyd cerameg mor rhwydd ag y byddai wedi gwneud pe bai hi wedi cael ei geni genhedlaeth yn ddiweddarach. Dechreuodd ar yrfa fel athrawes ymarfer corff, ac ofer fu ei chais i berswadio ei hysgol i ddarparu troell ac odyn ar ei chyfer; ond fe lwyddodd i gael rhai pan welodd arolygwr celf y potiau roedd hi wedi eu llunio â llaw a'u tanio mewn coelcerth ar faes chwarae'r ysgol. Ar ôl hynny dysgodd gymaint ag y gallai am grochenwaith drwy ymweld â phob crochenydd o fewn cyrraedd, "o wneuthurwr potiau blodau i Leach", ac roedd hi'n gwbl ben-darfynol o ddod yn athrawes crochenwaith ei hun.

Ers hynny mae hi wedi treulio rhan helaeth o'i hoes ym myd addysg celf, yn athrawes mewn ysgol gyfun yn Llundain, yn arholyydd Lefel O ac A, yn uwch-ddarllithydd, yn ddyfeisydd ac yn diwtor ar gyrsiau cerfluniaeth geramig greadigol ar gyfer athrawon celf hyfforddedig. Cyhoeddodd ddau lyfr ar dechnegau crochenwaith llaw ac fe'i disgrifir yn gwbl deg yn y broliant ar eu cloriau fel "addysgwr crefft Prydeinig o fri".

Fodd bynnag, er ei hol lbrysurdeb, mae hi'n ddi-feth wedi dod o hyd i'r amser i fwrw ymlaen â'i gwaith ei hun fel lluniwr cerameg. Yn wir, mae hi o'r farn fod ei gyrra ym myd addysg celf wedi ei rhyddhau o'r dewis arall sef y rheidrwydd i gynhyrchu "cant a hanner o fygiau yn union yr un fath â'i gilydd" er mwyn cael dau ben lllyn ynghyd. Ni fu ganddi erioed ddiddordeb mewn cynhyrchu n iferoedd mawr o eitemau cyfelyb, ac eitemau unigryw na wneir mwy nag un ohonynt yw ei chynnyrch cerameg. Pethau i'w *gweld* ydynt, yn hytrach na phethau i gydlo ynddynt a'u defnyddio. Mae rhai ohonynt yn ddiamheulol gerfluniol eu natur, ac eithrio fod eu maint bob amser yn cael ei gyfyngu i'r hyn a aff i mewn i'r odyn. Er ei bod yn mwynhau gweld pobl yn awyddus i brynu ei gwaith, mae hi fel llawer i gerflunydd a pheintiwr yn teimlo cryn chwthidod pan mae gwaith yn gadael ei stiwdio.

Mae'r arddangosfa hon yn y Gyfres Gerameg yn achlysur go arbennig, i'r artist ei hun yn ogystal ag i'r gynulleidfa, gan ei bod yn nodi diwedd bwch o ddwy flynedd ar bymtheg pryd na chynhyrchodd Mollie Winterburn nemor unrhyw gerameg nac arddangos unrhyw eitemau o'i gwaith. Mae llawer i ffactor a allai arwain at fwch maith neu fyr yng nghynnrych artist neu wneuthurwr — diffyg syniadau dros dro, temlad o gael ei esgeuluso, yn ogystal â'r angenrhiedrwydd dybryd i ennill arian mewn rhyw ffordd arall. Ond nid yr un o'r rhain a fu'n gyfrifol am y bwch sylweddol yng ngwaith cerameg Mollie Winterburn. Fe'i achoswyd gan rywbeth na ellid bod wedi ei ragweld, gan i ddolur damweiniol anffodus ei hamddifadu o'r gallu i ddefnyddio'r cyhyrau a'r cymalau hynny sy'n rhaid wrthynt er mwyn llunio cerameg. Fodd



brynnag, gan ei bod yn wraig o gymeriad dyfal a diflino, nid yw hyn wedi ei rhwystro rhag dilyn agweddau creadigol eraill o'i gwaith, peintio a fotograffiaeth yn twyaf arbennig, ac mae hi wedi

arddangos y cynnyrch hwnnw yn rheolaidd yn ystod y cyfnod.

Ddeng mlynedd yn ôl ymddeolodd o'i gwaith a mynd i fyw mewn tŷ i lawer ffodd

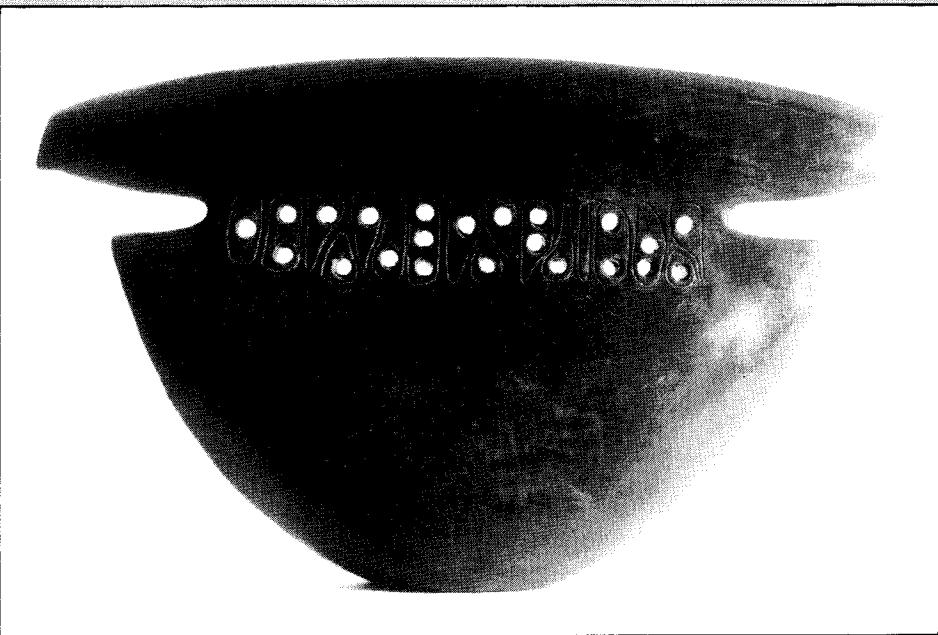
anghysbell ger Ystrad Meurig. Ond nid yw hi wedi ymddeol mewn unrhyw ystyr arall, ac a hithau wedi trawsnewid hen feud ym weithdy cerameg, gellir yn hawdd ddychmygu'r rhwystredigaeth o gael yr holl gyfleusterau ar gyfer treulio'i holl amser gyda'i diddordeb pennaf ond heb fod ganddi'r gallu corfforol i wneud hynny. Hyd yn oed yn awr ni all gynhyrchu crochenwaith ar droell, ond fodd bynnag mae'n well ganddi gynhyrchu pethau â llaw.

Mae hi'n teimlo fod yr hyn a gynhyrchedd hi ar gyfer yr arddangosfa hon yn 'arbrofol', yn yr ystyr ei bod hi wedi gorfol dod i delerau nid yn unig â'r bwch o ddwy flynedd ar bymtheg yn ei gwaith, ond hefyd â thrafod defnyddiau newydd mewn hinsawdd newydd — yn feddylol ac yn llythrennol, gan fod lleithder anorfod Cymru yn effeithio ar adwaith y clai. Ond nid oes dim byd yn betrus ynglŷn â'r eitemau newydd hyn, gan eu bod, fel eu gwneuthurwr, yn eglur ac yn uniongyrchol ac ymhell iawn o fod yn annid-dorol.

Mae'r ffurflau cerameg a gynhyrchrir gan Mollie Winterburn yn rhannu'n 'deuluoedd' o wrthrychau. Cynhyrchedd casgliad o boteli gwahanol ond perthynol eu ffur a chyffelyb eu haddum, i sefyll yn gyfochrog, rhai tal ar bwys rhai bach llydan, ac fel gyda theulu go iawn byddai'n bechod eu gwahanu. Poteli oedd ei photiau cyntaf oll, ac mae ffurflau poteli gyda gyddfaun meinion yn dal i fod yn rhan o'i chynnyrch, er fod y llinell derbyn rhwng gwthrychau seiliedig ar ffurflau ffwythianol a ffurflau cerfluniol yn un bur annelwig. Pa bryd yn union, wedi'r cyfan, y mae 'canhwylbren' yn troi'n 'ffurf tal unionsyth'?

Mae elfen ffigurol lythrennol i'w chanfod bron ymhob un o greadigaethau ceramig Mollie Winterburn, hyd yn oed pan fyddant yn edrych yn bur haniaethol. "Yn sylfaenol, pobl ydynt i gyd," meddai. Mae'r hyn sy'n ymddangos ar y cyntaf fel eitem gerfluniol gwbl haniaethol yn seiliedig ar grwp o bobl yn cerdded law yn llaw i ryw gyrchfan anhysbys. Mae "cyd-gysylltiad ffurflau", ffurflau yn asio yn un ffurf gyffredin, yn thema sy'n mynd â'i bryd.

Pwnc arall sy'n dymddangos yn gyson yw



penddelw o 'wraig Edwardaidd', wedi ei symleiddio i ffurf tebyg i lestr, gyda'r pen yn lleihau'n wddf ffurfiol, a thorchau o neclis yn addurno corff y lestr. Un o'r merched Edwardaidd hyn yw jar raku a wnaed yn ddiweddar (eithriad anghyffredin ymhlieth y crochenwaith caled arferol). Prin y byddai neb yn sylwi ar y ffaith honno heb i rywun grybwyl y peth, ond nid yw hynny o bwys, gan i'r gyfeiriadaeth ffigurol gael ei ddefnyddio fel dyfais i gynhyrchu ffurf anghyffredin ond boddhaus, gydag addurn glas, pinc a llwyd sgrawrog, a'r gwydredd wedi ei ran-nol striplio i ffwrdd i ddatgelu'r cracellu raku.

Daw themâu eraill o fyd natur — megis llinellau maes wedi ei aredig a ffurflau codau had — ond mae Dylanwadu o'r fath bob amser wedi eu ffurfioli, ac heb eu clymu yn or-agos ac yn llythrennol â'r ysgogiad gwreiddiol. Mae ffynonellau eraill ei hysbrydiaeth yn lluosog ac yn amrywio o bennau bwyeill a ffurf elfennol y groes

Gristnogol hyd gelfyddyd Cycladic a chelfyddyd y Môr Tawel. Ond eilbeth yw pob un o'r dylanwadau hyn i'r ymdrech i gynhyrchu ffurf hyfyw, egnol a chyffrous.

Mae'n rhaid dweud mai'r agwedd gyffredinol ar waith Mollie Winterburn yw agwedd ei chenchedlaeth — sut y gallai fod yn unpeth arall? — agwedd sydd wdi ei disodli i raddau gan dueddiadau iau a mwy coegwych ym maes cerameg, ond agwedd sydd (os gwiw dweud hynny) yn prysur ddod yn ffasiynol unwaith eto! Ond yn ddyfnach na thueddiadau byrhoedlog ffasiwn mae yma rywbedd sy'n anhraethol twy parhaol, ac rydyn ni'n hynod o ffodus, fel y dengys yr arddangosfa hon, fod Mollie Winterburn unwaith eto yn bendant ar y ffordd i roi mynegiant llawn i'w "syniadau dibaid" drwy gyfrwng cerameg.

David Briers

