BEVERLEY BELL-HUGHES

by Sheila Tyler

A baking tray in the kitchen is filled with what looks like sausage rolls. It turns out to contain six coils of porcelain. Beverley Bell-Hughes laughs and gives them a shake. There are muffled giggles from the next room: the budgerigar has probably sworn again. It's slightly but pleasantly chaotic as any household might be with four children and a working mother. Time and peace are precious. Beverley points to a green-painted shed in the garden. "That's where I work." Inside it, in a quiet world of touch, Beverley produces her hand-built pots.

"It's a personal challenge. I like to work instinctively and directly into the clay: it's an instantaneous, tactile material." The forms Beverley make are intended to have presence but also have an intimacy that reflects the way she works. "They are things to be felt and held." The work is often large, invariably textured and free. An 18" x 16" dish appears to defy the structural limits of clay, flaring out in fat layers. Its visual command and the way it invites the hand is typical of her work, though it's one of the few "designed" pieces. "The forms produced by nature interest me but I don't go out of my way to copy them. I get a piece of clay and just work on it. I never do any drawings or take photographs; the pot just grows. The whole thing is developed through messing about with clay. The bottoms of my pots are usually made inside moulds - baking tins, polystyrene trays, anything that's an interesting shape. I take the base out the next day and put it on the banding wheel. Then I take a lump of clay, roll it out into a coil, flatten it and add it to the base. How it rolls out will determine that part of the pot. I have no preconceived ideas. A lot of texture, the splitting and the crevices are got by forcing the clay to its extremes so that it's on the point of collapsing - it's a physical balancing act.

Tensile strength is achieved by using robust raku clay, itself rough and textured, though Beverley adds to the surfaces dry porcelain pieces which shrink more in firing and respond differently to the oxide washes of copper and cobalt that go under the barium-based glazes. Each pot takes about two days to complete; her largest dishes take three days.

It's an intuitively-developed technique, encouraged less by Beverley's severely-limited sight - a fact she is characteristically reluctant to mention - than by a natural delight in the material and a certain conduciveness to the circumstances or working while rearing a family. Clay was a discovery made only after arriving at art school. "The only thing I was good at was art and all I wanted to do from the age of 12 was to go to art school, but I didn't specially want to be a potter. At Sutton School of Art, where I went to do a two-year foundation course, there was no pottery offered - the pottery existed for part-timers only, and I suppose where you can't go, you want to go. I got to know some of the people who worked in the department and I persuaded the principal that I was so disgraceful at the calligraphy we had to do that I should be allowed to do pottery instead. Wally Keesler was teaching there at the same time as he was teaching on the Harrow Studio Pottery course. He persuaded me to go to Harrow. Previously I'd not thought of being a potter. I suppose I was drawn to it because basically I'm a messy person. At Harrow I used to like sitting in the dust with a piece of clay and just working it with my hands. I really liked the feel of the material."

Harrow emphasized domestic pottery but encouraged hand-building. By the time Beverley left she was making domestic wheel-thrown slipware and hand-built pots in porcelain, stoneware and raku, although the reason for the thrown ware was largely commercial. "Hand-building hadn't the same influence as now - everyone was doing thrown domestic ware - and making things that were going to sell was the main consideration." Thus is Beverley's domestic slipware that gained her acceptance by the Craftmen Potters' Association in the early 70s.
A fortuitous friendship gave Beverley her first workshop. As a child she had got to know the potters Rosemary Wren and her mother Denise who lived and worked in her home town of Oxshott in Surrey. Rosemary offered her a double garage in the garden, in which Beverley first worked with her husband Terry whom she then married at Harrow. "There was only one wheel and one kiln so we both got part-time teaching jobs and used the workshop alternately – I worked in it on the days Terry wasn’t there. The work of both Denise and Rosemary Wren was influential. "Denise Wren’s thrown pots were very direct, similar to my own, and I admired Rosemary Wren’s techniques that she used for her birds and animals." A London exhibition of the hand-built work of all four potters soon followed, though Beverley’s pottery output had been somewhat reduced. "From 1970 to 1973 I was producing babies instead of pots so I wasn’t making much." More or less confined to the family home, Beverley worked intermittently in the kitchen using a tiny test kiln to fire her pots. With no access to a wheel, she was limited to hand-building, a situation she turned into an opportunity to further explore techniques.

A move to Llandudno Junction, North Wales, in 1978, to the converted stables of a coaching inn, provided space and home-based facilities, though the problem of sharing them and of lack of time were recurrent. Hand-building remained the solution to the first; the second is perennial: "There’s always the problem of time – and I need quiet to work. I try to start about 9.30 to 10 am and work till about 3 pm, fitting everything else in at the two ends of the day. I hate working under pressure but at the same time I wouldn’t push myself if I didn’t have something – exhibitions – to work towards." Sharing a kiln presents less of a difficulty now that she and Terry fire to the same temperature (1280°C).

Everything Beverley makes is twice-fired, a process which helps provide the necessary distance for her to appraise the pots. Those she knows are not good visual forms are destroyed before the bisque firing; others, for the same reason, are abandoned before the second; those that survive both are usually left around to be lived with for a while. "If I keep a pot for a period of time and still don’t like it then I know it hasn’t worked. I like pots that have a presence of their own and that’s what I’m looking for – pieces that stand by themselves, like some of the Buckley pots. You can’t copy that because they were made unconsciously by instinctively good potters."

Beverley enjoys the traditional Buckley coarseware that vies for space on shelves, tables and floors among the work of more modern potters. But, as with the Buckley pots, visual impact isn’t everything. "Many people use a pot as a surface to decorate so the decoration becomes more important than the actual material being used. What I’m trying to do is to make the two part of one thing. Because the pots I make are containers I’m probably looked on as a potter rather than a sculptor. My life drawings are very much like my pots – sculptural with big circular movements. I can’t see the detail of what I’m drawing, like hands and feet, so I draw instinctively, following the lines as I feel they should go."

As her children become less dependent, Beverley is anticipating more time for her work. "I want to make much larger pots and, on the chemistry side, I’d like to do a lot more things with glazes." Her work seems destined to develop ever more boldly – in keeping with Beverley’s own exuberance – while retaining more than a little of whatever it is that is imparted to a pot made largely by feel, both physical and intuitive. It is the reason why Beverley’s pots need space be displayed, a visual distance, but why the way to get to know them is to reach and touch them.

WRITTEN BY SHEILA TYLER PHOTOGRAPHS BY ANTHEA CULLEN
doedd iddim y gyneud llawer o wthal.

"Gan ei bod yn treulio bron y cyfan o'i hamser yni ei charffed bydafi Beverley yng Nghwraithion ychlysuroi yn y gegin gan dddefnyddio odyr brofi fechan i dianhoi ei phiolair. Doedd dim modd dddefnyddio troeli ac felty fel i cyflymu i lunio phethau a llaw, selbyfia a drosydd yng gyfeiriad y mewn—hyn ymddangosiad.

"Mae rhannu odiyn y lliu o broblem beylaich gan ei bod hi a Terry y tano eu gwath a thr y tynmerth (1280°C). Mae popeth mae Beverley ym ei wneud ym cael ei dianhoi ddwydrwy, proesy swn gympwr i greu pellerei angheniodai iddi gyfeiriadu yna gyfysgu a mesur gwath llesten. Mae rhy o mae hi'n gwbl o'r fawr gwasanaeth ym lliwiau gwaelod boddhael y cae eu ddisrif o'r gytha ymchwil, calif eraill eu brawnu heibio, am yr u threwh, cyn yr all danio; mae'r rhy o'r voryd a'd ddau dianio eu cael eu gadal iddi gyfeiriad eu gyfysgu am y gwbl. "Os byddaf wedi cadw pot am bath amser y di all heb dddod yn hoff chware, mewn cyflymu nad yw'n liwddiant.

Rwy'n hoffatoi a chandwyd eu cymeriad arbenig eu hunain, a dyna bath byw eu chwilio am amadw eu'w chyfle a eu pertho eu hunain, fel rhy o lewi Beverley. All nhu eu hefelychu ac uch fe'u gwaenad yn gwbl ddyy nhengar gan groychenydd gredffol ddawnum.

Mae Beverley ym mwynhau crochenwaith wennol Brecy eu amra'r gwaith hwmny'n y cythadl am le ar siiloedd, byddau a llorau gyfeiriad crochenwaith mwy modern. Ond, fel yn acos crochenwaith Beverley, nid efais si isoala yw popeth. "Mae llawer o bobl o dddefnyddio pot fel arwyd taw i ddod yno o boen byd am y tynnu eu lliw eu chwilio eu 'r nywydd eu rhywbeth eu anelu a'i megis ar ddiogel a' r chwilio. "Mae rhannu odiyn y lliu o broblem beylaich gan ei bod hi a Terry y tano eu gwath a thr y tynmerth (1280°C). Mae popeth mae Beverley ym ei wneud ym cael ei dianhoi ddwydrwy, proesy swn gympwr i greu pellerei angheniodai iddi gyfeiriadu yna gyfysgu a mesur gwath llesten. Mae rhy o mae hi'n gwbl o'r fawr gwasanaeth ym lliwiau gwaelod boddhael y cae eu ddisrif o'r gytha ymchwil, calif eraill eu brawnu heibio, am yr u threwh, cyn yr all danio; mae'r rhy o'r voryd a'd ddau dianio eu cael eu gadal iddi gyfeiriad eu gyfysgu am y gwbl. "Os byddaf wedi cadw pot am bath amser y di all heb dddod yn hoff chware, mewn cyflymu nad yw'n liwddiant.

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