It can take a while for a life partnership with clay to established itself. As we have seen already from the examples of some of the other participants in the Ceramics Series, a passion for ceramics may develop not only through painting and sculpture training, but also by way of electrical engineering or clerical work.

Mary Bennett studied violin at the Royal Academy of Music, 1963-66. (Strangely enough, the well-known potter Elizabeth Fritsch also studied music at the RAM. Is there a temperamental affinity between playing a musical instrument and the manipulation of clay?) Some time after leaving music college, Mary Bennett enrolled for part-time adult education classes in pottery at Morley College, because she fancied having a go at something she had never tried at school. But so compelling did the activity become that she applied to Camberwell School of Arts and Crafts to study ceramics full time ("I'd love to make pots all day", she remembers thinking at the time), and was accepted without so much as a supporting portfolio of work to her name.

She went to Camberwell simply wanting to learn how to be a good ‘functional’ potter, but by the time she left in 1975, her ceramic horizons had expanded. (Camberwell has nurtured many of the ‘new wave’ ceramicists - Linda Gunn-Russell, Henry Pim and Angus Sutte, to name but three.) At this time, Mary Bennett’s ceramics were always “container” forms, with hollow insides and lids, though they had a tendency to spread horizontally, and slightly internally, in smooth organic block forms, so they did not look very much like casserole dishes or planters.

Upon leaving Camberwell, she set up a studio (with the invaluable assistance of a Crafts Council setting up grant) at the 401½ Workshops at Wandsworth in South London - another hotbed of innovative crafts of all kinds. Here she made jugs to sell, and also pursued her own, more wayward, work, eventually relinquishing container forms altogether, when she realised that ceramic objects did not always have to be made to put something in.

She now shares a fine workshop space in a warren of businesses tucked away down a side street near Clapham Junction, where she spends as much time as she can making sculptural ceramic objects of unmistakable singularity, which have, in the intervening period, substituted for their former horizontal emphasis a contrary vertical one.

These tall, spindly forms derive from their maker’s long-standing fascination with musical instruments, and particularly with less familiar ones - obsolete medieaval instruments, and ‘ethnic’ ones from other cultures. She of ten visits the Horniman Museum - a delightful South London treasure trove with a magnificent collection of musical instruments - and it was there that she say the “shawms” from which some of her ceramic pieces take their name. If you are one of the growing number of ‘early music’ fans, you may think of the shawm as the nasal forerunner of the oboe, but it is also the generic name for an almost universal variety
Ceramic Series

The various parts of these ceramic ‘Shawms’ seem similarly to be rolled, wrapped, bound and tied in various ways, using different thicknesses and shapes of clay, from flat sheets with moulded surface textures (occasionally unrolling to form wing-like appendages) to stringy strands. For part of the week Mary Bennett works with mentally handicapped children, and as with all fruitful teaching relationships, the children teach her as much as she teaches them. She has benefited, for instance, from watching their unselfconscious and unprejudiced ways of working clay - ways of working which she would eventually have ‘unlearned’ for herself, perhaps, but more gradually.

On to the tapering top part of each of these spindly forms is placed one or more thin discs, equivalent to the decorative lip guard of the Asian shawms. These add a focus of finely poised balance to the forms, having rather the effect of those nail-biting plate-spinning acts. They are not a fixed part of the objects, but are interchangeable, and can be chosen to suit the mood of the moment. At the opposite end, the ‘bells’ of these clay forms stand on a thicker round flat base, or some other form of stabilising structure. Mary Bennett lives surrounded by numbers of wind instruments ‘standing up’ out of their cases, on specially made stands, for her “other half” (her expression) is also a professional wind musician. (Sometimes the clay ‘Shawms’ stand in groups of two or three, called ‘Duos’ or ‘Trios’.)

Other pieces, apart from the ‘Shawms’, also relate to musical instruments, with rows of holed like flutes, or ‘pegs’ like a violin. Most recently, a double form with shapes derived from violins, their smooth surfaces scratched like neolithic rock carvings, is evocative of the interdependent musical lines of a Bach double violin concerto.

But it is possible to make too much of the literal connection between Mary Bennett’s work and musical instruments. I must admit that when I first saw some of these ‘Shawms’, I did not think of musical instruments at all. They stirred my imagination instead towards things which you might find on another planet, or strange plant-animals which could lurk on the sea-bed, or in the jungle - but nothing specific. They bend slightly as if they were listening, or as if they were moving gradually towards the sunlight, or moonlight. They have a “presence”. To live with one might be unnerving, but you would miss it when it was not there.

The ancient functional forms and well-used surfaces of old musical instruments provide a resilient basis on which to perform variations in clay. The colours and surface textures which Mary Bennett uses reflect the rich range of materials and patinas of old musical instruments, but do not copy them. One of these objects may be made in several parts, each in a different type of clay, fired at different temperatures, and decorated progressively with slips, underglaze colours, burnishing or sawdusting - a lengthy process. Whereas previously, each part of the objects was in a different, clear colour, more recently they have been ‘patterned’ in a way related to traditions of decorated ceramic ware, rather than to sculpture.

But the ‘Bach concerto’ piece seems to return to the smooth shapes of her earlier work, and shows the influence of sculptors such as Brancusi. In fact, sculpture means more to Mary Bennett than does the work of other ceramists, and there is nothing to lose by calling her work ‘sculpture’. She would like to make much larger pieces, on a ‘sculptural’ scale, but is restricted by the size of her kiln. Nobody, except convention, however, is stopping her from using other materials in combination with clay, and she is currently experimenting with wood (at the time of writing, it remains to be seen whether the results of these experiments will be on display at Aberystwyth). To further complicate things, she is also now making coloured ‘monoprints’ based on her drawings of musical instruments.

But when I visited her studio, she was busy making a very tall and attractive commissioned jug. She still enjoys making such vessels, when asked, and there is no sense whatsoever of such things being irksome necessities, or separate from her other work.

There is a great deal of tedious talk in specialised circles about the dividing line between sculpture and ceramics, but when it comes down to it, very few artists seem capable of enjoying the leap backwards and forwards over the separation. Mary Bennett is doing, she is not likely to worry, but just to get on with it, leaving that sort of thing to the pedants.

David Briers

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Mary Bennett

Gall gymryd cryn amser i barnerfaeth oes gyda chlai ei sefydliu ei hun. Fel y gwelwyd eisoes yn achos rhai eraill y gwelwyd eu gwaith yn y Gyfres Cerameg, gall caniad at gerameg ddatblygu nid yn unig yn ystod hyfryddiant mewn peintio neu gerfiumwaith, ond hefyd drwy waithio fel perianydd trydanol neu wrth wneud gwaith cleriigol.

Bu Mary Bennett yn astudio’r ffdid ym yr Academi Gerdd Frenhinol, 1963-66. (Yn rhyfedd dilgyn, bu’r grochenwraig adnabyddus Elizabeth Frith hefyd yn astudio cerddoriaeth yn yr Academi Frenhinol. Tybed o eys yna ryw barchynia anianol rhwng trin offeryn cerdd athrin clai?) Beth amser ar ôl gadael y coleg cerdd cofrestrodd Mary Bennett ar gyfer dosbarthiau addysg rhan amser i oedolion mewn crochenwaith yng Ngholeg Morley, oherwydd fod amn awydd i thrn cynnyr ar rywbeth na chafodd gyfeillion i’w wneud yn yr ysgol. Gynig ei oedd gael y gweithgarwch amn nes iddi gynnig am le yn Ysgol Gelf a Chrefft Camberwell, (mae hi’n cofio meddiwr ar yr prydl y byddai hi wrth ei bodd yn treulio ddiwrnod y gyd y cynhrych crochenwaith, ac fe’i derbynwyd er nad oedd ganddi hyd yn oed gasgliad o waith i’w ddangos i gefnogi ei chais.

Aeth i Camberwell ym unig am fod amn eisial dysgu bod yn grochenwyd ‘ymarferol’ da, ond erbyn iddi adael ym 1975, roedd ei gorwelion ym myd cerameg wedi ymledu. (Mae Camberwell wedi bod yn fagwraf i lawer o weithwyr cerameg ‘braddodiad newydd’ - Linda Gunn-Russell, Henry Pin ac Angus Sutcliffe, i’w diwedd dim ond tr.!) Bryd hyn, roedd cerameg Mary Bennett i gyd ar ffurf ‘cynhywsydd’, ym wag oddi mewn a gyda chasaed arnynt, er eu bod yn tueddu i ymledu’n llorwedol, ac yn llenoedd, yn ffurfau bloc organig llyfn, fel nad oedd lawer o debygnewyd rhyngddynt a dysgau’r caserol neu leisai ar gyfer tyfu planhigion ynddynt.

Ar ôl gadael Camberwell, sefydloedd stiwdio (gyda chymorth anhegurator neu cynhwyso gan y Cyngor Crefft) yn y 401½ Workshop yn Wandsworth ym Ne Llondain - magwraf arall i grefftau arbofol o bob math. Yna bu’n cynhrych ygygiau a’u gweithiau, ac hefyd ym din bywath llai ei confensiynol ei hun, ac o’r diwedd rhoses y gorau i’r ffurf ‘cynhywsydd’ ym gyfangwbl pan sylweddolodd oedd yr rhaid i wrthrychau cerameg gael eu llunio bob amser ar gyfer cynhywysodd ym mewn.

Ar hyn o bryd mae hi’n rhanu lle penigamp mewn gweliwyd ymlith tryblith o leordei busnes eraill i lawer sryd ocher ger Clapham Junction, ac yno mae hi’n treulio ei cymaint o amser ar y gall eu llunio gwrthrychau cerameg cerfiedig digambysonioli unigryw sydd, ym y cyfamser, wedi cyfnewid y gofyniai llorwedol blaenorol am bwysiai gwthrytherybnol unionsyth.

Mae’r ffurfau tal, meinion hyn yn tarddu o hofffer a ddisordor maith eu gweunethwr mewn offerynnau cerdd, ac yn arbenig y rhai llai cyfnewyd - hen offerynnu’r canol oesodd a rhai’ethyni’i ym perthyn i diwylliant eraill. Mae hi’n ymwyd yn am
ag Amgueddfa Horniman - trysofa hyfryd yn Ne Llundain gyda chasgluad goddiog o offernyau eraidd - ac yno y gwelodd hir, 'shawws' y cafodd rai o 'gweithiau ceramig eu hewr a eu holi. Os ydych chi'n un o'r nifer crynol o ddilynwyr 'cerddoriaeth gynnar', dicon y byddych yn ystyried y 'shawm' fel rhagfleidydd trwy'r ym lloEO'r dyfodol a gafodd o ysbrydio'r dafad tymor a ddarllen ar y fyd. Swynwyd Mary Bennett gan ofwng y 'shawms' o Asia Ganol, lle mae peithau'n tueddu i fod ym ngwy a ac ym shaministig, wedi eu rhwyddo mewn cryn anfiellaid a rhisiol coed.

Mae gwahanol rannau a 'shawms' ceramig hyn fel pe baent wedi eu rhoirol, eu rhlywdo neu eu cyimu mewn amrywio flyrdd, gan ddefnyddio clai o wasgand drych a flurf, o dameidâu gwasgad gysylltiedig a yncebuwyd wedi ei fwoiwlod (yn achlysurol y datod ei flurfio atodiadau fel awdurdod) i dres lliynol. Ar ran o'r wythnos mae Mary Bennett ym gweldwch gyda phlan o dan anfaintais meddyliol, ac fel ym mhob cyd-bethnas addysgol frwythlon, mae'r plant ym dyglynnod ym mwn i ddod plentyn o'i chwegr, ddi i ag y mae hyn ei ei ddysgu i'un hybryd. Mae hir wedi ei ei law o enwch i ddod i'w enwch i ddod i'w enwch. Wedi ei 'ddad-dysgu' drost i un yn ymheno amser, ond y byddai hynny wedi digwydd â bywyd ym Mwnt.

Ar ben blaeinlym pob un o'r flurfiau mai hyn bosodwyd un o neun rafau o ddisgrifau mai se'n cyfateb i'r ddiogelwch gwedd addurnedig sydd ar y 'shawms' o Asia. Mae'r rheini'n rhi, ffordwys o gyd-bwsedi cywir i'r flurf, ac mae eu heithaf rhyweth ym degbyr i'r perfforffau troieth platal hynny sy'n per i ddydd o ddechrau ei wyt. Gymnydd y pennaf oedd o'r wrth-yr-yrthymiau, gellir eu fyndu ddyddiol i gyfateb i hynny, a'u dewis i fyw i ddim tynnu. Yn y pen arall, Mae' hyd at flaen o' r flapiau, hynny sy'n sefyll ar sylfaen goron, wladodd, o ddeffnydd mwy trwchus, neu ar y fath arall o ddwyf i'w sefyllfogion. Mae Mary Bennett ym treulio ei hamser ym mynydd o offernyau eraidd ym sefyll i 'yfym' ym eu cyfates, ac ar siafreddwyr, gan fod ei chydamath hefyd ym offernyau eraidd ffordd fawr. (Weithiau mae'r 'shawms' clai o sefyll mewn gwripiau o ddau neu ddi o elwir ym 'deuadau' neu'n 'drieuwadau'.)

Mae gweithiau eraidd hefyd ar wahân i'r 'shawms' ym dyno perthnas ag offernya eraidd, gyda rhesi o 'duydant fel mewn fflwtr neu'r fflwtr fel'. Yn wynn ni, diwedder, cafwyd flurf ddefnyddiol fel ddefnyddiol a llyfr wedi i dyfri fel y sefyll ym dyfri. Mae' hyd at flaen o' r flapiau, hynny sy'n sefyll i'w enwch i ddod i'w enwch i ddod i'w enwch. Wedi ei 'ddad-dysgu' drost i un yn ymheno amser, ond y byddai hynny wedi digwydd â bywyd ym Mwnt.

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