CLIVE BOWEN

You have only to visit the house adjoining Clive Bowen’s pottery at Shebbear, in the wilds of North Devon, to see immediately that his declared aim of producing pots to be used is an honest one. Giant bowls and storage jars jostle for position on dressers and mantelpieces, interspersed with birthday cards and domestic trivia. Other pots are in the oven, drying on the draining board, under the sink, full of molasses, being eaten out of by cats, or sitting on the table full of windfalls. If their maker’s attitude to his ‘pots’ is not profound, it is at least respectfully affectionate, for here and there a shattered pot or plate, instead of giving up the ghost, has been stuck together again and replaced in position.

Clive Bowen was born in Wales, as far away from its rural interior as you can get, in a terraced street near the centre of Cardiff. He studied painting at Cardiff College of Art, but in 1965 decided to move to Devon to apprentice himself for four years to the potter Michael Leach, and thence to a small pottery factory in Barnstaple, learning consistency the hard way via twelve months of nothing but ‘fast repetition throwing’. At weekends during this time he would visit nearby the potter Michael Cardew, to help fire his traditional wood-fired kiln.

And indeed, you cannot venture far into the province of contemporary British pottery without encountering the monumentally influential names of Bernard Leach and his pupil Michael Cardew. From the received example of the former Clive Bowen became interested in Oriental ceramics, with their embodied attitude towards utility, considered impersonality, and the creative accident. From the direct example of Michael Cardew he learned of other, less refined world traditions of making pottery, and a respect for the ‘self-willed, flaming kiln’.

In 1970 Clive Bowen experimented with a small wood-fired kiln in his own back garden, and the following year, “when the time was ripe”, bought the run-down smallholding which is still his home and workplace. In its barn he built a full sized kiln with imposing chimney, and within two months was selling the pots fired in it. At the same time, almost as a antidote to his preoccupation with Japanese and Korean pottery, Clive Bowen developed a great appreciation of traditional British ‘country pottery’. But the country pottery trade had already dwindled to nothingness, and despite the example of Michael Cardew, Bowen had to regain contact with its neglected skills through prolonged experiment.

Regular visitors to Aberystwyth Arts Centre have had more opportunities than most to familiarise themselves with the nature of country pottery, most notably in the form of the recent travelling exhibition about North Wales Buckley Pottery, with its robust red earthenware decorated slipware (there is another way) with liquid clay ‘slip’ of contrasting colour, dipped in glaze and fired once.

Clive Bowen has followed in the spirit of North Devon’s own tradition of country pottery, which specialised in enormous pig salters and cream pans, and commemorative harvest-ware with decorations scratched into the dried slip. For the last fourteen years he has used fundamentally the same shapes, the same local materials (one type of clay, three colours of slip, two sorts of glaze), the same surface decorations, akin to those of country pottery, and the same traditional method of firing. A wood-fired kiln may sound rather primitive, but Clive Bowen’s large, round, 8-foot diameter ‘down-draught’ kiln is extremely efficient. It is also beautiful, without ever intending to be, the bottle-like shape of its brick chimney echoing the shapes of some of the vessels baked within, like sympathetic magic.

If the word ‘kiln’ conjures up something the size of a safe standing in the corner of an urban potter’s studio, think again. You can walk into Clive Bowen’s kiln and stand up in it. The experience is very like entering a neolithic burial chamber, and equally unnerving if one thinks of the enormous heat built up inside when the entrance is closed and the fireboxes stoked. Large stacks of wood (offcuts from a local sawmill) placed about the kiln to dry out, add to its arresting aspect.

At full capacity the kiln can hold 2000 pots. Only 5 to 8 firings a year are undertaken, and they are special events, requiring continual attention over a 24-hour period, and then taking four days to cool down. Clive Bowen usually shares the task of overseeing a firing with his neighbour, the potter Swend Bayer, taking turns, in shifts through the night, and offering assistance in return when Bayer fires his own kiln. It is strange to think that when the rest of North Devon is dead to the world, these brickwork beacons are intermittently warming the night air, as their ancestors had done for centuries.

To the uninitiated, the potter’s vocabulary is arcane. A ‘rubber kidney’ is not what you get through drinking too much, but an appliance used for deploying liquid clay. And do you remember, all those years ago, how the panel of What’s My Line? was completely stumped by a ‘saggar maker’s bottom knocker’? Well, Clive Bowen makes his own...
saggars - they are the simple fireclay supports which separate and protect the stacked pots during firing. Clive Bowen's own saggars are embellished with a simple wavy-line decoration which they don't need - the public will never see them. A small matter, but one which points up the nature of Clive Bowen's modus operandi.

The decoration of Clive Bowen's pots has remained consistent since he started making and selling them - simple borders and all-over designs of trailed lines, sometimes blurred with combing, and fluid line drawings of fish, shrimps and cockerels. Recently, however, without consciously pursuing it, he has begun to uncover a personally distinct attitude to the 'free' application of overlaid trailed lines in different coloured slips, seeming to want to return to his former more Oriental concerns. Potters are more modest than painters, and Bowen freely asserts that the past fourteen years have been a period of learning and preparation for 'turning this corner'.

To strive for originality was none of the country potters' business, nor is it that of Clive Bowen, which is not to say that he does not achieve it, simply by doing what he does, and going against the grain of fine-art oriented current studio pottery practice, both in its overall disposition and in its every practical detail. If his pots are sometimes slightly asymmetrical, or if the decoration has dribbled, or other small 'blemishes' are evident this does not mean that it has evaded quality control, for as long as the utility of the pot is not impaired, small accidents are accepted, in the Oriental manner, and become part of the pot. Indeed, the interplay between accident and design is an integral part of these pots, and the whole undertaking, despite its utilitarian precepts, is a 'risky business'. More 'controlled' accidents occur during firing, achieving deeper coloured rings in the centre of bowls and dishes as a result of concentrations of glaze, and mottled effects when the atmosphere in the kiln is varied.

But though Clive Bowen may throw his pots by hand in a disused cow-byre, he does it to the sounds of rock cassettes, and does not try to pretend that this is not 1984. The hardest part of the country pottery tradition to emulate is the nature of its market. People no longer sell whole pigs over winter, so the old salters (of which Bowen has picked up several prize examples at local farm sales) have been replaced by plant troughs, and other wares likewise cater for late twentieth century needs, as they should.

If you buy a pot from the showroom at Clive Bowen's pottery, his operation may appear to be the acme of self-sufficiency. And yet this is not so. Even if he does get his red slip from the banks of the stream in the field at the back of his house, he still depends on the availability of all his other materials from local middenmen, and like his predecessors, has to go further afield to secure enough sales to keep him going. Unlike the country potters, however, his wares are no longer the cheapest you can get, and must find a specialised market - a time-consuming business.

The unavoidable economics of running the business to some extent, however, keeps in line the nature of what Bowen makes. In order to keep his prices down, and avoid the necessity of teaching, which he hardly ever does, Bowen must make pots almost every single day - he has no choice, but it is a rote undergone unwillingly, and repetition has brought with it a deceptive facility. It looks easy, watching him throw half a dozen large cooking dishes on the trot, but it is the sort of rapidity of action which is borne of many years of preparation.

Clive Bowen's mentor, Michael Cardew, distinguished between the pottery tradition of art history, and the tradition of the workshop. Bowen's debt to the former has been marginal, whilst he has embraced the workshop tradition wholeheartedly, to the extent that his 17-year old son has recently begun to assist him in the day-to-day routines of the pottery. Be that as it may, Bowen's pots are more than good enough to stand up to scrutiny in an art gallery display case, and to take pride of place on your dresser, but they will not have begun to serve their purpose until they have been eaten off and washed up, brewed their first cups of tea, or baked their first potatoes.

David Briers

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CLIVE BOWEN

Does dim ond thaid i chi ymwyld â'r ty gerllaw crochendy Clive Bowen yn Shobear, ym mhafaelddion cefn gwlad Gogledd Dyfnaint, i weld ar unwaith fod ei dioglaniad mai ei nod yw cynnyrchu potiau ar gyfer eu defnyddio yn un diffuant. Mae powllni anferth a jariau storio yn ymgfrws am le ar dreseli a silffoedd pen tan ymhlith cardiau penbiwydd a mân betheuacu cartrefol eraill. Mae potiau eraill yn y fflym, yn sychu ar y bwrdd draenio, dan y sanc yn llaw triagol, yn dal bwyd cathod neu'n setyll ar y bwrdd ymhlith afalau a gwympwyd gan y gwyst. Os nad yw agwedd eu gwneuthurur tuag at ei botllau yn un gor-ddiffrôl, y mae o leidynn un sy'n dangos parch ac anwylldeb fel y dengys y ffafio fodd amli i bot neu bllâd a dorwyn wedi eu gludo'n gyfan a'u hailosod yn eu lle, yn hytrach na'u bwrw o'r neilltu.

Ganwyd Clive Bowen yng Nghymru, cyn belled oddi wrth ei chefn gwlad ag y gellid dychmygu, mewn stryd o da i teras bron yng Nghaerdydd. Astudiodd arno o Ngholeg Celf Caerdydd, ond ym 1965, penderfynodd symud i Dyfnaint i ddeulio pedair blynedd y breintia Michael Leach. Oddi yno aeth i ffitri crochennoth fechan ym Barnstaple, ac yno yna ystod deuddeg mis o ddidym ond "taflu unffurf cyflym" y dysgodd gysondeb. Yn ystod y cyfnod hwn nhw d'af i lwyr y Sui gyda'r crochennath Michael Cardew a oedd yn byw gerllaw, er mwyn ei gynorthwyo i dani ei oedd gyda greadddiacaith.

Achid yno, ni all neb dreiddio ymhell i faes crochennoth gyfoes ym Mhrydain heb ddod ar draws enwau Bernard Leach a'i ddisgybl Michael Cardew, daw a gafodd oddiannau ar harrhau o'r maes. Oddi wrth esiampl eli effedig y cynal o'r ddau y tyfodd diddordeb Clive Bowen mewn cerfaneg Ddwyreiniol sy'n ymgoffi ond agweddai ar ddefnyddio deled, amhersionolaeth gwiriad a'r adalwain greadigol. Oddi wrth ddyliannau unllongychl Michael Cardew y dysgodd am draddodiadau gyntaf efallai i'w coeth o Iunio crochennath, yng Nghymru, ei cham ar y barch at yr "odyn ffâmgoch, cysndyn".

Ym 1970 arbrofodd Clive Bowen gydag odyn fechan yn ei ardd geifr, a'r mylwedd gyaniyn, "Pan oedd yr amser yn addas", pynoddod dydydd a oedd wedi mynd ar ei waethaf ac sy'n dal y ganatb ac yn weithia i llid hyd heddlu. Yn yr ysgubor cofnododd odyn llawn fiant gyda simnai fawreddig, ac ymhen deus roedd yn gwers hu potiau a danwedd ynddi. Ar yr un pryd, ymron fel cyfrwng i adeiladu enwau ei orphoffi or crochennath Siapan a Korea, dechrournal Clive Bowen ddafadlygwyd adnabyddwyd mawr o crochennath gwil Gogledd Dyfnaint a dein. Ond roedd y fasnach mewn crochennath gwlad yn barod wedi gradd o ddiôlau a debaraeliant, ac er gwneuthaf esiamplu Michael Cardew, bu'n rhaid i Bowen ailddarganfod y medrau coll drwy hir arbrof.

Cafodd ymwelwyr cyson à Chanolfan y Celfyddydau yn Aberystwyth hefyd o gyffyl na'r hwnaf o bobl i ymgynghofio i natur crochennath gwlad, yn byw a'r arbenig gan ei chrwrr a phob dyddio diweddar ym dano'r crochennath Bwci Gogledd Dyfnaint, gyda'i llesri pridd cochion cryf wedi eu haddu'n y byd'os (dynamurf) ffridd a chyfeiriad gwyf, wedi eu trochi mewn gwrmwyd a'u tano uwch.

Dilynnod Clive Bowen yn ysbyd crochennath gwlad traddodiadol Gogledd Dyfnaint a oedd yn arbenig mewn creu llesri anferth ar gyfer haffu mora a phhaedi hufen, a crochennath dathlu cynnwys gydag addurniaid wedi eu crafu 'r slip ar ôl iddo sychu. Yn ystod y pedair mlynedd â ddeig dilweddath defnyddiodd yr un flawiau eu hanfod, yr un defnyddiau lleol (un math o glai, tli liw o slip, dau fath o wywredd), yr un addurniaid a'r arwno, cystras a'r rai a defnyddiod gan crochennath gwlad, - a'r un dull traddodiadol o dano. Dicho'n fod odyd geid yr ymwâl hytrach yn gywelog, ond mae odyn 'downright fwcw', wythnewid ar draws y hyn oedd o effeithiol. Mae haf̦ydd yn hardd, er na fwyddiol iddi fod, ac mae furt potel ei simnai frics ac ades i yna'r llesri sy'n cael eu tani o'i mewn, fel dewinnaeth gyd-oddol.
Os yw'r gair odyn yn eich awain i feddiw am rhywbeth o fiant sâf yng nghornel siwlwio rhwy grochenydd tref, ystyrnewid drachefn. Gellwch gerddio i mewn i odyn Clive Bowen a seflyd yn unionysd ynddi. Mae'n brofiad cyfleifydd i gerdded i mewn i siambl gladdu neolithig, ac yr un mor lais gan gellwch y gwres aruthrol sy'n cael ei gynullu o'i mewn pan mae'r fynedfed wedi ei chau a'r blychau tan yr ylaw. Mae'r pentrau mawr o goed wedi'i mynd a'r manorau bôr o felin goed leol sy wedi eu gosod o gwmpas yr odyd i sychu, yn ychwanegu at yr ymddangosiad trawiadol.

Gall yr odyd, pan ym llawen, gynwys 2,000 o botiau. Dim ond rhwng 5 ac 8 gwraith y fwydydd y cafif ei thanioc, ac mae'r tanio yn achlysur arbenig sy'n gofyn cynon o dros gyfnod o bedar arw ar hughan, ac yna pedal diwrnod o aros iddi oeni. Fel rheul bydd Clive Bowen yn rhannu’r darg o oruchwili’o tanio gyda'i gymod, yn grochenydd Svend Bayer, y ddau’n cymryd eu tro, ar yr ail, ddrw’r nos, ac y bydd y talu’r gymraeg gan yr ol pan fydd y Bayer yn tanio’i odyn yntau. Mae’n rhwydd meddwi fod y coelcherîl bricwraig hyn yn o bryd i wlydd y gyfnod eu awyr y nos fel y gyroes gyda’i gyfnod gyfrifol, tra mae gweddill Gogledd Dyfnaint mwy at ymyl gywmgw.


On ond er fod Clive Bowen yn ‘tafu’ ei botiau a llaw mewn hen feudy, mae’n gweithio i gefilliant ciasetau roc ac nid yw’n cysgod cymryd arno nad 1984 yr fwydydd. Yn yr anoddol i’w efelych o draddodiad yr hydrolaeth wedi'i gosod yno i farchnad. Nid yw pobl lleol yng nallfach chofan ar gyfer y gaeaf, ac felai mae’r hen llenin halltu (a mae Bowen wedi cael gafael a rhai enghraifffydd gwyb mwenn anwenithianu a ffurfu i Leo) wedi itilo’u i’l i gafnau ar gyfer tyfu planhigion ac mae eltemau eraill yr yr un modd wedi eu dargyfrau ar gyfer anghenion diweddr yr ugeinfed ganrif, ac felai y dylai pethaul fod.

Pe brech chi’n prynu pot yn yr ystafell ddangos yng nghrochenydd Clive Bowen, fe ddiwydiant busnes ymdodos fel uchafau’r hanner diddolionrwydd. Ond nid felly y mae hyn. Hyd yno oed os yw e’n cael ei slip coch o lannau’r ffon yna y cas o’u’i lân i’r ffrindiaidd, mae’n dal i ddibynnu ar fasnachwriaeth lleol am y cwbl o’i defnyddiau eraill ac felai fel ei raglannuwyd, mae’n rhai iddo fynd ymhlach na’i ardal ei hun an wmeillion cael gwiriant digon da i gymnal ei farne. Yn wahanol i ‘r crochenydd gwlad, fodd bynnag, ni oedd y ddeall i’r rhai yna fel i’r farchnad, a rhaed iddo dde i’w hyd i farchnad ar benigol - busnes sy’n mynd y llawer o amser.

Fodd bynnag mae economeg anafodaeth rhedeg y busnes i lawr radawiannu yr pennu natur y gwraith y mae Bowen yn ei gynhyrchu. Er mwyn cadw i’r brisiau i lawr ac er mwyn osgoi y rheiddryddiau o fynd i ddysgu, rhwbyth na wna oedd o anfynych law. Mae’n rhan Bowen gynhyrchu potiaw bron bob dydd - does ganddo ddinio ddiwys, ond nid arferiad syrthiwyd mae’n troi o’i anfoddog mohono, ac mae’r ailaddrod cyson wedi magu deheurolwyd twyddol. Mae’n ymdangos yna hawdd wrth ei wylio’r ‘tafu’ hanner ddiwys yno dafali ynnogion yna nhyr o arl y lliw, ond dyna’r math o sylw da hefych yna ddyni dafali yna llawer blywoddyd o ymwyrglais.

Gwahanlaetha Michael Cardew, cymharwch Clive Bowen, rhwng traddodiadau crochenydd hanes celf ac arlywyr y rheiddryddiau ymgyrwholl ym waith. Mae Bowen wedi i mewn i ymwythio yr hanes hynny. Prif yr dydd Bowen i’r traddodiadau cyntaf, ond mae ymwythio’r llwygion yr hanes hynny, i’r graddau fod i’w fab wrth yr hanes hynny. Mae Bowen wedi ddiwydiant o ddangos unigolion y na’i hafal a ddiwydiant ddosbarthu’r unigolion. Bowen dafali’r ffon i bo, mae potiaw Bowen yn fwy na theilwog o’r gosod ar yr slywedd ar unigolion a phatagoni dinas drwy y ddygwyd Bowen i’w defnyddio ar gyfer pryd o’i hyd a’u golchi wedyn, neu wedi paratoi cwpanial o’i ddeheu, neu eu defnyddio i gynhigion tawiw, 

David Briers