Bennett Cooper is not your average Essex man. To start with he is quick to point out that he lives, literally, on the very edge of the county, occupying a three hundred year old workshop on the edge of the Suffolk Stour, a broad flow of water edged by industry and port life. Neither does Cooper hail from Essex. Born near Liverpool, his parents moved to this part of the county when he was nine, and he has more or less stayed ever since. His pottery, in a pretty building reputed to have been painted by Constable, evokes the flavour of the area, an intriguing blend of the old and picturesque and the highly mechanised and modern industries of port activity.

There are much the same sort of qualities in Cooper’s ceramics. His handsome fish dishes, baking vessels, bowls, jugs and tea sets, have a strong relationship with tradition, but are essentially modern in feel, their simple, unfussy shapes well-complemented by the richness of the painted decoration. The pots themselves, whether thrown on the wheel or made by laying extruded cylinders into press-moulds, are a combination of the functional and the decorative. The recent acquisition of a Dragon extruding machine and the possibilities it offers, with its ingenious use of low technology, is proving to be highly successful in simplifying making processes and opening up new possibilities. But one of the most characteristic aspects of Cooper’s pots is their painted decoration - a challenge he longed to take on for many years before having the nerve to paint his first fish on a pot and find that, much to his delight, customers liked it. Demand has continued ever since.

At art school, Cooper was undecided whether to opt for textile design or pottery, but having got his hands on clay he decided that that was his métier. Interviews at West Surrey College of Art and Design at Farnham and Hornsey School of Art proved instructive. At Farnham, when he said that some of his favourite pots were Japanese Oribe ware. Henry Hammond dismissed his choice as, ‘nothing more than seventeenth century pop art’. Cooper opted for Hornsey, at that time, in the early 1970’s, becoming part of Middlesex Polytechnic. The ceramic department had just moved into lavish, purpose built premises with virtually every facility available. For Cooper, it also seemed to offer a more exciting and challenging staff. Here Cooper made oxidised stoneware on a smooth-firing white body, some decorated with screen printed images in platinum. ‘College was relatively well-off in those days’, he observed. The feel and decorative qualities of the work reflected his own love of the watercolours he painted in his spare time.

The Royal College of Art followed, and Cooper still debates whether the three years he spent there were worthwhile. For much of the first year, while recovering from an injury sustained in a road accident, he was unable to handle clay, but spent the time researching William de Morgan’s lustre recipes, producing with the help of a technical lecturer Joe Shipley some fine if elusive results. ‘One day I’m going to use those on my pots’, he says. For Cooper, the problem was that as a studio potter he felt he never fitted in. ‘I fell between two stools, being neither an industrial designer nor an art potter. David Queensberry seemed to have little feeling for my work, and my tutor, Eduardo Paolozzi, had little to say about my reduction-fired stoneware’.

Mick Casson was brought in to offer advice, but it was not an atmosphere conducive to the slow pace of throwing tableware on the potters’ wheel. The big break came with the Queen’s Jubilee in 1977. Inspired by the handsome slip-trailed chargers of Thomas Toft, often decorated with commemorative designs, Cooper collaborated with Clive Higginbottom to produce dishes in the Toft style portraying the Queen on the balcony of Buckingham Palace waving to the crowd. Prince Charles gave the pots his approval, and with the profit from these jokey, tongue in cheek plates, Cooper was able to spend the year following college without any financial worries.

Attracted by the idea of urban potting, Cooper took a workspace, little more than 6’ by 12’, at 4011/2 workshop in Wandsworth Road, making earthenware with slip-trailed designs. However, the studio proved too small for practical production, and Cooper soon discovered that the hot-house atmosphere of London was not for him. He moved to Essex, teaching at Southend School of Art two or three days a week. Eventually he found the building on Mistley Quay, and he together with two musical instrument makers and a furniture maker, set up the Mistley Quay Workshop. A tea shop was opened in part of the building, a new roof was added, and ten years ago they bought the freehold, in a venture which has proved to be financially and artistically viable.

For Cooper it is an ideal spot. Here he can gaze into the diving and ducking swans, admire the passing ships, and, up river, even moor his own small craft. On good days he can slope off to do a day’s fishing, an interest made evident in
the books in his workshop, where Leach’s A Potter’s Book jostles with The Art of Salmon Fishing, Freshwater, Fishes and Sea and Shore Birds. The workshop on the first floor has magnificent views across the water, and is near the main making area. On the day I visited, through holes the twenty inches across, sat slowly drying, tiles painted in the process of being painted, while long narrow dishes awaited to be decorated with characteristic Cooper fish design. Downstairs is a 36” cube top-loading kiln built by Cooper thirteen years ago to Robert Fournier’s design and has proved to be economical, efficient and practical. Cooper’s clay body, a combination of red earthenware and fireclay, plus a little sand for cooking, pots, is prepared in an old dough mixer which stands next to a table holding the moulds for his dishes. The body itself matures at 1160 C into a strong, medium dark red which looks good on unglazed areas.

A white slip serves as the base for decoration. This, he says, enables him to re-enact the process of watercolour painting, for some of the applied pigment burns away slightly to leave translucent washes of colour which add depth to the design. Patterns are built up with slip and pigment. Trailled lines of slip first create the design, then further slip is applied with sponge or brush. Pigments, often the same colour, are then put over the top of the slips to ensure a rich tonal range. Finally, the surface is sgraffiato to add life and movement. A glossy, lead based glaze brings out the colours and produces a practical surface. The designs themselves are derived from nature. Juicy fat fish seem to swim effortlessly across the surface of dishes, while the sides of jugs are adorned with huge growing bunches of fox gloves and other flowers. A deep ultramarine background gives the work added richness, intensifying the colours used.

Benn Cooper is one of those rare creatures, a full-time potter. Teaching was abandoned in favour of potting some years ago, and to be financially viable Cooper decided that ‘you have to make a range of functional ware’. A catalogue was put together and sent to craft shops and galleries round the country, and slowly orders came in. Acceptance as a Fellow of the Craft Potters Association proved a significant recognition, and now a happy compromise has been struck between making an established range of table and kitchen wares and one-off pieces for exhibition or to serve as a catalyst for new work. ‘I am’, says Cooper, ‘a slow developer, it took me ten years to develop my fish designs, but at some point I’m going to experiment with the reduction-fired lustres, and put that on my pots. ‘If that takes a further ten years they will be pots well worth waiting for.

Emmanuel Cooper

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Bennett Cooper

Canolfan y Celfyddyau Aberystwyth
Roedd yr adran gerameg newydd symud i adeilad pwrasol, gwych, gyda bron pob cyleustra ar gael. I Cooper, roedd hefyd yn cynig her llawer iawn mwy cyfrfous. Yma, bu wrthi’n gwneud llestri caled wedi’u hocsieddio ar gorff gwyn, rhai addurniadau mewn platinwm gyda delweddau wedi’u printio ar sgrin. - “Roedd y colegau’n gymharol gyfoethog yr adeg honno,” yw ol Cooper. Roedd teimlad a phrioneddol addurniadol ei waith yn adlewyrchu ei gariad yntau tuag at y dyfriwiau y byddai’n peintio â nhw yn ei amser hamdden.

Ar ol hynny, aeth i’r Coleg Celf Brenhinol, ac mae Cooper yn dal i ddadlau a oedd y tair blynedd y treuliodd yn y fan honno o unrhyw werth. Yn ystod y rhan fwyaf o’i llywddyn olaf yno, tra y bu’n gwella o anaf a gafwyd mewn damwain ffordd, ni allodd drafol i clai, ond treuliodd ei amser yn ymchwilio rysaith glowedd William de Morgan gan gynhyrchu, gyda chymorth y darlithydd technolog, Joe Shipley, rai canlyniadau eithaf llywddiannus os braidd yn annelwig. “Ryw ddwiwnod, dwi am ddefnyddio’r rheina ar fy mhortiau,” meddai. Problem Cooper oedd nad oedd yn teimlo ei fod yn ffitio i mewn fel crochenydd stidio.”Roeddwn i’n cloffi rhwng dwy stôl gan nad oeddwn i nac yn ddylynydd diwydiannol na chrochenydd celf. Nid oedd fel pe bai gan Stephen Queensberry fawr o deimlad tuag at fy ngwaith, ac er bod fy nhwtor, Edward Paloi’n dipyn o ysbrydolaeth, nid oedd ganddo yntau fawr i’w ddweud am fy llestri caled wedi’u taniad lleiaf.”

Daethwyd â Mick Casson i mewn i gynig cysgwr, ond nid oedd yr awyrgrych yn addas ar gyfer y broses araf o daflu llestri bwrd ar y droel.

Cafwyd y cyfle mawr gyda Jiwbili’r Frenhines yr 1977 wedi’i ysbrydoli gan waith llywbro slip harodd Thomas Toll, a oedd yn aml wedi’u haroddno gyda chynlluniau coffaol, dyma Cooper ar y cyd â Clive Higginbottom yn mynd ati i gynhyrchu dysglau ynnoll Toll gan bortredu’r Frenhines ar falloni Plas Buckingham yn codi llaw ar y dorf. Derbyniodd y potiau sêl bendith y Tywysog Charles a chyda’r elw o werthu’r platieiau smala yma, galodd Cooper dreulio’r llywddyn ar ôl gadael y coleg heb unrhyw waith cyfrogedig. Wedi’i ddenu gan y syniad o grochenwaith trefiol, dyma Cooper yn cymryd lle i weithio, fawr ddidyn yn fis na ‘6’ wrth 12’ yng ngweithdy 1011/2 ar Ffordd Wandsworth, lle y bu’n gwneud llestri pridd gydag addurniadau llywbro slip. Fodd bynnag, roedd y stiwdio’r rhy fach at ddibenion cynhyrchu ymarferol, ac yn fuan iawn, darganfu Cooper nad oedd

**Clawr** ‘large jar’ 20 inches
awyrghlych prysur Llundain yn dygymod ag o, a symudodd i Essex gan ddysgu yn Ysgol Gelf Southend am ddiiwrnod neu ddau bob wythnos. Yn y diweddar, cafodd hyd i’r adeilad ar Gei Mistley lle, yng nghwmni dau wneuthurwr offerianu cerdd a saer dodrefn, y sefydloedd Gweithdy Cei Mistley. Agorwyd caffi yn rhan o’r adeilad, ychwanegwyd to newydd, a deng mlynedd yn ôl, dyma nhw’n prynu’r brydles ar fenter sydd wedi’i phrofi’n un y gynhaliol yn ariannol ac yng Nghelydwydol.
Dyma fangre ddelfrydol i Cooper. Fan hyn, gall syllu ar yr eleirch yn dowcio, edymgyu’r llengau wrth iddynt fynd heibio a hyd yn oed mwear i’i gwich bach ei hun ymhellach i fyny’r afon. Ar ddiwrnodau braf, gell sleifio o’r gweithdy i bysgota, diddordeb a amlygir gan y llyfrau a gair yn y gweithdy, lle y mae A Potter’s Book gan Leach i’w wled ochr yn ochr â The Art of Salmon Fishing, Freshwater Fish a Sea and Shore Birds. O’r gweithdy ar y llawr caintaf, ceir golwg fwyd diguro ar draws y dŵr a dyma lle mae rhan fwy y gwaith creu’n digwydd. Ar y diwrnod y bûm i’n ymweld ag o, roedd ‘na bowleni wedi’u tafâu, ryw ugain modfed ar draws, yn sychu’n ar’deg, panel yn cael ei beintio, tra oedd yna ddysglau hirigul yn aros cael eu harddwnuro gyda dyluniadau pysgod nodweddiadol Cooper. I lawr griasau, ceir odyn 36” ciw b a lwythor o’r top a adeiladwyd gan Cooper dair blynedd ar ddeg yn ôl ar sail cynllun Robert Fournier, ac mae wedi profi’n economaidd, effeithiol ac ymmerferol. Bydd corff clai Cooper, cyfuniad o bried coch a chlai tanio ynoch ag ychydig dydd ar gyfer potiau coginio. Bydd y corff ei hun yn aeddefedu ar 1160 C yn gyfrwng cryf, coch tywyll, sy’n edrych yn wych ar fannau sydd wedi’u gwydro.

Slip gwyyn yw cynsail y gwaith addurno. Yn ôl Cooper, mae hyn ei aluogi i ailgreur’r broses o beintio â dyfriwiau, gan fod peth o’r prif gament a defnyddir yn lluosgi ymaith ryw ysyndig gan addala golchiadau lliw, tryloyw sy’n rhoi trwch i’r cynlluniau. Bydd y patrymau’n cael eu hadeiladau gyda slip a phigment. Llinellau wedi’u llywbro o slip sy’n y cynllun i ddechrau, yna, defnyddir rhagor o slip gyda sbwng neu frwsh. Yna, rhoddir pigmentau, yn aml o’r un lliw, droso’r slipiau er mwyn sicrâu amrediad tonaid o ychwanegol. Yn olaf, bydd yr wynyn yn cael ei sgraﬃnio er mwyn ychwanegu bywedd a symudiad. Mae gloyweddd glegienog wedi’i seilio ar blwm yn helpu i amlygu’r lliwiau gan greu arwyneb ymmerferol. Deilia’r cynlluniau eu hunain o natur. Yn ddengys pysgod mawr, tewion fel pe baent ym nofio’i ddiwydrach ar draws arwyneb y dysglau, tra bydd ochrâu’r siwgaiu’n cael eu haddurno â phwysy mawr o glaftsh-y-cwâr a blodau eraill. Rhydd cefndir uwchfarin tywyll ychwanegol i’r gwaith, gan ddywysau’r lliwiau a deffnyddir.

Aderyn prin yw Benn Cooper - crochenydd llawn-amser. Rhoddwyd y gorau i’r dysgu ar draul crochenwaith ychydig flynyddoedd yn ôl, ac er mwyn bod yn gynhaliol yn ariannol, penderfynodd Cooper fod yn rhoi i chi wneud amrediad o lestri y gellir eu defnyddio. Rhoddwyd catalog at ei gilydd ac fe’i danfonwyd at siopau crefft ac orielau o gwmpas y wlad, ac, yn ara’deg, daeth yr archebion. Bu cael ei ddherbyn yn Gymrodor o Gymdeithas y Crochenwyr Crefft yn gydabwyd aethwch, ac, erbyn hyn, trawyd ar gyfer ddeddwyd rhwng gwneud amrediad sefydledig o lestri cegin a bwrdd ac ambell eitem unigol ar gyfer arddangosfedd neu fel catalyyddion ar gyfer gwaith newydd. Yn ôl Cooper, datblygu’n ara’f fydd o. “Mi gymerais i ddeng mlynedd i ddafal wynebu cynlun y pysgod, ond, ryw dro, dwi am arbrofi gyda’r gloyweddu tanio lleihaol a’u rhoi ar fy mhotiwd.” Os bydd hyn’na’n cymryd deng mlynedd arall, wedyn, mwy fydyn nhw’n potiau gwerth aros amdanwynt.

Emmanuel Cooper.