Jill Crowley

People react in different ways to Jill Crowley’s ceramic sculptures. You may love them, or you may hate them, but you are unlikely to walk past them abstractedly and hardly notice them, as you might with a display of less assertive ceramic objects.

Jill Crowley has been one of the protagonists of a dramatic shift away from the formerly prevailing British ceramic orthodoxy of orientally self-effacing vessels with evident utilitarian form, towards extremely personalised forms of expression, often akin to contemporary trends in painting and sculpture, though usually retaining the scale and the materials of traditional ceramic ware. The first makers to cause a flutter in the ceramics dovecote, and still the leaders in the field, had been students of Hans Coper at the Royal College of Art during the sixties, and Jill Crowley was one of these.

Born in 1946 in Ireland - and still with traces of an Irish accent - Jill Crowley moved to English shores at the age of eight. A thorough grounding in pottery skills at Bristol Polytechnic prepared her for Hans Coper’s tutelage at the Royal College, where she was encouraged to find her own way, rather than be too directly influenced by his own achievements. At this time she was introduced to the craft skills of raku ware - earthenware fired at relatively low temperatures, usually outdoors in the venerable Japanese tradition, with resultant qualities quite unlike the heavy opacity of stoneware. She soon discerned the suitability of raku for her own developing brand of ceramic sculpture.

A brood of life-size raku frogs was among the first items to come from Crowley’s workshop, and some of them still sit by the pond in the idyllic oasis of her back garden in Brixton, as if about to jump in at any moment. An actual goldfish bowl, cast in clay along with its recently deceased inhabitant, formed the basis for a subsequent series of vessel-objects, upon the surfaces of which a distorted fish-eye view of the artist’s yellow spectacles (at present she sports a pink pair) curves around the outside of the bowl, and the obtruding three-dimensional goldfish comes at us from several points on the wrong side of the ‘glass’, turning our mental equilbrium inside out.

Towards the end of seventies, Jill Crowley became interested in portraiture - questioning why and how one human being should endeavour to record the external features of another. Her own portraits in ceramics were so startlingly original, within the context of the recent history of studio ceramics, that they attracted a great deal of attention at the time, and indeed, ever since.

These ceramic portraits are easily misrepresented, because when seen reduced and flattened as photographs in magazines or catalogues (and many reputations in the arts and crafts are established and disseminated in this form) they look like cartoon men - little more than “ceramic jokes”. The artist has long disparaged a magazine article reference to herself as the “joker in the pack” of the ceramics world. In fact, to encounter these
pieces at close quarters, and to look at them from all angles, usually requires much more than just a quick chore, for they possess a great presence, and a quality all of their own. In the tradition of marble busts, they are cut off at the neck, but unlike sculptural heads modelled from a solid lump of clay, they have been built up like pots by pinching or coiling, so that they are hollow, like vessels. Sometimes a pot-like opening is left in the top of the head, as if it has been trepanned, and the bulbous or protuberant nose taken over the original role of the spout of a teapot.

There is humour in these heads, of course, warm albeit acerbic, but the humour in all her work, says the artist, is incidental to its main impetus, and often surprises her when it emerges. Rather than jolly, these heads can be austere, and even a bit frightening. The grog (re-ground fired clay) in the body of the pieces encourages a fascinatingly stubby, warty surface, which the artist paints with a brush when the clay is biscuit fired, in variously coloured slips and underglazes, rather than "just dunking into one glaze". The surface textures are enormously varied; sometimes allowing the glaze to crackle (with a result like the gnarled features of W. H. Auden), or built up in knobby protuberances to an extent that the head appears to have grown from the coral reef of experience. Such features as eyes, nostrils, suits and ties are incised and painted in a linear fashion. The colouring of these pieces, like their overall presence, is not properly conveyed in a photograph. The artist is rendering the likeness of specific but unnamed person, and you have only to look at any unfamiliar non-western art tradition to realise that there is no universal fixed notion of what constitutes a 'likeness'.

A subsequent series of portraits of businessmen (types rather than specific likenesses) came into being as Jill Crowley was becoming established in her own sphere. They were the embodiments, if you like, of single-mindedness, pin-stripe uniformity, greed, but also frailty, loneliness, and existential absurdity - such as Samuel Beckett with business sponsorship.

From the world of men, Crowley then turned to portraits of male cats; quite devoid of greetings card sentimentality. Most of Jill Crowley's cats were modelled with their own elegant grey cat, but upon a determined local stray, christened Furryballs, impossible to bar from her kitchen. These ceramic cats' heads are large, small, and stand on hollow, rectangular plinths, fashioned idiosyncratically and slightly asymmetrically, providing a suitable base, but also making a wry comment on the neat plinths often provided for more polite figurines.

A quite different series, the "torso" or "wall ladies", remind me of a series of series having being variations on a simple format, a flat untrimmed rolled piece of clay, to be hung on the wall like a plaque, bearing a drawn head. The figures, squatting on the wall, protruding eye-like, as in ancient Cycladic figurines. The various combinations of surface texture and colouring accorded to this basic shape include all manner of incised and scratched lines, coloured blobs, cracked patinas, and coloured lines drawn straight into the clay while still in semi-liquid slurry form. These "torso" worry people, apparently, sometimes to the point of almost violent antipathy, for the artist has celebrated bodies which depart from the current idealized norm. She believes that "worn is beautiful", and despair that the visual evidence of getting older should customarily elicit feelings of repulsion.

The artists' more recent ceramic mermaids are archetypal sirens, blonde haired and blue eyed, but middle aged and friendly. They evolve from a simple extruded clay tube shape, flattened or modelled, with breasts and hands incised. Following a recent visit to China, the artist made a series of "instant rapid figure drawings with Chinese brushes loaded with ink, to rid herself of the Western notion of laborious and painstaking life-drawing. Some of this experience has rubbed off on the way the ceramic mermaids are painted.

The free-standing single hand sculptures, and the later series of feet, do not depict infantile appendages, but do derive from the artist's close observations of her small daughter's hands and feet. Like the mermaids the basic clay shape of these pieces is an extruded tube, with digits positioned in a similar way to the spouts of teapots, or toes incised. So they retain their own ceramic identity, which may make them appear in one sense distorted, though it is essential to the artist that the feet have the right number of toes, and that the positioning and joints of the hands should actually 'work', thus rendering them, in the artist's word, "sausagey but expressive".

Jill Crowley's daughter is nursery school age now just old enough to start making and decorating her own pots, and old enough to teach her mother a thing or two. Crowley's recent plates show the grateful influence of her daughter's unrestrained and unconditioned work, with coloured bits of clay 'rolled in', and porcelain lines trailed on to give the outline of a face, or make a drawing of a wave machine. (Until it was pointed out to her, Crowley had not realised the aqua thread through her work, with its frogs, goldfish, mermaids and waves.)

Jill Conway has exhibited her work all over the world, and sold to both public and private collections (one collector has an impressive rank of her heads all the way along his mantelpiece.) Her work could not have been produced at any other time in the long history of ceramics, and yet however much she is impelled to experiment and take risks, both formally and technically (her new kiln blew up recently), she does not 'innovate' for the sake of it. What she has always been most interested in is 'ordinary people', and what "the man on the Clapham omnibus" (or as likely, "the woman shopping on Clapham High St.") has to offer - our basic foibles and maddening complexities. The more direct and untrammeled our response is to these ceramic objects, seeing them just as they are, the more likely they are to reveal to us their manifold qualities.

David Briers
Jill Crowley

Mae pobl yn ymateb mewn gwahanol tyfryd ar gefnlluniau cerami a Jill Crowley.

Garedil yr hollolion ym 1946 - mae arlith o’i acen Wydewl i’w gwleidydd y hyd - a symudodd i Lloegr pan oedd yn wych oed. Cafodd hyfryddolasant sylfaenol trwy ym medr awdurdodwyr y boblogaeth mewn syniad ym mwyaf Prydain sy’n gyffredinol iawn. Yn gyflymu, mae Jill Crowley wedi cael ei ddarganfod fel un o’i phoblogaeth, sy’n eu haul i synhlwyddo, i’w enwi i’w chwarae i’w rhan, a’r tystiolaeth am ychydig o’i amrywiaeth. Yn ôl i’r adeiladwr, caiff ei ddarganfod fel un o’i phoblogaeth, sy’n eu haul i synhlwyddo, i’w enwi i’w chwarae i’w rhan, a’r tystiolaeth am ychydig o’i amrywiaeth. Yn ôl i’r adeiladwr, caiff ei ddarganfod fel un o’i phoblogaeth, sy’n eu haul i synhlwyddo, i’w enwi i’w chwarae i’w rhan, a’r tystiolaeth am ychydig o’i amrywiaeth. Yn ôl i’r adeiladwr, caiff ei ddarganfod fel un o’i phoblogaeth, sy’n eu haul i synhlwyddo, i’w enwi i’w chwarae i’w rhan, a’r tystiolaeth am ychydig o’i amrywiaeth. Yn ôl i’r adeiladwr, caiff ei ddarganfod fel un o’i phoblogaeth, sy’n eu haul i synhlwyddo, i’w enwi i’w chwarae i’w rhan, a’r tystiolaeth am ychydig o’i amrywiaeth.
Roedd y 'trosos' neu'r 'wall ladies', cyfres gwbl wahanol, yn cynrychioli newid cefniad ffurfio. Amrywiaiadau ar ffurf syml oedd y rhain, tamaid o glai gwastad, heb ei ddimio ac wedi ei roloi, i'r osoc ar wai fel plac ac arno lun o gorff manyw heb y pen yn cyrcydu wedi ei dynnu o'r tu blan fel 'tûk'i' o Polynesia, gyda dim ond y bronau'n yn ymwybio allan megis llwygaid fel mewn ffigurynnu Cyclopa hynafol. Mae'r cyfuniadau a amrywio o ansawdd ar anwyneb ac o lliw a roiar ar y ffurf syfænoiyn o cynnwys pob math o linellau wedi eu rhychu a'u crafu, smotiau o lliw, patina wedi cracio a linellau llw y wedi eu tynnwy symlychynnyr y daeth mewn cyflwr hanner hylll. Mae'r ffurfiau hyn ynddynt peir ar y draddodiadol ac o bwydau, fel ymddengys, yn ymmyl ar esgor ar gaineb ffyngig, gan fod yr artist wedi rhoi bri ar gyffin sy'n wahanol i'r norm sy'n cael ei ystyried ar ddefnydd yr hyn o bryd. Ei chred hi yw bod 'y treuliedig yng Nghyfrif', ac maen'n cael ei thristâu am fod arwyddion gwlediol heneidiau fel rheol yn wrthun gan bobl.

Hudoesau confensiyol, euwralw, llygadlau, yw mór-fyrnion ceramig mwy dwedder yr artist, ond rha canol oed, cuf cafellgar. Fe'u datblygiar i ffurf tiwb symlychynnyr o glai, wedi ei wasathau neu ei fofelu, gyda bronau a dwylo wedi eu hysgyrhu. Yn dilyn ymwyliad â Tselina o ddiweddar gwaith yr artist gyfres o luniau cyflym, byfyllyr, o bobl gyda bywais Tseilinad a cîn, er mwyn cysylltu ymryddiau â'r dull Gorllewinol o ddynt ffiniau manwl, llafur, o bobl, Mae path o'r profiad hwn wedi gaedar ei òl ar y dull a defnyddiwyd i llwir o'n mór-fyrnion.

Nid darlunio saelodau plant y mae cerfluniau o dwylo a'r gyfres ddiwedderacrach o gerfluniau o draed, er eu bod yn deillio o'r sylw manwl a roddodd yr artist i ddiwylo a' r thread ei merch fach. Fel yna achos o mór-fyrnion, ffurf syfænoiyn o chlai y wedi yw gweithiau hyn yw tiwb estynedig, gyda'r bysedd wedi eu gosod mewn ffordd debbyg i bigau tebot neu fwydd traed wedi eu hysgyrhu. Felly, maent yn cafwy eu hunaniaeth ceramig eu hunain, sy'n gallu peri iddynt edrych yna lliwgar o'r ystyr, er ei bod eu holl bywais i'r artist bod y nifer priodol o fwydd ar y traed a bod gosodiad a chyfyllyr â'r dwylo, o'r gwylio 'gweithio' gan eu gwneud, o'r yr artist, o'n 'debyg i seseys ond yr llaw mynegiant'.

Ebyg hyn mae merch Jill Crowley wedi cyrraedd oed ysgol felthin - dim ond prin ddechrau hwnnw ac addurno ei phothyau ei hun ond yn ddechrau hen serch hynnny i ddysgu un neu ddau o bethau i'w mann. Mae piau ad da wedi Jill Crowley yn dangos dyylanwad derbynol gwath a merch-yfawr, gan fuddug yng nghymysg eu hunain, sy'n gallu parti iddynt edrych o'r llunig merch eu hunain. Mae'r artist mewn pion a Myfyrwyr a'n llawer ogyntaifeidig, ac o'r rhain oedd yr artist, 'bach' hyd at y byd, a'r artist sy'n gweithio ar waith, a'r artist sy'n gweithio ar gyfer ymhen yr artist, a'r artist sy'n gweithio ar waith.

Mae Jill Crowley wedi arddangos ei gwraith ymhol-hran o'r byd ac wedi gwerthu a gasgliadau cyhoeddus a phheroedd (mae gan un cansgwyll rang druadwistio o' pherchau ar hyd ac ei lliffl ben tan). Ni allai ei gwraith fod wedi cael ei gynhyrchu ar un i'nhwch ar y byd a llygadau a thochegau a'r art. Mae Jill Crowley wedi adadau o'i eiddo sy'n drifarau, ac o'i gyfraith a'r artist sy'n gweithio ar waith, a'r artist sy'n gweithio ar gyfer ymhen yr artist. Mae Jill Crowley wedi arddangos ei gwraith ymhol-hran o'r byd ac wedi gwerthu a gasgliadau cyhoeddus a phheroedd (mae gan un cansgwyll rang druadwistio o' pherchau ar hyd ac ei lliffl ben tan). Ni allai ei gwraith fod wedi cael ei gynhyrchu ar un i'nhwch ar y byd a llygadau a thochegau a'r art. Mae Jill Crowley wedi adadau o'i eiddo sy'n drifarau, ac o'i gyfraith a'r artist sy'n gweithio ar waith, a'r artist sy'n gweithio ar gyfer ymhen yr artist. Mae Jill Crowley wedi arddangos ei gwraith ymhol-hran o'r byd ac wedi gwerthu a gasgliadau cyhoeddus a phheroedd (mae gan un cansgwyll rang druadwistio o' pherchau ar hyd ac ei lliffl ben tan). Ni allai ei gwraith fod wedi cael ei gynhyrchu ar un i'nhwch ar y byd a llygadau a thochegau a'r art. Mae Jill Crowley wedi adadau o'i eiddo sy'n drifarau, ac o'i gyfraith a'r artist sy'n gweithio ar waith, a'r artist sy'n gweithio ar gyfer ymhen yr artist. Mae Jill Crowley wedi arddangos ei gwraith ymhol-hran o'r byd ac wedi gwerthu a gasgliadau cyhoeddus a phheroedd (mae gan un cansgwyll rang druadwistio o' pherchau ar hyd ac ei lliffl ben tan). Ni allai ei gwraith fod wedi cael ei gynhyrchu ar un i'nhwch ar y byd a llygadau a thochegau a'r art. Mae Jill Crowley wedi adadau o'i eiddo sy'n drifarau, ac o'i gyfraith a'r artist sy'n gweithio ar waith, a'r artist sy'n gweithio ar gyfer ymhen yr artist.

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