Walter Keeler has lived since 1976 near Monmouth, in rural Gwent, but he is not a countryman by birth. He was born in London in 1942, and his earliest encounters with pottery date back to his childhood, finding fragments in the mud of the Thames foreshore. He also remembers childhood visits to museums, which spurred him to purchase old pots with his pocket money - pots which are still on display in his living-room, it might be added.

Keeler learned his basic pottery skills at Harrow School of Art. Setting up on his own, Keeler at first made stoneware according to the well-established 'craftsman potter' precepts of Bernard Leach. But, worried that he might be on 'automatic pilot' for the rest of his life, and facing problems of financial insecurity whatever he did, Keeler short-circuited his own potential boredom by deciding to allow his very personal inclinations as a potter to surface, and to follow them wherever they went, which turned out to be towards an invigorating hybrid of traditional forms with his own modern lines.

Keeler's pots are undeniably 'modern' - they have a feel which accords with the present, which you might describe as 'hard-edged' or 'tight', with very few fancy frills, but with a flair and ebullience which sets them apart from routine tableware. It is difficult, however, to pinpoint what it is that makes them so 'up to date', because they don't follow any of the current stylistic fashions in hand-made ceramics (though they may themselves be followed). A Keeler pot is instantly recognisable, should you catch sight of one in a glass showcase, in a craft shop, or on a kitchen shelf - not least because his output is unified by a narrow range of colours and an assortment of distinct shapes. His domestic tableware is the sort which is actually likely to be used, though each vessel is thrown individually, as a special event, rather than repeating thoughtlessly a previously established format.

It is here, in fact, on the wheel, that the source of Keeler's originality lies, for only on the wheel does everything which goes into his pots consciously materialise. It is here, he says, that his ideas begin.

Keeler throws his pots on a silent kick wheel, without a noisy motor or even the clatter of a foot treadle. This fact need not of itself be of any importance (he says that it allows him to listen to Afternoon Theatre on Radio 4 more easily), but it seems to speak volumes about how these pots come into being. The initial and most important part of their making is (without being at all mystical about it) kept as clear and free of mental obstructions as possible.

When the basic shape of the vessel has been thrown, it is cut off its base on the wheel, and 'altered' in various ways with hard instruments, just as the rounded and soft shape of a loaf may be incised or impressed to define its shape prior to baking. The vertical creases in the sides of many of Keeler's teapots and jugs are formed by hitting the soft thrown shape with a metal tool - always an exciting act for Keeler, for it determines the unpredictable exact shape of the body of the pot.

The 'altered' shape is then replaced on a flat base, but usually it is trimmed first so that it leans backwards slightly - not like the Tower of Pisa, but just enough to lend an air of jauntness and energy to the piece. A simple but effective device, with no historical precedent that Keeler can remember.

The edges of the pots may then be emphasised by the addition of 'ribbing' while the pot is still wet, and simple decoration added, such as small circular impressions, like neolithic 'cup marks', close to the juncture of crease and edge. The rims of bowls and plates are cut to shape decoratively when the clay is 'leather hard'. The close-fitting, sometimes globular lids of Keeler's teapots, and their emphatic, tubular handles and spouts, are skilfully but unequivocally 'stuck on'.

The pots are fired in a brick kiln built in the form of a self-supporting arch, up the insides of which lick, as Keeler puts it, a 'whacking great flame' from an oil fire. At almost white heat, salt is thrown into the kiln through a small opening, producing clouds of white vapour within which the sodium in the salt combines with the silicates in the clay to produce a glossy coating with the well-known 'orange peel' salt-glaze surface texture, which Keeler likens to water condensing on a
window pane (the more smoothly textured parts of the pots have been dipped in a special slip called 'engobe'). The colour of the pots comes from pigments which are sprayed on prior to firing. Traditional salt-glaze colours are usually browns, but Keeler uses a cool, blue-greyish, metallic colour for all his ware.

All crafts are messy activities, with an irksome element of "clearing up after you". A potter, in particular, who wishes to pot another day, cannot quite get away with letting the residue of his craft build up around him, like Francis Bacon working amongst mountains of used-up tubes of paint. 'Salt-glazing' pottery is a particularly messy process, requiring constant attention. You have to really want to make salt-glazed pottery to carry on doing it.

The complexity of the salt-glaze firing process perhaps reduces the urge to otherwise over-decorate pots, as well as to some extent determining the form those pots take, for the bottom of the pots rest on wadding during firing; the wadding adheres to the pot and must subsequently be ground off.

As with other obsolescent craft techniques currently enjoying a revival, printed information about salt-glazing is scant or not dependable, and Keeler has had to learn largely by trial and error. Even then, there is always an element of unpredictability built into the process. Keeler only reluctantly admits that he now possesses an enviable technical expertise, suggesting instead that he tends his kiln during a firing with the experienced intuition of an improvising musician.

The forms and minimal decoration of Keeler's pots echo their maker's affection for the hybrid shapes of Romano-British pottery (unselfconsciously melding Roman and Celtic forms), country slipware, and the pottery of the early industrial revolution. But to grow such a list of 'influences' might suggest that Keeler sits down with a pencil, lists the bits he likes best in these old pots, and consciously sets out to incorporate them all in his next batch of pots. This is far from the case.

Keeler has also come to appreciate, through his pots rather than the other way round, the artistry of common industrial metal work, such things as oil-cans and stove pipes, to which we never give a second thought, or even a first one.

The old oil-cans which Keeler has saved from disused workshops, and which he now keeps by him, were made without thought to their aesthetic qualities, yet their shapes are worthy of the anonymous Japanese folk craftsmen so highly prized by Bernard Leach. We have been so busy gazing eastwards that we failed to see some perfect examples rusting under our own noses. Here again, however, it is important to realise that Keeler has never consciously transcribed the qualities of oil-cans into his own clay vessels - the realisation has come 'after the event'.

The primary condition which Keeler imposes upon himself before he makes new work is that it should be interesting to make, for he knows by now full well that if he is bored or reluctant, the chances are that it will show in the end result. He knows also that his pots are not 'necessary', in the way that toilet paper is necessary, and that people looking his way are seeking something more than respectable evidence of competence or even technical virtuosity.

So he does not mind if you laugh out loud at his pots, as some do. He does not produce 'ceramic jokes', or even clever pastiches, but all the same what he does is far from being cold and lifeless. The handles on his recent dishes, like three-dimensional squiggles, and the way his jugs and vases 'lean' bumptiously, are reminiscent of the line drawings of the American master of exuberant graphic art, Saul Steinberg - an unlikely comparison, it's true, but a great compliment all the same.

With ceramics exhibitions these days, you can never be sure what you're going to get, or how you are supposed to respond to it. It is the confusing variety of things made in clay at the moment which make any attempt at elucidation such as this advisable. Otherwise, it would not be necessary to say anything at all about Walter Keeler's pots (apart from giving you their prices). It is self-evident what they are - jugs, teapots, dishes, etc - and either you like them, or you don't.

If you do like them, one thing is for sure. The qualities of Keeler's pots have a tendency to creep up on you gradually, but his reputation is increasing at a more rapid pace. His order books are full, and he is beginning to achieve an international reputation. Don't wait - this may be the last chance you'll get.

David Briers
**WALTER KEELER**

Bu Walter Keeler yn byw ger Trefynwy, yng Nghymru, er 1976, ond oed o ddim ar wreiddiol. Ganed ef ym Llundain ym 1942, ac mae ei ymwneud cynysaf à chrochennwaithi ei hyd a'i blentynodd, pan ddeuai o hyd i damediau ym y mae ar iannau Tafwys. Cofia hefyd iddo ymwdâl ag amgueddfeydd pan yn blentyn ac i hynny ei ysgogi i wario peth o'i arnon post at hen lestri - a gellir ychwanegu fod y llestri hynny yn dal i gael eu harddangos ym ei ystafell fyw.

 Dysgodd Keeler fedrau sylfaenol ei grefft fel crochennwyd yr Ysgol Gelf Harrow. Ar y cychwyn, ar ôl dechrau ar ei llaw ei hun, bu Keeler yn cynhyrchu crochennwaith caleid yn ôl symiau profedig Bernad Leach ynglyn â'r 'creftwr crochennwyd'. Ond, oherwydd ei bryder y gallai drefuilio gweddil ei oes yn gweithio'n gwbl beiriannol ac a chan fod problemau ariannol ym ei wynebu beth bynnag a wn, mewn addasu Keeler osgoi ei ddiflannu potensiail ei hun drwy benderfynu rhoi rhywydd hynny i'w dueddadau personol fel crochennwyd a'u dilyn i ble bynnag yr arweiniad, - i gyferiadau croesiad bywgiog o ffurfiau tradodiadol a'i lliniaw modern ei hun fel y digwyddodd.

Ac ni ellir gwadau nad yw llestri Keeler yn 'modern', - mae ei newydd yn gyfrwys â'i presennol, gellir ei galw 'ymyl-galed' neu'n 'dynn', gyda dim ond ychydig iaawn o ffurfiau fflatiau, ond gyda gwerthau a bywgiognewyd sy'n eu gwneud y wahanol i lestri arferol. Fodd bynnag, mae hi'n anodd dodi bys ar yr hyd sy'n eu gwneud mor gyfoes gan nad o ydym yn canlyn unrhywun o'r ffarson sy'n boblogaidd mewn cerameg llaw ar hyn o bryd (er enallaf fagu dilyn eu hunan). Gellir adnabod un o lestri Keeler ar unwaith dim, ond o gael cip olwg amno mewn cas arAGMA sinsio gwydr, mewn sipol crefydd neu ar si� mewn cein, - ac nid y rhwym lliwaf am hynny byd ei gynnrych wedi ei uniaethu gan ystod fyffyd o lwiau ac amrywiadaeth o ffurfiau gwbl boblodiad. Mae ei lestri bwrdd domestig o'r fath sy'n debyg o gael eu defnyddio, er bod pob llestr y cael ei 'daflu' yn unigol, fel digwyddiad arbennig, yn hytrach na byd ei unwaith o ddefodol ar ffurf sefydlog.

Yn wir, yma ar y droel y mae tarddiad gwreiddioldeb Keeler, oherwydd dim ond ar y droel y daw popeth sy'n rhan o'i lestri i fodolaeth ymwybodol. Yma, meidd ef, y mae tarddle ei syniadau.

Mae Keeler yn 'taflu' ei lestri ar droel droed dawel, heb beiriant swylyd na hyd yn oed glician troedlad. Dydyl i fiETHI hon ddim bod o unrhyw bwys ynddi ei hun (mae o'n dweud ei bod yn ei gwneud ym haws iddo wrando ar 'Afternoon Theatre' ar Radio 4), ond mae fel pe bai'n llefaru cyfrofau am y flordd y mae'r llestri hyn yma eu creu. Mae'r rhain gyfrwys a phhwyseio o'r blass (a hynny heb fod yn gyfrwys o gwbl) yn cael ei gadw mor rhyhd o chlir ac ò phhosib o'r rwystrau meddyliol.

Pan mae ffurf sylfaenol y llestr wedi ei 'daflu', caiff ei dorri oddi ar ei sylfaen ar y droel a'i 'newid' mewn gwahanol ffyrdd gydag arall caeled, yr unigol fel y caiff ffurf Gron, foddai torh ei rhychu a'i blychu i haddurno ac i ddiffinio et siap cyn ei chraeu. Ffurfiyr yr cych unionsynt yr ochrau llawer o debitoau a bygiala Keeler ddyw daro'r siapau meddyliol wedi ei 'taflu' gydag etrnf metel - tseg gyfrwys i Keeler bob amser, gan mai dyna sy'n penderfynu union ffurf annarogon corff y llestr.

Yna gosodd yr ffurf 'ddiwygiedig' yna ôl ar sylfaen wastad, ond fel rheol wedi ei ddrigo'n gynaf neu ei fodyn gogydddi o wyddiog tuag yn ôl - nid i'r un gwaith i'r Thwra Pisa, ond yna union diddych i roi argraff a sioncrwydd hyderus ac egw i rwychi. Dydyl iymyl ond, effeithiol, heb unrhyw gynnaid hanesyddol y gall Keeler ei chofo.
Yna tra mae'r llestr yn dal yw lwyd gellir pwyseisio'r ymlyon drwy ychwanegu rhesi a mân addurniadau megis argraffiaid bychain crynnog, fel 'marciau cwpw' neolig-w, y agos i'r cwslltwth rhwng yr a'r myli. Torri'r ymlyon powi on a phlatiau a siapau addurnion pan mae'r clai 'cynt galed 'lledd'. Caint caedrau tebitoau Keeler, rhai ohonynt yn gynnyon ar cwbw'n fisio'n gloes, a'r deulon y'r pigau llwchadd pendu'r y broses. Mae Keeler yn amharol iawn y gynhyrchu gwasg ar lefel y broses sy'n brin a gherllwch.

Gwell ganddo awgrymu ei fod yn gyflog a'i rhaid i mewn o'i chwech i mewn. Dwi'n meddwl ei fod yma'r llestrau'r petai sy'n cael ei chwistrellu arnynt cyn eu tanio. Llwyddau tir y broses cyflog a'i rhaid i mewn i mewn. Dewedi sawd efo mewn hew, ac addasu i lawr yr awdur. Mae mae Keeler yn ei defnyddio llw metalig, llydawsl, cleaer ar ei waith i gyd.