Fifteen minutes from the centre of Swansea, down a lane which turns into a track and ends up at a farmyard where furry little cats rush about excitedly at your arrival, Anna and Sarah Noel have their ceramics studio, in a converted cow byre to one side of the old farmhouse which is their family home, almost literally a stone’s throw from romantically named Brandy Cove.

Separate doors lead to Sarah and Anna’s workplaces, but it is impossible to go through the wrong door, as they both lead into the same room, where their closely adjacent areas are separated only by a set of shelves and a gas heater. Thus, in architectural form, is embodied their unusual symbiotic working relationship, fruitfully combining separateness and commonality.

Anna and Sarah are almost contemporary sisters, who share a lot of interests. They both chose to study ceramics at art college, but in different places — Anna at Bath Academy in Corsham, and Sarah in Bristol Polytechnic, in the relatively short time since leaving college, they have both established a firm predilection for making non-utilitarian ‘figurative ceramics’, predominantly (though not exclusively) exploiting the crisp, light quality of ‘raku’ firing.

Sometimes, even their subject matter coincides, though it is not difficult to tell their work apart, for like its makers, it has its own distinct character. Although they have sometimes shown their work together, as here, at other times they have preferred to promote their work through separate outlets: Anna has sold work through the Beaux Arts Gallery in Bath, for example, and Sarah through Anatol Orient’s in London — both at the top of the ceramics gallery league table, by the way.

Anna specialises in making raku animals, which are usually more rounded and modelled than Sarah’s work, which is most often made from single flat slabs of clay, and involves more linear surface drawing. But Anna’s animals too sometimes have legs or tails cut from slabs of clay, reflecting her enjoyment of such things as tin toys and folk art. Indeed, the range of influences which makes itself felt on both Sarah and Anna’s work draws from a mish-mash of many visual traditions, though mostly those which have tended to be marginalised through their anonymity by being called ‘ethnic’, ‘folk’, or ‘mediaeval’ art — toys, circuses, Ikons, Inca ceramics, Assyrian art — that sort of thing.

Some of Anna Noel’s raku cats are small and discreet, sitting on their haunches with their ears back looking slightly distraught. None of them, in fact, is the cuddly, chocolate box sort of cat, and some of them, with incised spots or stripes, in dry yellows, greys, or carbon blacks, are more like votive objects or temple guardians. The larger cats, standing on all fours, sometimes become like indistinguishable mythical beasts with rows of fearsome teeth. Some of them really are lions, with 2D ‘cut-out’ manes, legs and tails, like Anna’s other circus animals, hovering between theatrical and mystical fantasy, where a circus horse can become a Pegasus.

The architecture of fantastically conjectured theatres is another theme with which Anna is currently preoccupied. A basic slab-made box form is given a roof with flat cut-out finials, flags, or onion domes, while other architectural details are drawn and then incised on the surfaces. A stage, like that of a toy theatre, is cut into one side, complete with players.

Although she seldom makes vessels, Anna is not at all averse to so doing when asked, and has made to commission recently, for example, a teapot version of her recurrent theme of a walking cat holding a whole fish in its mouth, through here a much smaller cat (the teapot lid) sits on the larger cat’s back.

Sarah Noel has always liked drawing, and still fills sketchbooks with flowing pen and ink drawings of buildings, boats, angels, and ecclesiastical grotesques, with an economy of line reminiscent of the sort of graphic expression which seems to be second nature to artists in Eastern Europe. It is not surprising, perhaps, that her paintings appeal to Sarah enormously, and she never tires of looking at them.

Most of Sarah’s pieces are relatively large, free-standing figurative images, comprising two
Ceramic Series

identically shaped cut flat slabs of clay, which are worked on separately to an almost complete pre-glazed stage before being 'sandwiched' together with the top edges meeting exactly, and the straight bottom edge held apart to form a base on which the piece stands. Though it may not be obvious when viewing these free-standing pieces in a display cabinet, they are double-sided, with an equal amount of incidence on each surface.

These pieces fall into several series, which include mermaids, singly or in couples, some sitting on their tails which form a support for the piece; boats glazed in metallic reds and blues, ploughing through curly waves with sailors and gulls (including a recent series based on drawings made in Swansea docks), and a lady violinist, sometimes on horseback.

Sarah also makes one-sided wall plaques. Lately she has been making these in several parts, to avoid warping during firing, and this practical device has added its own formal, pictorial quality to the final result, producing economical, hieratic images in smoky unglazed raku greys, with blue and turquoise extremities. Other, smaller plaques, on similar themes, are given a shiny all over thick alkaline glaze, usually reserved for blues, as it can only be applied to a piece which can be glazed flat, and would run off the sides of a vessel.

Sarah and Anna fire their work together in a gas-fired kiln in a brick shed in their back garden. Together, using pairs of long tongs, they remove the pieces from the kiln whilst they are still glowing hot, and plunge them into an old tin bath full of sawdust. There, the fired clay continues to 'reduce' as long as it is covered with sawdust, becoming 'carbonized' black. With experience and ingenuity, Sarah and Anna have learned how to exploit the subtle greys, blacks, and crazing effects produced by this ancient technique, so that even an unglazed 'monochrome' piece is replete with wonderful subtleties of tone and surface texture.

Many potters make 'non-functional' ceramics as a less numerous parallel activity to their main output, but Anna and Sarah Noel's unequivocal pursuit of making almost entirely non-functional figurative ceramics is quite unusual. It is what they want to do most, and what they do best, and the most uplifting thing about what they do is that it could so easily have been awful. They might have worried too much about whether or not it was art, and overstepped themselves into pretentiousness. Or their work might have become little more than a pastiche of the many influences which go into it, and might have become, at worst, whimsical giftware. Instead, Sarah and Anna's work, in its different ways, treads an invigorating tightrope, being playful and enjoyable but with an 'edge' to it, both in terms of character and technique.

David Briers
C

hwarter awr o ganol Abertaawe. I lawr ffordd sy'n ddirywio'n llwybr ac yn arwain i fuair fiern ille mae cathod bach blwch yng nhref o gymryd o gymaes with i chi gymeriad; mae stwffio cerameg Anna a Sarah Noel. Beudy wedi ei addasu yw'r stwffio ac mae'n sefyll wrth ochr yr hen fferm sy'n ganfod iddynt, bron i daffaid caireg o'i baes sy'n ddyn yr enw rhannau o 'Brandy Cove'. Mae dau llawn gwahanol yn arwain i mewn i weithiau Sarah ac Anna, ond acos dim posib i chi ddefwis y dews anghywer gan fod y nail a'i llall yn arwain i'r ystafell, ac yno mae libar y ddwy yn apos iawn i'r glwyd heb dim ond ychydig o siflgoed a gwrsafodd ry'n eu gwahanu. Dyna sut, mewn teimlad pensaemio, yr ymgorffori perthynas waith symbiog fel ddywy, gan gyflunio awrfa garnwdd a chyllfadenwdd mewn modd tynnantion. Dwy chwas oddedur fyn i oed yr Anna a Sarah ac mae ganddi lawer o ddiddordebau yng nysyru. Dewis y ddwy oedd astudio cerameg mewn coleg cellt, ond mewn lleoedd gwahanol — Anna yn Academi Caerfaddo yn Corsham a Sarah yn Mhlythtechneg Brysate. Yn y cyfnod cymhralol yr ers iddynt adalai coleg, mae'r ddwy wedi magu hoifir arbenigig o gymrychu ‘cerameg’ fiiguroi addurno, gan de'nhydriod i'w fwyar arbenigig (ond nid yr gyfryngwch) ansawdd ysgafn, bendiant, tanu 'raku.

Weithiau, mae hwy yn oed eu pwnciau yr un fath, er nad yw'r anodd gwahanol nhw y nail oddi wrth y llall, oherwydd, fel eu gwneuthuwyw, mae iddynt eu cymeriad arbenigig eu hunain. Er bod y bACHISUR yw'r aelodau eu gwahanol sy'n gwybod i glwyd, fel y gwneir yrna, ac adegau eraill bu'n wele gandynt gescio hywyddo eu gwahan mewn mannau gwahanol. Er enghraifft mae Anna wedi gwerthu ei gwahan ddyw o 'Beaux Arts' yng Nghaerfaddon, a Sarah yn 'Anatol Oriental' yng Llundain — y nail le a'i llall gyda llaw ar ffigat yntelau cerameg.

Mae Anna'n arbenigia cymeriad ceramieig mae'r ddwy wedi gweud. Mae ganddi lawer o darluniau linellog a'r aelodau, mae ganddi lawer o darluniau linellog ac ynychwys mwy o darluniau linellog a'r aelodau, mae ganddi lawer o darluniau linellog ac ynychwys mwy o darluniau linellog. Mae ganddi lawer o darluniau linellog ac ynychwys mwy o darluniau linellog. Mae ganddi lawer o darluniau linellog ac ynychwys mwy o darluniau linellog.
henddom ar yr arwyneb. Mae llwyfan gydag actorange arno, a mewn model o theatr, wedi ei ddomi i un ochr y blwch.

Er mai anam y bydd Anna'n cynhyrchu lleisiaid, nid yw hi'n annibyniad i wneud hynny pan o wybod ydym iddy ac yn ddiweddar mae hi, er enghraiff, wedi ymateb i gornisiwn dwy lunio teritwrflut tebod o'i theima gyda'r goth eu cenhod gyda physgôdwy yw cyfan ei ycheg, er fod yma gath lliwrail fâl (caeddyd y tebod) yn ei oesodd ar gefn y gath fawr yw yr enghraiff yma.

Bu Sarah Noel bob amser i hyfryd o ddarlunio, ac mae hi'n dal i lenwi liwiau anrhyd gyda llunciau pin ac inc. Ei terorrog o adeiladu'r gyntaf, angylion a cherfliwiau eglwysig grotseg, a hynny mewn arddull gyda'n swn a siglffig yr henw o'r tynennydd yr waith y mae'n ei oeso'n arna i'w wthyn nhw'n ei wneud ar gyfer'r wrthod arbennig o'r waith hwn. A oes yr wy, mewn amser a fu a wneud y waith hwnnw'n wneud cabinet araddangos, maent y ddwy ochrog gyda'r n ail ochr cyn bwysic at r 'llai.

Mae'r gwelhaith yno'n rhannau o amryw gyfresi gan gynnwys mon-fyonion, rheil unigol neu'n gypsiol, sy'n rhoi ochr yn ystod yr yr yno. Mae'r ddyfais ymarferol hon wedi dod ag ansawdd ddarlunio, flurtli'r i'r cynhyrchu terfynol, gan gynhyrchu dwlwsau cynnil, graedeg mewn llwyd 'tudah' ei wythnosodd gyda'n ymgyrion ym mhen wahanol fathau o lai. Cafodd plasau eraill yno, ar themacu cyflymdeb, eu gorchuddiau ei gweddio ac alcalaidad trwchus, disgwar, a ddefnyddiaf fel rheid o gyfer teitlau gan na ellir ei defnyddio ar ddim ond anrhydodau gwasgaf gan y byddai llefodi o'i araf i leith leisn.

Mae Sarah ac Anna yn tano eu gwaith ar y cyd mewn odyn new mewn sied frics ym eu garedig felion. Gan weithio gyda'i gyflyd a defnyddio gellir i hyno maent y byddai'r waith o olynnu mewn wyniau ac ym ei dddod mewn hen dwbla tun y wlinw o lwch lif. Yna, mae'r olai yna'n parhau i rydwir yno cyein belled a'i fod wedi ei oruchuddio i lwch lifnes oedd ef wedi ei garbodedig ni ddù. Dwy eu profiad a'u dyfaisgarwch, dysgodd Sarah ac Anna sut i fantasio ar y llwiau ddu a llwyd cynnil a'r

\(\text{\textit{Anna Noel}}\)

\(\text{\textit{Photo: J. Barnett}}\)

\(\text{\textit{CANNAN Y CELFYDDYDAU ABERTYSWTH}}\)

\(\text{\textit{David Briers}}\)