GEOFFREY SWINDELL

Geoffrey Swindell stands in front of the shelves arrayed with his work dating back to the late sixties right up to the present. He picks up one of his recent pots, cups it in his hands and clasps it to him. The gesture expresses it all: "I just want people to respond to their beauty and craftsmanship, to the pleasure of holding them, to delight in the surfaces. It is not in the least complicated." Over the years his philosophy as a maker has been refined and simplified. He may indeed be returning to his roots.

His roots go straight to the heart of British ceramic traditions. He was brought up in Stoke on Trent and at fifteen went to college for a year to train as a painter: the aim was to gain the skills to be a painter of faces on figureines. It was a man's job and it was comparatively well paid. The women who painted the dresses were paid much less. But the experience at college broadened horizons, he studied hard to obtain some academic qualifications so that he could follow the DipAD course at Stoke and then he went on to the Royal College of Art whose MA course has produced so many of Britain's best known artists and ceramicists. His ten years of training took him from the simple expectations of a working class background to the bastions of privilege of the elite London art world. He has had to come to terms with these polarities in his work and in his life.

The synthesis becomes clear with a visit to his home in a pleasant Cardiff suburb. Children ride their ponies along the street on Sunday mornings. I was warned that it would not look like a pottery and the freshly painted semi-detached house with its neat garden gave nothing away. Only a more concerted inspection revealed the flaws in the conventional exterior. A person of passions lives inside: motor bikes, mechanical toys, shells, garden ornaments, science fiction images, drums. These are not the polite tastes of the neighbours. His collections of objects displayed in cabinets invade several rooms in the house. The front room is his workshop and there is another workshop in the garden for glazing and firing. Geoffrey Swindell lives here with his wife and two young sons.

Teaching ceramics at South Glamorgan Institute of Higher Education occupies four days a week during term time. The other three can be used for potting, but family activities are an essential part of his life. A balance has to be achieved and he considers all three aspects, teaching, domestic life and potting to be equally important. Inevitably his other commitments restrict his ceramic output, but the production corresponds to his needs as a maker and to the requirements of the market. His year is planned in a cyclical schedule and he does not work at potting during the summer vacation but gives that over to projects connected with the house. Designing and constructing a climbing frame for the children gives him just as much challenge and satisfaction as making a pot. He feels himself to be unusual in this. At the same time he is quick to assert how essential it is for the teacher to remain a practitioner.

Like many ceramicists working in porcelain his pieces sell best in Germany and the USA. Ten years ago porcelain was at the height of fashion within the British avant-garde in ceramics but fashionable styles now emphasise more painterly and expressive sculptural qualities. Currently big is beautiful. He is no longer working at the forefront of taste. Is he worried? Well, perhaps just a little but there is an integrity and good sense to his
system and rhythm of production which is right for him. Just at the moment there is little
time for radical rethinking and no desire to
make that kind of upheaval. Compare this
with a fellow student at the Royal College,
Jacqueline Poncelet. She too first made her
name in small-scale delicate porcelain but has
now left the craft world behind and
designates herself a sculptor. Her large freely
painted stoneware objects have an organic
suggestiveness reminiscent of sea creatures
and have some qualities not so dissimilar to
Geoffrey Swindell’s forms. The dichotomy is
symptomatic of contemporary crafts and their
aspirations within the more prestigious art
world.

Impatient with the pretentious and
complicated ideas behind much avant-garde
craft he has reacted against it by espousing
and reasserting the old values of simple
craftsmanship and the beautiful object.
However on a slightly more philosophical note
he does assert that he likes the idea that the
pot should have a sense of ‘still becoming’
emphasising the journey rather than the
arrival. The form should have potential like a
living being as if it might breathe, swell up,
spin round and defy its static nature. Mystical
notions of pottery are usually associated with
the Leach tradition, but in fact this was
something instilled in him by Hans Coper, his
teacher at the Royal College.

The sculptural and formal aesthetic of Ruth
Duckworth, Lucie Rie and Hans Coper is the
tradition that he identifies with as distinct
from the folkcraft sources of Bernard Leach
and his followers. He has no desire to dig his
own clay or construct his own kiln. Modern
ceramic technology, electric kilns and bought
in materials are quite satisfactory for his
needs. It is what he does with it that matters:
the object is the end product not the lifestyle.
He is an unrepentant modernist despite the
fact that his preference for highly finished and
refined ceramics can be related to his
childhood memories of the Stoke Museum
and his delight in the precision of early thrown
and turned pieces of Staffordshire ware
produced by firms such as Wedgwood.
Although some of his early pots are in
stoneware Geoffrey Swindell has consistently
worked in porcelain for over twelve years. A
few helmet-like forms about a foot high were
made in the mid seventies but otherwise his
work is of small scale, sometimes even tiny.
In early years he worked with closed forms,
evocative delicate objects that had

connotations of tiny organisms, shells,
snails, seed heads, nuts and pebbles
smoothed from the action of the elements.
More recently the pieces have evolved into
vessel forms but they are never functional in
the conventional sense.

These two different types although visually
closely linked are produced by opposing
techniques, the earlier works being press
moulded, often with little extrusions or
additions taken from moulds of mechanical
parts, model kits etc. By contrast the vessels
are thrown and turned. Both are preceded by
rough drawings and sketches which are the
starting point of his process. After the biscuit
firing they are glazed sometimes with a
combination of different glazes. Lustre glazes
are blended or sprayed with paraffin or
detergent to create mottled effects. But in
many ways, and usually, it is the lengthy
finishing process which characterise his
technique.

Most of the pots require two to three hours of
finishing and he compares himself to a
jeweller rather than a potter. All the bases
have to be ground smooth and flat, the pots
are rubbed with carborundum paper to make
part of the glaze matt, more glaze is sprayed
on, certain parts are masked out. Pots are
refired. Sometimes they are sandblasted to
give a delicate pitted surface, a violent
process which often causes breakages. A
high wastage rate has to be accepted and he
calculates that only about a third of the
original pots are finally sold.

He presses his materials to the very edge of
endurance. The tensions in the process are
conveyed in one’s response to the piece
creating a visual tension, a knife edge
excitement and dynamism. These are qualities
which are communicated by the object to a
wide cross-section of society, they do not
have to be explained. For Geoffrey Swindell
the finely crafted object speaks to everyone.
That is his reward and he is therefore happy
to remain within the camp of craft.

For further technical details about the work
of Geoffrey Swindell see Peter Lane Studio
Porcelain 1980.

Moira Vincentelli
Saf Geoffrey Swindell o flaen y silifoedd sy’n dal engreifiadu o’i waith yn dyddio o flynyddoedd olaidd y chwedegau hyd y presennol. Cwyd un o’i gerddogaethau, diweddar a chau ei dowylo amdano a’i gofheiddio. Mae’r ystym yn cyfeiru’r cyfan, “Y cwbl nwyf am i bobl ei wneud yw ymateb i’w pryderthwch a’u crosffwriaeth, ffrîr pleur o gyfrifo ynddynt, ac ymhŷfrydu yn yr arwainbau. Does dim byd o cwbl ym min y gymhleth ym y peth.” Yn ystod y blynyn rhedeg mae ei athroniaeth wedi ei symiau i’r chochti. Gall y wr a fu bod yn dochweddiad a’i wreiddiol.

Mae ei wreiddiol’n treiddio’n syth i galon y traddodiad cerameg Prydeinig. Magwyd ef yn Stoke on Trent a phliha oedd yn bythneug oedd aeth i goleg am fiwyddyn i gaill ei hyfforddi’n beintwr: y bwrdd oedd enill y sgiailu angenheidiol i fod yn beintwr wynnebu ar figurynau. ”Gwaith i ddyn oedd hwn ac roedd y cyflog yn gymharol dda. Cawrmer oedd y lliafr gweygyddio lai o dâl o gryn dipyn. Ond oeddnoch ei orwelin gan ei brodiau’n gyda coleg, asdiuodd y garedigion a siarthau gymwysterau academadach fel y gallai ddodyn y cwrs DipAD yn Stoke ac yna aeth i’i Gymuned i’r Coleg Celf Brenhinol yma ei gweygyddio MA wedi cynhyrchu cymaint o artistiaid a llywyr cerameg mwyaf adnabyddus Prydain, Arweinyddwyr a chropan ei ddiddyn, melynodd o hyfforddi o disgyllwidda syrwig ei gefndir dosbarth gweithiol hyd at ragfluriau breiniol byd ceif eitaidd Llundain. Bu’r rhaid iddo ddogodi ddygymodi’r peignau hyn yn ei waith ac yna ei lifwydd.

Daw ymwmiau a’i gartref yn un o faestrefi dymuniol Caerdydd a’r synthesis i’r amlog. Mae plant yn marcnoaoeth eu merod ar hyd y stryd ar fore Sul. Roeddwn wedi fy rhybuddo na fyddai’r yrthych fel crochandy, a ddeidd dim awgrym o hymry ar gyfyl fwy o sem oedd newydd ei beintio nag yn yr ardd drefnau o’i flaen. Dim ond ar o’i achlysiau mwy drefyl y deeth y gwenddau yn yr allanolion cofreddwyd i’r amlog. Mae person amryfal ei ddiddordeb ym byw yma: beicio am mor, tegi na’r mecanidol, cregrig, addurniaidau garodd, cerfioniau fflyg, wyddonol, drymliw. Nid dyma ddiddordeb ymarferol ym cymdeithas. Mae ei gasgliadu o wahanol bethau sydd wedi eu harddangos mewn cabinetau ym haith i’r amryw o ystafelliaeth yna’i gartref. Yr ystafell fynyf yr ym oedd ei waith ac all gweithiolygar ar gyfer gyfrif hwydro a thanio ym yr ardd. Dyma gartref Geoffrey Swindell a’i ddau fab bach.
Yn ystad y tymor ysgol mae dysgu cerameg yn Seffidlyd Awdai UchW De Morganwyl yn mynd â phedwar dwmrod o'r wythinos. Gall defnyddio’r tri ddimor arall ar gyfer crochenwaith, ond mae gwarchodfaeddau teuluol yn rhan fanhodol o ‘fwyd. Mae’n rhaid cael cydwysedd ac mae’n ystyried y tai ag agweddu, bywodd domestig a crochenwaith, yr un mor bywsg a’i glwydd. Mae’r ymwybyddiau eraill yn cyflymu’r anorod ar fain ei gynhrych ceramig, ond mae’r cynnyrch yn.cfateb i’w anghenion ac i alluadu’r farchnad. Cynllun cycloch sydd i’r flwyddyn 1970 a’r byd wedi eu cychwyn. Mae’n tyfuiddio a cruel sy’n dysgu’r trwydd Roedd gan ei chwarae i chwarae gyfoes. A yw hynny’n par godid iddo? We, rhwyf gymaint efallai, ok ond mae rhwy oneswyrwyd a synnwyr yno perthyn â i’r system ac i rydym ei gynhyrchu sy’n gweddio iddo ef. Ar y funud nid yw amser yn caniatáu ynhwylo alystiried radical ac nid oes ganddo’r awydd i wynebu chwylu o’r fath. Cymhara hyd ag agweddu JacqueLine Poncette, oedd y nad y ddwyn i ddod. Rhwng effaith a oedd y mae Coleg Brenhinol. Daeth rhithau i amgylch yngant dyswy dwi o gwarchod gyn与n cau i raddfa fechan ond erbyn hyn mae hyn ei weldi a rhaianner a rhudd prifysgol a hyn fel. Mae’r awgrym o wybheth organig sy’n dyw i golofnau yr môr y byd i’r fanfodion gyda’r awydd yno mewn rhagfeydd yno. Drwy’r frenhinesion a chlywedodd yno, mae’n rhaid i ddiolch i’r yr hynny a elus. Drwy’r hynny a elus...