MARY ROSE YOUNG by David Briers

Mary Rose Young was interviewed on daytime television a while ago, as she made and decorated some of her earthenware pots in her studio. "Engaging" would be the best word to describe the way in which she presented her work, and the work itself. Despite being obliged to observe the time-honoured Blue Peter tradition of bringing out prepared pieces at crucial points and saying 'Here’s one I finished earlier', she did also manage to make it seem the most natural thing in the world to throw a clay mug, stick handmade ceramic roses all over it, decorate it riotously in the brightest colours possible, and still come up with something useful, stylish, unusual, and fun. She also made it seem as though anybody could make a living from doing likewise, if only they set their mind to it. And perhaps they could, but the non-daytime-TV reality is that although Mary Rose Young is now able to make ceramic tableware which is highly personal but which everybody else also likes and wants to own, the path which has led to her securing this fortunate position has not been strewn with roses all the way, and has proceeded somewhat at a tangent to the status quo of the studio ceramics world.

Mary Rose Young lives ensconced in the Forest of Dean, that fascinatingly unique area of Gloucestershire near the Welsh border, resistant to invasion since the year dot, and still a close-knit community. Unlike most contemporary ‘country potters’, she did not have to make the conscious decision to move into the rural environment, because she was there already. The Forest of Dean was where she was brought up, and most of her family still live there. Paradoxically, her ceramic ware is free from any of the most obvious ‘country potter’ trademarks, and many people not knowing otherwise assume that it has been made in the middle of London.

When Mary Rose Young started her foundation course studies at Cheltenham Art College about twelve years ago, she most enjoyed drawing and illustration, but also became interested in ceramics along the way. Subsequently she joined the ceramics course at Wolverhampton Polytechnic, where she was allowed maximum elbow-room for experimentation whilst avoiding the precious self-regard of college fine-art departments which alienated her. She still feels quite strongly about that, and quotes Picasso’s sketchbook drawings as examples of wonderful art which still manage upon occasion to be “so silly and funny”.

After making a name for herself at college, she found herself suddenly out in the real world and at the bottom of the proverbial ladder again, having to devise several short-term ways of staying alive. These jobs, entirely unrelated to ceramics, she did so badly, or were so unrewarding, that she was forced towards the realisation that she had to be a creative maker of
some sort, and so had to find a way of making such a lifestyle viable. Failing to secure a Crafts Council grant to set up a studio, she turned instead to that other great national cultural support service, the Enterprise Allowance Scheme. With this incentive, and some valuable free advice and encouragement from Mick Casson, she set about developing her throwing and decoration techniques, for (another paradox) she had to teach herself how to throw pots after leaving college.

She sold the pottery she made each week from a barrow on Bristol’s popular quayside stretch of giftshops and arts centres. Although sales were far from overwhelming at first they built up gradually and eventually she attracted attention and orders from further afield. She took part in the prestigious Chelsea Crafts Fair, where the second time round she was a sell-out, with considerable orders from the United States. And the Observer colour supplement commissioned her to make a ceramic Filofax cover, which was anti-Filofax really, being smothered in 3D roses, sheep and a giraffe, and impossible for a media person to slip into their pocket. By now her order books are full to bursting point, and she is facing the dilemma of not wishing to disappoint potential buyers, while resisting a decline in quality through over-production (see Sandy Brown and Morgen Hall for similar stories).

But however well her work may be selling, she has never courted popularity for its own sake or by the easiest route, and everything she does has developed from things which she has firstly wanted to make for herself, for her own house. Her house, in fact, with its walls and furniture hand-decorated in a style the very opposite of reserved, reflects her attitude to life and creativity, for there is no dividing line between what goes into her living spaces and what goes into her ceramics, right down to a lavatory garlanded with bright painted roses and decorative pointillism. There cannot be many potters who have accommodated an entire lavatory bowl in their kiln, but nor are there many who would make ceramic wall-lights for their living room like mixing bowls and colanders, replete with ceramic spoons. And on the roof one of her chimney pots is actually a giant decorated mug, which becomes an environmental scale steaming cup of cocoa whenever the fire is lit. This sculptural side of Mary Rose Young’s work also extends into the work she makes to sell, which comprises eccentric one-off pieces alongside a range of functional tableware.

Most of Mary Rose Young’s pieces are painted all over. Turn over a plate decorated with running chickens and you will find some more running around the base. Thus one might tend to think of her as a decorative applied artist rather than a potter, though the throwing and preparation of each piece takes as much time and is given as much care as its subsequent decoration. You can tell this as soon as you pick up one of her cups (or better still drink from it), for they have a crispness which somehow only a hand-made ceramic item possesses.

When a piece has been thrown and its base turned, and any extraneous decorative features such as ceramic roses have been made and added, it is left to dry, and then the porous surface is painted quite quickly with underglaze colours. She avoids necessitating the great act of faith required by most potters prior to firing their work by using colours which are not greatly modified by the kiln, so they go into it looking basically as they will when they come out, apart from being rendered glossy and brighter. Most of the pieces are decorated exuberantly with bright yellows, blues, oranges, greens and salmon pinks juxtaposed with reckless panache. Some are striped or spotted, whereas others feature cockerels, chickens, crows or fish, and of course the eponymous rose motifs of their maker. She never makes preliminary designs for her ceramics, although she still fills many a sketchbook with drawings and feels that the activity of drawing feeds directly into her ceramic work.

Some of her favourite or most popular designs are repeated (we would be disappointed if they weren’t!), though exact replication is simply not in the nature of what she makes. Every now and then she will resist incipient repetitiveness with something unexpected, like the black & white pieces which punctuate her coloured ware to great effect, or the recent experiments with “goldifying” (her term) pots all over with metallic glaze usually reserved for discreet rim decoration. To go with her cups, bowls and plates she also makes striped or spotted twisted ceramic spoons, which are great fun and look as though Uri Geller has been at Hansel & Gretel’s gingerbread house.

Sometimes it seems ponderous or even portentous to let a lot of words gel in the way of the direct enjoyment of contemporary studio tableware. So let us just say that Mary Rose Young’s pieces are each more ‘unique’ than you might think, if that is not a contradiction in terms, and with an added caveat that photographs do not do them justice, may we point you in their direction.
Beth amser yn ôl ar raglen teledu yn ystod y dydd, gwaellwyd cyfleyddiad â Mary Rose Young tra oedd hi wrthi yn ei stiwdio’n llunio ac yn addurno rha i’r photiau pridd. ‘Swynol’ tyddfai’r gair gorau i ddarglirio’i gwraith a’i ddu rhai o’i gwyllwyno. Er gorfod cywymffurfiol â’r hen dras dodol ‘Blue Peter’ o ddod â phot parod i’r golwg o bryd hwn glydd, ar adegau allweddol, a chweud, ‘Dyma un wnes i’n gynharach,’ llywedodd ar yr un pryd, fel pe ba’i gheirf mwyaf naturiol dan haul, lliunio myg clai ar droioli, gosod rhosynnau ceramig gwaith llaw drosto i gyd, ei addurno’n gynhyrchu rhywtheth defnyddiol, lluniaidd, anghyfredin a hwylog. Llywedodd hyn i roi’r argraff y gallai unrhyw un enillt ei fywoliaeth wrth wneud yr un path, pe baent yn mynd ati o ddifrif. Adichon y gallent; ond yn y byd real y tu llaw i stiwdio teledu, er bod Mary Rose Young nwy wr gollu creu llestri cerameg sy’n gwbl bersonol ac y mae pavb arall yn eu nhoffi ac yn chwennych, y gwir amdanw yw iddi gyrraedd y setyfifia hapus hon ar hyd llebyr nad oedd yn ffl i gyd a’i bod yn bwrw ymialen i gyfreirio trwy gwahanol yr hyn sy’n arferol yn myd cerameg stiwdio.

Mae Mary Rose Young yn byw yn gyd a chyflwyno’r Flried Ddene, y ran hynnydd, unigryw, o Swydd Gaerlwyd ger goror Cymru, sydd wedi gwrthsefyli pob mewnliad ers oes Adda, ac sy’n parhau i fod yn gymuned glos. Yn wahanol i’r mwyaf tryf o’r ‘grochenydydd gwerthig’ cyfoes, fu dim galw amni i ddod i benderfynu ymwyboled i symud i amgylchyd gwledig, gan ei bod hi yno eisoes. Yn Flried Ddene y magwyd hi ac yno y maa’r hyn hwyaf o’i ethau’n dal i fwy. Yn groes yr i’r disgwyl, mac ei chynnyrch ceramiq yn rhifyd oddi wrth nodweddiad amlycaf o’r ‘grochenydydd gwerthig’, ac mae llawer o bobl nad ydynt yn gymhwybod am amgenach ym cynrychiol yr hanfyrach mai yng Nghymru.

Pân gychwynnodd Mary Rose Young ar ei chwrs syfylen yng Ngholeg Cefn Cheltenham tua deuddeg flynedd yn ôl, aruniau a darluniau a rodd da i pleo pennaf iddi, ond dechreuodd ymddiddorion mewn cerameg hefyd. Yn dilyn hynny ymunodd â’r cwrs cerameg ym Mholytechym Wolverhampton, lle y cafodd bob ymwybyddiaeth cerameg stiwdio cyn y bo’i wybodaeth i’r hynny cymorthol. Yn dilyn hynny, cafodd e i wrthwynto i’r gweinidogaeth ym Mholytechym Wolverhampton, lle y cafodd bob ymwybyddiaeth cerameg stiwdio cyn y bo’i wybodaeth i’r hynny cymorthol.
ddatblygu ei thechnegau trin treullo ac addurno, oherwydd y (yn rheffedddigion unwaith eto) bu'n rhaid iddi ei hyfforddi eu hun i lunio potiau ar yr drosel ar ôl iddi aedar y coleg.

Byddai'n gwerthu'r byn a gynhyrchai bob bywthnos ar stodin simodol ac ar ran bobologiad o'r cei ym Mrysst lle cær siopau anthegion a chanolfarnau cefn. Er nad oedd y gwerthiant yn yr yrddradau o bell flordd ar y cychwyn, gweledodd gyynydd graddol ac ymhen amser dechreuodd ddaeth syw ac archebion o gyfchion a'i chwmpas ar y tylwyth o'i chymryd ac enill archebion sylwedolod o'r Taleithiau Unedig. Comisiynwyd hi hefyd gan atodlad llwyr Observer i greu clawr cymro ar gyfer Filofax, rhwbydd a cefn mewn gwirionedd yn wrth-Filofax, gan ei fod wedi ei ochraddu a rosynnau, defaid a jyraedd trwy dimen-swn an y gwbl amhosibl i unrhyw berson ym myd y cyffredinol ei daro yn ei boed. Erbyn hyn mae ei fod i'r archeryon yn crwten, ac mae hwn wynyn ôl problem o beidio â'i alom at ymwystyr potensial tra'n gwrtshafael drwywyd i annwedd ei gwaith oherwydd gorgyrrhythu (profiad cyf-efelyf) i brofiad Sandy Brown a Morgan Hall.

Ond pa mor dda bynnag y mae ei gwaith yn gymryd, nid yw hi erioed wedi ceisio ennill poblogwyrd ei rhwmdir ei hun. Byddai'r byn i bun na thwyd ddewis fyfryd wyddo o'n weud phethau, ac mae popeth y mae hi'n ei wneud ymddangos oherwydd o bethau roeddan hi eisio eu geneuodd yr ynde cyntaf iddi hi ei hub, ac ar gyfer ei chartref ei hun. Yn wir, mae ei thys gyda i'r furiu a'i ddodfeydd wedi ei llwyddio â llaw mewn arduol sydd yn y pengen a' r hyn a eifwei sy'n ei weld ymwybyddiaeth sy'n hagwas at fywyd ac at greadigwylwyd, oherwydd nid oes unrhyw wahanolrwyd rhwyd y mae hi'n ei roi yn y mannau mae hi'n byw dyddiant y'n hyn sy'n cael i fyny o'i cherameg, gan ymgyrnwch bwsen tŷ bach sydd wedi ei hadduur â rosynnau cymro eu peintio i'w tachodi a phwysylltiaeth addurno. Go brin fod llawer o grochenyddion bynnag cymrynwch bwsen tŷ bach ym en ei chorflopfaeth ym en hodyn, nac ymwybyddlaw lawer a fydan a' r llunio goleuadau cerameg ar gyfer muriui eu hystafell tŷw ar rheini'n edrych fel teisson cymysgu ym chylan-derau ac yn cymrynwch llwydau cerameg. Ac ar ddi eni chartref, mae addurno anfodir y tro'n troi ym Myfyrwyr Sylfaenboeth o gocoau a radfa amgylch pan fyddi tân wedi ei gynghori, yw'n o'i potiau ar y cor republican. Mae wedi gerfionion hon ar waith Mary Rose Young ym mwythfawr y gyflawn - y gwaith y mae hi'n ei wneud ar gyfer ei wtheru, sy'n cymrynwch etamau unigolyn wedi ei gyfystyr â gysylltiad gyda llawer o'i enwau.

Llys y waith o'i hoff gynlluniu, neu’r hoff mwyaf pobologiad, ei bod wedi eu hail-adrodd (byddai’n siom pe na baent), er nad yw ail-lunio manwyth ym mwythfawr ei gwaith. O dudd yw llifodd yr ymgyrcheddion yn holl y gwaith, oherwydd bydd hynny’n gyffinwr â gwaith rhyswydol oherwydd y byd oedd wedi ei gwaith. Oherwydd byddai Mary Rose Young wedi ei llwyddo i ddiwydiant hynny, byddech chi’n troi plât wedi ei addurno â chwylion byr y rhedeg, mewn cael goleg ar ei gein, fe welechi chi ragor o gywyn y rhedeg ar yr ochr honno. Gallai hyn arwain rhwyd i ffordd amddiffyn fel artist addurno, ac mae’r phaqhwaeth ni’n hyrach ar chynychyddiaeth, er bod paratoi a llunio pob etem ym cymryd yr un amser ac yn hawlio i’r gorfodaeth. Doldown hyn y gyflawni’r cyflenwyd ac yn enwadwyd yr unigolyn. Wedi’r rhwydwyd a chwpanau’r rhwydwyd, mae hi’n osododd y wthswryd wedyn sy’n wynebu’r rhwmdir ei chwpanau a chwpanau’r rhwydwyd wedyn sy’n wynebu’r rhwmdir eu chwpanau.