

Zoe Preece: Pacing the Perimeter

It is 8 am and as you turn from the main road into Tudor Lane, it feels as though it has already been busy for hours. The run of small independent businesses are open for trade; the sound of air-tools and revving engines from the local garage filter from the far end of the street, providing an ongoing muffled backing track; the smell of lightly burnt cut wood seeps beyond the joiner's door, hitting your nostrils surprisingly hard with a sharp eye watering tingle; the newly opened coffee shop, adopting the old brick work as nostalgic aesthetic, rides the wave of the area's regeneration, attracting the movement of people that might not otherwise have taken the detour.

It is down this cluttered little lane that we find the blue door of Fireworks Clay Studios. Perhaps the new coffee shop threatens greater footfall but for now, and for almost 24 years, this co-operative studio comprising 18 ceramic artists has been safely tucked away, shaking only slightly every 20 minutes as trains travelling to and from Cardiff Central gently vibrate the ground, the buildings and all furniture inside!

The lane is only a 5-minute walk from the city centre and to enter it is to encounter a particular compendium of sensory stimuli that envelops you as you turn its corner. It is a frequent characteristic of an artist's space that it surrounds them in a palimpsest of lives lived and here we have the refuse of life in abundance; the fly-tipped and shadowed edges threatening just enough of the unknown to hold your attention, to prompt you awake especially as late nights draw in. For material-based artists in particular, alert to the significance and metaphor of sensory provocation, these sounds, smells, sights act as a sensory primer before their engagement in creative practice.

There is of course a parallel here, between an artist's ability to register with heightened resolve the sensations conjured by the world around them, and their intent to capture sensation within inanimate form. Whilst familiarity may cause even this rich environment to become muted, subliminally incorporated into everyday experience, an artist's ability to perceive, to absorb and emit, is the very subject matter of their work.

To open the blue door of the co-operative invites an altogether different mode of thinking. If the lane signifies life in all its messy intricacies, then the studios contain those chosen elements given focus by the artists working inside; you move from the broken asphalt onto cobbled paving, from the industrial units and high-rise flats to potted palm trees, climbing vines, string-lights and wooden seating. It is an environment revised over time to represent the inner lives of its occupants; their need for calm, places to meet, to reflect and respond to the tension of the world outside. You can 'feel' a palpable change in pace as you greet the threshold of the door and find yourself all too eagerly wanting to 'move' inside.

How concrete everything becomes in the world of the spirit when an object, a mere door, can give images of hesitation, temptation, desire, security, welcome and respect. If one were to give an account of all the doors one has closed and opened, of all the doors one would like to re-open, one would have to tell the story of one's entire life.

'The Poetics of Space' Gaston Bachelard

If we are to understand the relationship between “inside” thoughts and “outside” spaces as more a dynamic continuum than as opposites, then to enter an artist’s studio will always bring with it the jeopardy of trespass, of walking amongst a persons objectified thoughts and feelings: a particular shade of paint entitled ‘Elephants Breath’ may have been specifically chosen to conjure a meditative state, a randomly placed spoon may have been placed as catalyst to inspire an entire world of experience - conversations had whilst cooking, eating, washing up, and a chair positioned by a window whilst reaping the benefits of good light, may also be perfectly angled as a vantage point from which to review the development of work in progress. All of this would be part of an artist’s sensorial construct of their space, a physical articulation of their mental processes but none of it would be obvious to an onlooker – there is no reason that a visitor would know any of this.

An artist’s studio reflects a kind of human geography, a social mapping of space as important to them as the doors and walls of the architecture itself. This is what Edward Soja terms as a ‘Third Space’, a rather brilliant notion that, put simply, declares that positioned in-between ‘real’ space (the bricks and mortar of 24 Tudor Lane) and ‘imagined’ space (our claim to that building as a collective of artists), lies a ‘third space’ where those bricks and rental contracts are turned into a sanctuary, become invested with individual and collective agency.

The studio is itself a poetic example, devoted to, and enabling thoughts and feelings to be given form. This ‘Third Space’ is precisely where creativity takes place, arising from the friction between the concrete objective world and the narratives of ownership and identity that surround it. We take from the physical: corners and walkways, doorways and tables and attribute to them social or personal meaning.

To gain permission to view an artist’s studio and recognise it as much as a psychological structure as a physical one, is to gain privileged insight into their social mapping, their interrelatedness with the world. This is the premise on which I want to explore the work and working environment of Zoe Preece, one of the members of Fireworks co-operative.

Preece’s ceramic practice is an intriguing meeting point of concrete reference and personal meaning. She articulates familiar domestic objects but sets them within a sense-scape so rich with evocation, so alive with tacit stimuli that her compositions dip in and out of memories of where we may have experienced such sensory equivalents before.

What Soja’s ‘Third Space’ attempts to define, is our innate desire to find ourselves within something, to re-interpret and re-code the world according to our own personal narratives and this is the mechanism that kicks into heightened activity when we encounter Preece’s ceramics.

We can see her studio straight away through a window placed at the top of the entrance stairs, but it will take you half the building’s perimeter to get access to it. Its position is both obvious, situated in plain sight and hidden from view, an interesting opposition to hold in mind as we examine her work more closely.

Once up the stairs and inside the building, members can turn their name tag to 'IN' on the notice board, and turn right into the kitchen to take advantage of the knowledge and support of any one of the skilled artists taking a coffee break in there, from throwers, production potters, figurative modellers, slip casters. But you need to continue along the corridor past the majority of spaces to eventually get to Preece's studio.

Once within its confines you will find all manner of collected things.

The studio is ordered, and not to proclaim too great a distinction between thinking and making, the left is an area devised for more schematic thought: a small glass cabinet displaying 'still life' remnants, a radio, books for both literary and notated reference on a little table prepared for writing, photos of domestic ware, collages and drawings on the wall. To the right, is a space devised for more practical engagement: a run of paint pots from Farrow and Ball, columns of slip buckets, shelves and shelves of plaster moulds, a plaster lathe and lathe tool sharpener.

Along the back window is a display of work recently returned from exhibition with notable pieces missing, the entirety of a 54 piece installation purchased by the National Museum of Wales, a result of her success in 2018, winning the gold medal for 'Craft' in the National Eisteddfod.

This is a distinctly calm space - although I am obviously visiting outside a busy production day - there is a sense in which a measured hand, an organised mind and attention to detail prevails.

As with all collections, these gatherings of items offer us a certain illusion of stability, safety in numbers, the coming together of loose ends. They are reminiscent of our own ad hoc collections of squirrelled away objects, hidden in drawers, cupboards, wardrobes and just as with our domestic equivalent, they contain the promise of being given purpose at some point in the future. For now, they wait and whilst they wait not yet re-purposed for use, they illustrate the curious phenomena of what it means to keep 'things'.

In a recent 'in conversation' event for the opening of her exhibition 'Material Presence', Preece referred to the title of a Susan Sontag book: *'Archive of Longing'* and although used by Sontag to describe her own personal library, there is little difference between our reason for collecting either object or book; it is their future potential use that seduces us into holding onto them. Both harbour the promise of answers to problems we have not yet encountered. They act as small investments in moments in the future when those otherwise hidden, almost forgotten 'things' of knowledge or deed come to the fore. How comforting to have a breadth of solutions to life's unpredictable situations conveniently on hand on a shelf or in a kitchen draw!

Once 'objects' become untethered from the habits of their everyday use they have opportunity to serve a range of altogether different purposes: as an aid memoir, an unconventional doorstop, bookend or impromptu ruler/paper weight/prop. Their ability to respond to multiple demands integrates them more fully within the complexity of our lives

and in doing so, tells us far more about our wants, needs and relationship with 'things' than any original purpose.

In Preece's studio, the identity of her collected 'things', or rather their habitual identity lies in the 'home' and so her space is teeming with domestic reference, a familiar intimacy; their associations may be muted but a sense of the personal glows from within. This wealth of sign and symbol, image and sense-state summons an archetypal connection to domesticity, to a place of dwelling that envelops the space in all but wallpaper and tiles.

It takes us mere seconds to adopt these orphaned 'things' into our own collections and imagine them amongst their likeness, placed on our draining board or in a kitchen draw.

The desire to pull things into our own narratives is unquenchable, particularly things overtly displaced from context; it is a mechanism that kicks in all too often without us even realising. We are compelled to attribute meaning, to re-situate abstract things within a coherent structure.

It is those very moments of decoding objects that interest Preece. Her pure white cast forms are intentionally devoid of the marks of their making, their use, branding. They are objects before the traits of any specific identity has been inscribed, and as you approach their silhouetted outlines, you can catch yourself in the process of assimilating, weighing up their properties against your personal experience and knowledge.

It is at once a disquieting and calming process. Disquieting how quickly you engage in this realignment of objects without recognising it, and calming once you do, as you settle into an altogether different pace, allowing yourself to engage in the process over and over again with each object and arrangement met.

You slow down and tune into your inherent mechanisms for interpretation.

Preece pushes and pulls at the way in which these familiar objects are read by exploring traits both obvious and those hidden from view. With alchemic knowledge gained only through methodical trial and error, she manipulates the same material constituents to form familiar imagery - a heaped tea spoon ready to tip into a cup - and to capture more sentient events - liquid swelling into the meniscus, caught just before spilling over a spoon's edge. At times our eyes recognise the concrete characteristics and at others, it is our bodies that recollect.

Nowhere is this more apparent than in pieces where she has frozen the stages by which we ordinarily experience motion, where the liquid from a spoon drips entirely over its edge pooling onto the table. The roles of holder and held are almost inverted, the spoon's horizontal form appearing balanced at the tip of the liquid's thin molten stem. The agility with which Preece alters the composition of her materials to flux or to fix causes you to pace the perimeter of what is seen and what is felt, you oscillate between.

The connection of these objects to the home is not arbitrary. Preece's intent is to bring to the fore the intricacies of our everyday, to heighten awareness of those background details

that all too quickly rush past. These are the details that punctuate our lives *'as they are lived'*, those small acts that are repeated with almost ritualistic care, that sustain us in some way, humble, poignant. We are reminded to slow down and pay attention.

As a mother of two, Preece's sensory landscape has changed over the years, from the kitchen playing a central role with objects and processes reclaiming daily significance to her family's life, to a different terrain of sounds and movements as the children have grown older. In this respect, the work stands as homage to those earlier times, to those years when life feels most hectic and stops only when you sleep, those are the years when you need to raise the value of the intricacies of the everyday.

Preece speaks of her relationship with objects and materials as being a co-existence and in reference to Tim Ingold she states:

When I consider these ideas in relation to the 'home', to the domestic realm, it brings me closer to that realm. I become a part of it, rather than just an observer. I am no longer a subject moving around an inanimate space, made up of inanimate objects. The space and the objects take on a vibrancy, an aliveness, a presence. And I suppose it is this material vibrancy that I explore in my work.

'In Conversation' with Natasha Mayo, Llantarnam Grange, 2018

What is cultivated here is an attitude of attentiveness that permeates both home and studio. It fuels Preece's approach to the materials and processes of making as well as underpinning their intent. To watch her work or demonstrate is to witness the care and respect she places on skill. It is not merely a means to an end, a necessary background activity, it too is given due attention. Her moulds for slip casting are things of visual and tacit beauty encouraging a joy in use, her movements around them are almost choreographed.

This ability to enter into a 'co-existence' with materials was tested most recently when she worked on the piece 'the way the earth remembers our bodies', a walnut table milled on the CNC machine, requiring her to step outside of the comfort of long known and honed processes. The walnut warped and bent and not understanding its tendencies, its nature, she had to learn vicariously from those who did. The wood dictated a different conversation and pace of interaction and gradually these new skills, new knowledges became encompassed within this very distinct attitude of making.

This particular piece stands out from the others by moving us away from a focus on objecthood and instead onto an articulation of space; the walnut surface has etched upon it the residue that surrounds the objects of a family meal: the ruffled table cloth, the half-eaten biscuit, the impression of a knife and spoon. What has been steadfastly removed from the pure white cast forms appears absorbed by this surface. This is the work that most palpably conveys evidence of our co-existence with objects by making those very points of interaction physical.

It is not for us to find ourselves within this piece but to witness how others have already done so. The contrast of this, set against the white silhouetted forms, causes them to resonate a longing to be touched!

It is interesting to note how Preece painstakingly removes by hand all evidence of the life and histories of her porcelain objects, yet uses digital technology to evidence sensorial interaction. But that is a subject for another visit!

If an artist's studio is as much a psychological space as a physical one, then this space is vibrant with insightful conversation. But it is not a conversation arising from obvious subject matter, the richness of this studio lies in the value placed on the intricacies of the background, an attentiveness paid to the sense-scapes that hold the larger events together.

As you move to leave, walking back along the corridor, the encounter with Preece's studio has caused change, you have slowed down and become more alert to the details of your surroundings. To open that blue door back onto Tudor Lane is to invite an almost overwhelming assault to your senses as the smells, sounds and sights regale you once more. You realise, distinctly too late, how the world has already caused you, involuntarily, to speed up and lose purchase on all but those larger things that threaten to jump out to the fore.