

## **Placement: A Visual Ethnography Through Clay**

**On the 22<sup>nd</sup> January 2011 Dawn Youll and Lowri Davies met with Natasha Mayo to talk about their curating of the exhibition *Placement*. As the conversation unfolded it became clear that this title was not simply a convenience in grouping artists from different places, but embodies the potential of ceramics to reflect and interpret aspects of our environment, society and culture:**

**DY** It was Diana Sykes from Fife Contemporary Arts and Alex Boyed Jones from Oriel Davies Gallery that came together first. They wanted to use ceramics to create a connection between Scotland and Wales, and they thought of us ... but we didn't want to just do a survey of artists, we wanted a thread to tie it together that wasn't just about ceramics and those two places but something else...

**LD** The idea of *Placement* evolved as we were looking at the artists ...

**DY** We each had a wish list and an artist we shared was Laura Ford. She uses the ceramic ornament as a hook to get the viewer engaged in her work, and I think it was her use of ceramic language; using something you could be very familiar with, to explore common themes in her sculptural practice that we found most interesting ...

**LD** ... and in favouring Laura's work it opened up the boundaries – we looked at designers, applied artists and fine artists, inviting people from different backgrounds who use clay but wouldn't usually exhibit in a ceramic show. The discussions I had with Cecile Jhonstone Soliz were interesting because she said she probably wouldn't have done this kind of exhibition fifteen years ago.

**NM** So something has either changed in her work or in wider perception of ceramics?

**LD** In ceramics. I find Cecile's work fascinating because I work in a similar way but she curates her work so completely differently ...

**DY** ... she references the domestic and the museum, her work is very much about telling stories of collections and museums ...

**NM** ... so function and pottery become metaphors, part of a narrative that other things can be added to?

Are there particular connections between 'placement' and ceramics?

**LD** For me personally, yes. In the beginning I displayed work on a Welsh Dresser. Now people come to me if they've bought a piece and tell me where they have placed it in their home, it feels quite important for them to let me know.

I also reference Welsh porcelain, mainly Nantgarw and Swansea ware, I also look a lot at Buckley and Ewenny. And you know these potteries developed because of their location, by the fact that there was coal and clay there. Stoke-on-Trent was exactly the same.

**NM** Geology of course! Could the same be true of aesthetics, do you think that a place can also generate a particular aesthetic?

**LD** Oh most definitely!

**NM** Both your work and Anne Gibb's have a similar sensibility ...

**LD** ... well Anne has been really affected by changes in place recently. She's creating new work for the show in response to a residency at Cove Park back in 2009 ...

**DY** ... it will be interesting to see how she responds to a place that she didn't feel so comfortable in, and didn't really have any history with.

**NM** How did you select the pieces?

**DY** On a few occasions we approached the artists to see what they would like to contribute. With David Shrigley I knew I'd seen the ceramic work I wanted in an exhibition in Kelvingrove museum. The pieces are a giant pair of boots and a bomb shape. He showed them within a collection of other pieces in the museum, and it was fascinating that they seemed to have no interpretation at all – you only read the bomb. The pieces were in ceramic material that you often see in a museum but they seemed to have no history at all ...

**NM** A loss of place ...

Do you think our idea of 'placement' is necessarily constructed, eclectic even?

**LD** Yes, yes it is. Conor Wilson's work is a good example of that. The layers on his pieces come from different periods in time, he explores traditional and far more contemporary cutting edge techniques. The triple chamber pots we've selected have different fragments, different ideas from different places...

**DY** ... its because of all the cross-overs that have happened in ceramic history, you can't identify any one origin because things have been borrowed so many times from China to Holland, backwards and forwards, he combines because that is how it is.

Steven Bird is also eclectic but uses more international references. The piece we've tried to get for the exhibition is called *Transatlantic Pot* it's a mix of cast found objects making up a huge pot sculpture.

**LD** He spends half the year in Dundee and Australia. It will be interesting to see if there are any differences in the work.

I didn't realize that Nick Evans was born in Zambia until recently ...

**DY** ... he's made these big totems in ceramics. He references the male and the female represented by the column and the pot, with elements of the hand-made and the machine, a kind of comfort in the craft material and violence in the machine ...

**LD** ... the African element made me think a little bit more about his pieces and where those ideas might originate. Most of us have moved from where we lived as children to

make and work. That's significant in understanding ideas of *Placement* I think. We selected Claire Curneen's terracotta trees – the gold roots are beautiful – the trees look as though they have been uprooted. The element of uprooted-ness is quite important actually.

**DY** There maybe even more of a narrative available in this work because there isn't a figure dictating, which is why I really wanted them. I thought they were much more fitting to this idea of an open place.

**NM** What about your work Dawn?

**DY** When I think of my work in terms of place, I think about the space between the viewer and the work and creating triggers that let them think of places in their own mind.

**NM** Can you give an example?

**DY** There is a piece called *Sunset*, its very related to landscape but its just made up of components that were around my workshop and the colours I use directly relate to a sunset that I experienced in the location I made them. So there is a gas canister, which is a really vivid red, and a piece I cast from the top of a bag of clay that's black and kind of like hills, and a piece of corrugated clay from a different piece of work that I glazed purple. It just became this composition from random elements but it's also a way of speaking about a place in a bigger way than actually trying to draw a landscape or show someone a picture.

**NM** You literally explore 'placement' as a construct?

**DY** Yes. An ornament doesn't necessarily need to be seen on a sideboard in a house for the person to think of that place, its built-in. The place the artwork takes them is entirely up to them.

I've worked with Ken Eastman recently and he's interested in exploring the particular landscape around Herefordshire. He uses the sheer properties of the material to communicate the idea of landscape and harnesses them into a vessel form because the vessel has its own language. It exists in space and contains space – he's often sent me pictures of the outside of his workshop, but I think I get more of an idea of where Ken lives from looking at his pots!

**NM** Does an artist have social responsibility to speak about their surroundings?

**LD** I do, I see it more as documenting memories, traditions and culture but you don't necessarily have to work like that ...

**DY** I'd say that mine is documenting where I'm from as well, all the things that are close to me where ever I happen to be. I think it's unavoidable.