

Collection

Saturday 8 May – Sunday 20 June

This exhibition shows the work of twelve (two working as a pair) artist-makers who live and work in the South West. Saffron Wynne, Exhibitions Officer for the Devon Guild of Craftsmen, invited the exhibitors to take part as each one makes a significant contribution to contemporary creative practice in the region and all have a national or international profile.

A collection, as Dail Behennah's statement reminds us, is 'a number of objects collected or gathered together, viewed as a whole: a group of things collected and arranged: an accumulation of objects gathered for study, comparison or exhibition.' The pieces in the exhibition are not necessarily gathered together for comparison or study but, together, they show the wealth of talent and excellence which exists outside of the metropolis in our own region.

The materials used by the exhibitors include ceramic, metal, wood, lino print, glass, willow, mixed media and textile. The artists' statements refer to their process, influences, interests, beliefs, passions and pastimes and one or two refer to collecting or a collection. Dail Behennah has used her accumulated collection of short willow pieces to make work for this exhibition. Deceptively simple, her work takes a widespread craft material and transforms it into quiet, understated pieces which need nothing other than their own presence.

Tim Andrews refers to his own youthful collecting, his most 'valuable' coin being the one that was old, worn and imbued with the most history. He also refers to the role of the artist as being akin to a collector, the artist or maker trafficking in ideas, experience and perceptions which are then translated into artworks. Tim's stacked pieces echo the kiln-packer's practice of protecting fine and delicate wares from the turbulent atmosphere of the firing chamber by placing them in large clay containers known as saggars. The saggars, unglazed and rough, were a form of disposable packaging. Inside, the precious contents might be made of bone china or porcelain – a pale, smooth contrast to their outer, protective casing.

Peter Randall-Page, a name often associated with stone sculpture, sometimes of an imposing scale, has made things out of clay for more than thirty years. His recent solo show at the Yorkshire Sculpture Park was the first public outing for some large-scale ceramic installations, a growing part of his practice. He describes clay as having the same appeal for him as stone – of and from the earth. His rounded 'clay bodies', based on thrown vessel forms, pay homage to Amlash art¹. Peter sets himself simple rules to work with. The first is the nature of the material, for example the shape of a stone or the properties of clay, to which he adds something else. For the 'clay bodies' series it was a fast, rhythmic approach with not too much 'messaging

¹ Amlash is a town in present day Iran, high on a plateau to the Southwest of the Caspian sea. Amlash art only came to light in 1934, dug up by workmen. Amlash artefacts date from the 10th – 8th century BC.

about'. Within his 'rules' he finds a freedom to work in a way which he describes as 'unselfconscious'. His interest in natural phenomena and how nature orders itself is a continual source of excitement to him. The natural world operates within a simple set of rules interrupted with occasional random variations. Self-order with a tendency to go a bit wrong (or right), just like evolution.



Amlash terracotta bull, c. 1100-800 BC

Svend Bayer's magnificent wood-fired ceramic pieces are accompanied by the disarming admission that he is 'reckless to the point of stupidity' when it comes to firing his work. The process of making ceramics is (mostly) a time-intensive, meticulous exercise in patience, control and coaxing backed up by extensive knowledge of the materials. After several stages of careful making, the work is put into the fiery turbulence of the kiln for a day or two and, if the fire is properly controlled and the work is well-made, the pieces are *likely* to survive. They emerge from the kiln chemically and physically transformed and may be a glorious surprise or a crashing disappointment. It is the first lesson a potter learns – take *absolute* care when firing – or the work may explode, slump, blister, craze or melt. How reassuring then to find a maker of Svend's extensive experience and skill *still* gets swept away with the alchemy of making or, to use his own analogy, he remains a gambler.

Rachael Woodman's glass pieces are blown, large pieces in the London Glassworks furnace and smaller pieces in Frome, and then worked on back in her own studio. Lots of the decision making and further work on composition takes place at a later date when the glass is cold. She tends to work 'in series', *Vertical* being an example of a 'series' piece. Expressing the physical nature of glassblowing, Rachael describes the process of making a piece like *Vertical*. First she blows a bubble of glass and then flattens it 'like a lollipop'. Then she runs up a ladder carrying the molten lollipop. In an inverted position the glass is allowed to stretch out, using gravity, into an elongated cylinder. Rachael describes her work as 3D paintings and it is paintings and sculpture to which she is most drawn when she becomes an audience to the work of others. *Chosen* is a very personal piece, reflecting the uniqueness of being and finding a place of safety.

All the above work as well as Matthew Harris's painterly textile pieces, Malcolm Martin and Gaynor Dowling's graceful sculptures, the intriguing 'stories' of Eleanor Glover, the fine, supple jewellery of Syann van Niftrik, Matthew Burt's exquisite

furniture and Jilly Edward's serene tapestries², would grace any 'collection'. For now the work is here, at the Devon Guild, a collection of home-grown, contemporary work, collectable and collected. The exhibition, far from saying what a collector should or shouldn't collect, lays out a visual repast of artists and makers who are already a part of various collections. Most are represented in public collections, all are in private collections.

Clearly, artists and makers need to sell their work and collectors may have the power to make an artist's reputation. Being 'collected' will impact on an artist's confidence in a very positive way. Representation in national collections is a career enhancing position. Artists need collectors and collections. Art collectors need art.

Collecting, if we really think about it, is something we all have experience of. Collections don't necessarily require tagging, recording, cataloguing and ordering. A collection may be extraordinarily valuable or it might be a drawer full of bottle tops. I was once invited to view my neighbour's collection of plastic coffee stirrers – the ones made specifically for take-aways. Stifling a yawn, I tried to look interested as the coffee stirrers appeared, nestled in their margarine tub. These little plastic totems turned out to be strangely appealing with their similar-but-all-slightly-different long, narrow, white forms. Here was a collection of miniature plastic spears and javelins. Completely insignificant and worthless as lone items, together they gave a fragile snapshot of our throwaway, takeaway culture. And apparently the Design Museum was interested in taking on this highly portable collection! So I learned something – never judge a collection by its name.

And we have a lot to thank collectors for. If Tate, Getty, Wallace, Sainsbury et al. had not run out of house-room or had to pay a tax bill or, more happily, discovered philanthropy, we would not have some of our finest national collections. So what makes a good collector? It is not necessarily money. Dorothy and Herbert Vogel, a librarian and a post-office clerk, spent all Herbert's wages (they lived on hers) amassing a spectacular collection of twentieth-century minimalist and conceptual art. The Vogels were the first collectors who bought work from many artists who went on to achieve considerable acclaim. The Vogels nurtured their artists, believed in them and encouraged them. In 2008, two-and-a-half-thousand drawings from the Vogel Collection were distributed throughout the US with fifty works each going to a selected art institution in fifty different states. The *whole* of North America has benefited from a modest, unassuming couple, albeit a couple with an excellent eye, who had no particular advantage in life apart from their passion for contemporary art.

The psychology of collecting is complex. People collect for all sorts of reasons. Some for pleasure, some for security, some for investment, some for historical interest. There is an element of the hunt for some (find it, get it, keep it), and an element of escapism for others. It may be a light-hearted hobby, it may be a fierce compulsion. George Costakis, a Greek/Russian collector, born in 1913, apparently sold the family car in order to buy a Kandinsky and a Chagall. In describing an advanced state of an addiction to collecting, he said 'collectors are like madmen who have forgotten everything else in the world'. Susan Sontag, in her 1992 novel, *The Volcano Lover*, describes a lighter side. 'To collect is to rescue things, valuable things, from neglect,

² The title of Jilly Edwards's large, woven tapestry, MA, is a Japanese term meaning 'just so'. Everything is right with you, the work and the world.

from oblivion, or simply from the ignoble destiny of being in someone else's collection rather than one's own.'

This is what two famous art collectors have to say about their passion. They can have the last word.

Nobody can give you advice after you've been collecting for a while. If you don't enjoy making your own decisions, you're never going to be much of a collector anyway.

And:

I don't buy art in order to leave a mark or to be remembered; clutching at immortality is of zero interest to anyone sane.

Charles Saatchi

I feel sorry for the person who can't get genuinely excited about his work. Not only will he never be satisfied, but he will never achieve anything worthwhile.

Walter Chrysler

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