

## In Tandem

**Saturday 26 September – Sunday 8 November 2009**

Blandine Anderson and Terry Sawle are both Devon Guild Members with strong individual practices in their own chosen fields of sculptural ceramics and fine furniture. Ceramic and wood are materials not commonly used in combination<sup>1</sup> but Blandine and Terry, because of their interest in each other's work, wanted to collaborate on a body of work which would explore the aesthetic, sculptural, functional and technical possibilities of a wood and ceramic partnership. This exhibition is the result.

Blandine describes being awestruck by Terry's carpentry skills but amazed at the length of time it took to make a piece of fine furniture. Terry was equally fascinated by the spontaneity and plasticity of clay. The two of them began doodling and then working seriously on designs where the properties of the two materials were integral to the overall design of the pieces taking shape in their imagination.



Some of Blandine's wilder ideas were voted unworkable by Terry and Blandine admits to feeling that his expertise is greater than hers. This is because his work experience is so varied, encompassing everything from farm gates and fine furniture to buildings. Blandine's ceramic knowledge is extensive but she describes her materials and processes as 'simple'.

At the time the exhibition concept took shape and was agreed with The Devon Guild, Terry had a large workshop employing six staff. He spent a large proportion of his time managing the workshop and staff and not enough time making. The balance is now rearranged; he has a smaller workshop but much more time for making.

A key part of this collaboration has been learning about each other's materials and working processes. Blandine feels that cabinet making is rule-based whereas her approach to ceramics is much more instinctive. Terry has had to learn the limitations of clay and was surprised to learn that it has a 'memory'. It can, for instance, enter the kiln in a particular shape or form but somewhere in the firing cycle it can revert to a shape it held at some point between raw clay and finished piece. However, once it has been fired, ceramic is stable and will not alter. Wood, on the other hand, has a

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<sup>1</sup> The exception being wooden surrounds for ceramic tiles, baths or basins.

life after making. Blandine and Terry both agree that it was the limitations of the ceramic material which needed to be accommodated and, once they had recognized this, they were able to move forwards. Blandine has learned to work with a degree of precision unimaginable to her before the partnership. She has even mastered mitering (corner joints formed by cutting bevels of equal angles) and has had to produce what Terry calls 'proper drawings'. They have both been pushed to extend their boundaries and Blandine has had to make 'repeats', a new experience.

It is interesting to ask makers how and when they knew what they were going to be. Blandine's answer to this question was that it was a gradual evolution. She started with plasticine as a child and then graduated to mud and worm-casts. She made mud pots which were left to dry on the back doorstep and knew her materials were limited when the mud pots collapsed in the rain. Fortunately the craft shop in the village sold air-drying clay. Blandine sold her finished pieces back to the shop thereby increasing her pocket money stream. Her progress to art school was never in doubt. Once there she found an inspirational drawing teacher, the 'inspirational' aspect being twofold; a teacher with good subject knowledge but also one who believed in Blandine and 'brought out the best'.

Terry's career as a maker started at an equally young age. He says he started 'making things in sheds' when he was as young as six. Somewhere around the age of eleven or twelve he made his first lathe from a converted vacuum cleaner. It didn't conform to any health and safety standards, 'lethal' is the word Terry used, but the more extraordinary fact about his home-made lathe is that he'd never actually seen one working – only a picture. His future as a maker wasn't taken for granted though. He was academic as well as practical and his school tried to encourage him to choose an academic profession. Fortunately, Terry also had an inspirational teacher (woodwork), a man who knew and cared about making things well, and Terry stuck to his guns choosing furniture and art over the alternatives.

The exhibition divides itself into areas. Integrated wood and ceramic pieces, two pieces of furniture made by Terry for which Blandine has made ceramic companion pieces and a group of paintings by Blandine. The paintings are a response to the collaborative process and, like everything else in the exhibition, they have been closely discussed.



The technical challenges of the pieces have been extensive. Fired ceramic cannot be altered so it is Terry who must make the wood fit any irregularities in the measurements of the ceramic components. And, as an experienced furniture maker, Terry knows about the stresses and strains that pieces of furniture are subjected to. He knows that people 'bash furniture with hoovers'. Timber will withstand aggressive housework but ceramic might not. Therefore there are no ceramic parts in contact with the floor and most of the pieces are strengthened with steel 'threaded bars'. These pass through the ceramic and fit neatly into the wood, top and bottom.

It's important to say something further about the materials used, as 'wood' and 'ceramic' are broad categories. Blandine uses T material<sup>2</sup> which is bisque fired to 1000°C. The slips, oxides and occasionally glaze are added at this point and then the work is fired again to 1230°C. If further colour or lustre is required then a third firing (760°C) is done.

The timber used is chosen for its colour and quality and includes wenge, cherry, oak and walnut. Fumed<sup>3</sup>, limed oak has become a favourite. In some cases veneers have been used, partly to cut down on weight and partly in response to sustainability issues. All veneers are certificated and Blandine and Terry have also planted 4,000 hardwood trees just to be on the safe side. From working with Terry, Blandine has learned that Terry looks at trees in a different way to her. He sees pieces of furniture within them whereas Blandine sees a tree as a thing of beauty in its own right.

A question often asked by children about hand made work is 'how long did it take?' In the case of the Brown English oak sideboard the answer is two and a half years. However, had it been made in a concentrated burst of time, it would amount to nine full weeks.



The work in this exhibition represents three years of Blandine and Terry thinking and working closely together. They have engineered their own techniques and processes, an exercise in ingenuity and craftsmanship, with no precedent to examine or learn from. The pieces on show in this exhibition are an adventurous approach into new territory which encompasses furniture, ceramics and sculpture.

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<sup>2</sup> Extremely resilient, tolerant clay body. Used for large sculpture and handbuilding. Low thermal expansion, low shrinkage and good warp resistance. Very refractory.

<sup>3</sup> Fuming is a way of darkening oak with ammonia in a sealed environment.