

## **A CERTAIN WELSH ARTIST**

### TOWARDS A THESIS (JOB DESCRIPTION)

The particular background I come from engendered a sense of responsibility to continuation and preservation. The Welsh speaking in Wales when I was growing up were expected to be actively engaged in the culture, whether through the Eisteddfod, both local and national, or the chapel, or at a later stage, protest activity for the rights of the Welsh language. This we felt, and our parents before us, was a necessity since our culture was/is threatened with the extinction of its language. From the 1960's onwards there has been an added sense of grievance and anger.

Anxiety of one kind or another, trauma even, drives art. Artists "find" a subject that underlies their production for most of their career. How do they 'find' it? I drifted by natural inclination into mine. Only later could I analyse my motives, which appear straightforward and culturally predetermined. My only real choice would have been to ignore and deny that predetermined path. An MA course completed in 1992, ten years after I had entered into a career as an artist revealed the developments, and explored my reactions to a prolonged stay in Zimbabwe in 1990 as Artist in Residence at the National Gallery of Zimbabwe.

The external structures that enabled this work to reach an audience were the cultural shift in international art and an expansion of information media within Wales. The former shift exposed the growth of art addressing de-colonisation, in the realms of the political, of sexuality, gender, feminism ethnicity, and crucially, the examination of identity. The establishing of a Welsh language television channel for Wales, gave voice to certain agendas, visual art in Wales being one. A byproduct of this new industry was the creation of a newly affluent, culturally aware middle class who invested in art.

In order to bring these factors into play and to redress a perceived deficiency in these areas in Wales' art, I committed myself to seeking to "compensate

the canon"<sup>1</sup>. This engagement involved expanding my field of practice from painting and assemblage (the studio/exhibition work) to include explanatory texts, interviews and discourse. This led naturally to writing, editing publications and disseminating the work of other artists and in curating exhibitions both of my own work and of other artists.

Writing in turn has led to lecturing and to "activism", that is, forming groups, making declarations, participating in forum events and, somewhat of a hyperbole, becoming a "theorist".<sup>2</sup> This whilst also maintaining a studio practice and exhibiting and selling my work

The market for my work is generally within Wales, though works have sold abroad, and private buyers are usually aware of, and are sympathetic to the cultural context of the work. Crucially, works have also been bought by public collections including several by The National Museum and Gallery, Wales; The Contemporary Art Society of Wales; The Tabernacle, Machynlleth; The National Library of Wales; Newport Museum and Art Gallery; Brecknock Museum; The University of Wales Trinity St David and The University of South Wales. Works have also featured in publications that chart the history of art in Wales by writers such as Peter Lord, Prof Anthony Jones, Osi Rhys Osmond, and Prof M. Wynn Thomas, as well as in televised documentaries. Interviews have also been published widely, as well as catalogue essays for many exhibitions. My work has also been used as book-cover artwork for many publications, mostly of an academic nature.

This in effect, adds to the cultural specificity of the work and the means by which it operates in the context of audience, and the responsibility of the artist to a given audience. In this way, my practice reflects that of the poet in Wales, who has a defined historic role within the culture. I would argue that this is not the case for most contemporary visual artists.

Writing, television broadcasting, giving talks and lectures, and also having my paintings used on book covers, posters and so forth, are valuable

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<sup>1</sup>Raymond Williams. The act of "compensating the canon", that is challenging and offering alternative variants to the accepted and "selective tradition".

<sup>2</sup>Writers' biography, Certain Welsh Artists. Seren, 2000.

dissemination vehicles. Indeed some of these activities might be regarded as 'performative' elements in the practice, which operate almost as the creation of a 'brand'.

In many ways these distinctive areas merge into the one mission and I find the same creative pleasure in achieving goals in each area.

Such practice is increasingly more common for artists, but remains far from being the norm. However I can draw parallels with artists in comparable cultural situations, artists who have inspired me along the way; I have engaged with such artists and their work in several locations around the world as well as in reading and visiting exhibitions.

The matter of choice, in this career path, is a moot point. How, again, to adapt Raymond Williams' terminology, "formation and alignment" plays its part and how external cultural determinants push one into a given trajectory which one is then forced to accept or to reject, is an area for discussion. Influences on an artist or writer are varied and change over time, and many need to be abandoned along the way. But the social and cultural dynamics within which one lives are unavoidable determinants on the work produced and on the way an artist negotiates the world.

There are, as there are surely in most artistic practices, periods of doubt and conflict and it is the acceptance, appreciation or not, of the work and role of an artist by an audience that serves most to alleviate these doubts. These factors are made manifest by invitations to exhibit, sale of work on the one hand, the publication of texts, student interest and learned research on the other. An artist gains a "position" and an audience by dint of prolonged endeavor in one given field, which in turn escalates the opportunities to expand the practice.

One sometimes craves a "retreat" into the studio to make paintings that are devoid of cultural reference, but these hypothetical works never surface for me, try as I may. As the poet T.H. Parry-Williams expresses in the poem, "Hon", I am drawn back with no hope of escape, to the subject of nationhood, identity, culture, and the irrevocable decline of the language that has been a

core of Welsh identity in the absence of national independence for centuries. The same can be said of the writing and discourse on art, which I also practice. This identification with a minority cultural experience, with a language that is ancient (that is the original British tongue) but is in retreat, seems to me not to be a parochial concern. Neo-liberalism and globalization along with the development of technology and the Internet has diffused the cultural specificities of the whole world. Cultures are becoming homogenized, and as a result, the world is impoverished.

Incorporated into the work is the use of certain tropes that can be seen as strategies of postcolonial art and literature. These might include the exploration and contemporisation of myth, as in my treatment of themes from the Mabinogi; or the use of traditional iconography, displaced or reinterpreted; the use of maps and landscape in *Hon* and *Tierra Incognita* to create contemporary images that relate to a specific and particular tradition, one that is itself a "selective tradition" even within Wales. It is not a "tradition" that can be recognized by all people living in Wales, but one in which I perceive an "authenticity" pertaining to my own background and in which I identify a continuing presence in the work of poets, writers and artists of the past and present. The twin faced *Janus* figure became for me, an illustration of this, symbolizing the need to look into the past whilst at the same time looking forward into the future. These works acts as warnings or reminders, that society on a global level seems hell bent on moving forward whilst paying little heed to the lessons of history, folk memory, tradition and the idea of rootedness. Recent work has amplified the use of maps, diagrams, texts displayed as 'learning aides', the use of poetry and quotation within drawings. Words, and translations sometimes form the core of the visual work, replacing imagery. Making such work, one is always engaged with an involved level of research in history, mythology, ethnography and literature. In the works of *Field-notes* and *Words* produced from 2010, text as drawing, as image has taken over completely, in an attempt to visually represent the language and poetry of Wales through the centuries. Working collaboratively with poet Menna Elfyn on *Field-notes* has led me to explore the words that signify this loss of territory and belonging in its abstract and physical sense. The names

of places lost in translation, which also means the loss of history and narrative, the loss of the 'song-lines' of an ancient tradition, the loss of connections to roots and place that are invested in place names, poetry, family tree's and names of writers from the past. The *Word* drawings are exhibited as if unearthed through archaeology of the soul, displayed as if in a museum of endangered species. I have sought to capture poetry, as it was written, rough and layered, with crossing out, erasing and additions, rather than as the 'finished' version committed to the printed page.

These are common strategies, methodologies of postcolonial identity explorations in the art and writing, film and theatre of many minority cultures in the world. There is a cultural need to capture and re invoke, to unify past with (broken) present; to use an old language in new and relevant ways, leading to hybrid, new forms that bind a continuing cultural heritage to new modes of being. These are tools.

Iwan Bala 01/06/13