

UNEARTHED

by Sebastian Blackie

IN FRANCE



At Morvan Regional Natural Park, in central eastern France, a massive hill fort is being excavated. Built by the Gauls on Mount Beuvray about 200 BCE, it once encircled a city of 10,000 inhabitants. The archaeology that has been uncovered so far is beautifully displayed in the Musée de Bibracte. It shows the Gauls to have had an advanced culture, distinct from the Romans with whom they traded peacefully until cynically attacked and eventually conquered after several years of war by Julius Caesar. Bibracte, the museum, demonstrates how the Romanization of the countries that made up the empire has somewhat eclipsed the indigenous cultures they occupied. However, seeing the Gauls' art and decorative style, it is clear it has endured to re-emerge in the individualistic carvings of Europe's rural Medieval churches and even persists today in the spirit of free thinking that continues to rebel against the rationalism and conformity the Romans bequeathed to the Western world. The museum and the forest-clad mountain above were the venue for a major exhibition by two British artists; ceramic artist Jane Norbury and sound artist Will Menter.

Norbury and Menter have been active members of France's artistic community for many years, working in collaboration and individually. Norbury predominately works with clay and the other elements associated with ceramic such as fire, wind, and water. Menter's work also has an allegiance to this matter but his fascination with sound and the performative aspects of the medium mean that anything may potentially be deployed (a July 2016 performance involving ice blocks suspended like fruit in scrub oaks on a French hillside comes to mind). Illuminated with pencil spotlights in the warm summer night, the melting ice dripped onto aluminium fast-food containers strategically placed on the woodland floor, producing a hypnotic, random percussion that was startling in its ability to evoke the elemental from such a disparate range of objects. In the same summer, Norbury installed a line of raw clay forms through a ruined Medieval church. The clays had been gathered from different



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1 *Orange Inside*, 16 in. (41 cm) in height, ceramic, fired to cone 1, 2018. Photo: Ben Timpson. 2 Jane Norbury's studio in France—The Nine Doors. 3 *90 buckets of earth*, 196 ft. 9 in. (16 m) in length, local clays, L'église de Cortiambles, 2016. 4 Jane Norbury using an extruder at Anderson Ranch Arts Center, 2018. Photo: Levi Basist.

sites in the region using cheap, mass-produced plastic buckets, which molded the clay into identical forms. As the forms weathered, the individual character of each sample was revealed chiming with the decay, albeit at a slower pace, of the stone church. The elements of Norbury's piece were beautifully simple and as a whole, resonant in its location as the formed clay began to spew across the ancient flagstone floor, aided by occasional showers, to be turned to dust in summer sun as it returned, funeral like, to the ground from which it had been taken.

From the Beginning

Norbury's artistic journey in France started when Britain, having recently joined the European Union, began to explore new cultural links with neighboring countries. Norbury was one of several art students at West Surrey College of Art and Design, in Farnham, UK (now The University of the Creative Arts), who undertook a foreign exchange as part of their studies. She initially started at Marseilles, but quickly moved to the dynamic ceramic department at nearby Aix-en-Provence College of Art, run by the energetic and entrepreneurial Jean Biagini. Biagini, a French national with Italian

ancestry, was an internationalist. He had studied in Japan and the US and used the college's scenic location to attract visiting artists from all over the world, producing a heady mix for the students. During Norbury's association with Aix-en-Provence College of Art, he organized an exhibition for American ceramic artist Paul Soldner at Marseille's Cantini Museum of Modern Art and a raku workshop/symposium at the college. This had a profound impact on French ceramics where, up to that point, vessel making, with some rare exceptions, was synonymous with peasant pottery and associated with the country markets rather than sophisticated art galleries. As a result of the connection through Norbury of Farnham and Aix-en-Provence College of Art, I was able to persuade Soldner to include a workshop in Britain—still heavily influenced by the attitudes of Bernard Leach—as part of his European tour. For Norbury (and many others), Soldner's demonstrations were largely symbolic. They did not particularly lead to the adoption of Soldner's methods but did inspire fresh thinking about the significance of working with clay and what it might become as well as what it had been. Jean Nicholas Gérard, who was studying at Aix-en-Provence College of Art at this time, is a good example of



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Clay and Forming Techniques

For the Bibracte project Norbury made a clay body from unprocessed clay dug from a quarry in central France mixed with commercial, low-firing black stoneware. She combines slabs with coiling, scraping, and paddling to stretch and compress the clay. All work is fired to 2012° F (1100° C) under heavy reduction.

the dogma-free culture in which students were able to find their place within the cannon of studio ceramics.

France has provided a supportive home for many visual artists attracted by cheap, idyllic, rural housing and a distinct culture. But, as for so many who choose the life of the independent, self-employed artist, a commission like an exhibition at Musée de Bibracte has only been secured after many years of commitment to practice, financial insecurity, and endless applications for residencies and funding.

A Resistant, Rugged Material

Much of Norbury's work is site sensitive, if not site specific, and at Musée de Bibracte she used the architecture to strong effect. The historic collection is set out in a series of interconnected rooms that look out onto empty, inaccessible, courtyard-like spaces and the wooded mountain beyond. Norbury's unglazed, uncompromising forms which were set in these *khora*s' (or *chora*—a philosophical concept first discussed by Plato, then more recently by Heidegger and Derrida; it is a space between places), neither belonging to the natural world of rocky outcrops and tree stumps beyond nor the fragmented artifacts within, whose distressed fabric speaks of the generations over which they laid hidden. They have, however, something of the rugged, straightforwardness of both. They are not elegant forms nor do their surfaces shine, qualities present in the few Roman pots in the museum collection and much favored by so many contemporary makers. Norbury's handbuilt forms have a kind of resistance; as if refusing to be anything other than what they are. The material appeal gave value to the historic collection but there was no attempt to seduce the viewer with the overt displays of sensuality that the medium is capable of. As such they work as art, provoking reflection beyond the object. It is not that they lack aesthetic appeal but they do not trade in the self-absorbed sexiness that seems such a common feature of contemporary craft. Though hollow and sometimes open, the forms are not vessels. They are about the body and tell of the body in two senses: The forms evoke human bodies in shape and scale but defy explicit anatomical identification. They also



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5 *Queule 5*, 3 ft. 5 in. (1.1 m) in height, mixed clays, reduction fired to cone 04, 2017. 6 *Queule 2 and 3*, to 30 in. (76 cm) in height, mixed clays, reduction fired to cone 04, 2017. 7 *Queule 1*, 38¾ in. (96 cm) in height, mixed clays, reduction fired to cone 04, 2017. 8 *Sillon 33*, 17 in. (43 cm) in diameter, stoneware, 2017. 9 *Inward Out*, 40 in. (1 m) in length, stoneware, fired to cone 3, 2019. Photo: Jane Norbury.

represent the dynamic body in the traces of their making. The physicality of the rolling, smearing, banging, and scraping that have brought them into existence can still be read. This naked use of material rejects the idealized, objectified body, whether it is flesh or clay.

Norbury recently undertook a residency at Anderson Ranch Arts Center in Snowmass Village, Colorado, closely associated with Soldner. She continues to pursue her

obsession with the body, but this time aided by mechanization. It will be interesting to discover what this determined artist will create with cutting-edge technology, dealing with a ubiquitous subject, but in a culture so different to France and England. It seems that the US, or at least Anderson Ranch, has recognized, as has France, Norbury's creative independence and, unlike the Romans, is embracing a diversity of values. Now a mature artist, Norbury's practice embodies the enrichment that comes from cultural exchange—a process that began with a student exchange and continues with her recent residency in the US.

Jane Norbury is author of the new book, 90 Buckets of Earth, which is published in English and French, and available at www.janenorbury.com/news.htm.

the author Sebastian Blackie is an artist, writer, and academic. Professor of ceramics at the University of Derby in the UK, head of research school of art (retired), he is the author of Dear Mr Leach, and has recently participated in residencies including Shangyu Celadon, China, and FLICAM, China.