

Unearthed 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. In the summer of 2016, Norbury installed a line of raw clay forms through a ruined medieval church. The clays had been gathered from different sites in the region using cheap, mass-produced plastic buckets, which moulded 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, funereal 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 neighbouring 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 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 inter - connected 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 khoras' (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 artefacts 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 favoured by so many contemporary makers. Norbury's hand-built 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 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 Centre 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.

I have only seen Jane's most recent work in photographs. To comment on the work of an artists that, one knows from firsthand experience, is highly visceral, is risky when based on appearances alone. To be in the physical presence of Norbury's work is to know its scale and sense its weight in relationship to oneself. We trace its shapes and surfaces from every angle, we feel their volume and infer their interiority making our own unmediated exploration, which in turn draws forth dark memories, into the light of consciousness, like water from a well. Nevertheless, the photographs suggest significant developments in a body of work that started when she took a residency at Anderson Ranch in the USA five years ago. There is a sense that they are the result of a fully digested experience. They seem to retain a wonder at what clay can be, reinvigorated by the residency, but with an authority that comes with years of practice and undiminished curiosity.

"Walking Skins" reminds me of Claudia Benthien's scholarly analysis of how skin is conceived in Western culture. It is sometimes represented as metonymically representing the whole, the inner self laid bare there for all to read, naked, authentic. Alternatively, the skin can be seen as a carapace, protecting, concealing. A surface that faces the world on which we write that which we wish to be read. In both cases it is a contested space of identity.

Norbury writes of the fossil forest in Dorset as one of her influences. These circular organic traces fixed in rock is resonant of soft clay becoming hard ceramic. But I am reminded that they stand on the very edge of the towering sea cliff; a boarder of sorts! I feel vertigo not just because of the crashing waves

far below, nor the vastness of the sparkling sea before me and those who sail and some who die there, but the briefness of our existence marked out in the rock. I am reminded of Walter Benjamin's quote: "To live is to leave traces" and the range of meanings the word 'trace' can have. If I could be present at Norbury's exhibition I might also be thinking about the second part of Benjamin's thought "Im interior warden sie betont" "They (the traces) are emphasised in the interior".

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