

16 May to 21 June 2008

Gordon Baldwin

The inward and onward journey

It is there on the map. If there were a sign it might say Mynydd Penarfynydd, but that would tell you nothing beyond the mysterious music of the name. You struggle down the precipitous stony path ever closer to the sea and reach a tiny inlet, a strange world of rocks and stones, some sea-sculpted into standing forms. You would remember it for ever, and you would remember too, the perilous descent, the call of sea-birds, the sun on the water, and the waves' surge. Mynydd Penarfynydd becomes an imaginary signpost, black and white on a board but recalling a rich experience that is beyond description. Gordon has been there. Indeed, some years ago now he created several pieces which, when finished, reminded him of that hidden place and of many others - hence the title 'Vessels from a place of stones'. But, should you ask 'where is it, this place of stones?'. The reply would be - 'on the drawing-board of my imagination'.

The studio walls are hung with drawings; not of places or figures, but of abstract forms boldly outlined, waiting, demanding to be turned to clay. These are a sculptor's drawings. A sculptor restlessly concerned with the limitless possibilities of that humble material which, under his sure and steady hand, can grow, take shape and bring those forms to life, responding to the impulse of imagination. Yet this is no easy journey. There is a beginning and an end, and a long intuitive process of decoration in between. 'I make no predictions', he says. On a piece made many years ago Gordon stencilled some words chosen at random from a book - 'Fan Kuan walked through snow-clad mountains for months before he put a single stroke on silk'. By a happy chance they say something about the way in which he works, as does the title of a more recent piece, 'Bowl with quick drawing done over a long period'. This 'long period' is not simply one of meditation: it is one of doing, of recognition of the many possibilities suggested by the form. These surfaces have hidden depths. A vessel can be white today and, refired, grey or blue tomorrow. A fresh ground can be applied, worked on and put back in the kiln, perhaps only to give way to yet another, and another, each decorated layer yielding and contributing to the next. Other forms, too, may have grown from the same idea, inviting further exploration: siblings come into being to be similarly worked on and given their own identity - a family is born.

So there they stand, these abstract forms, deeply significant in themselves and seemingly immutable after the long gestation and the many ordeals by fire. But now they take on a second life, through the 'titles' which emerge after the process has ended; words hinting at, rather than defining the concerns and inspirations of a lifetime.

Sometimes these are points of departure, where a specific shape or form makes a clear statement - 'Bottle drifting to a point', 'Vessel around a square', 'Grey vessel with simple line' - but often they are points of arrival, stages on the inward journey.

There are the greetings in reply to artists who have sent him messages across the years - 'A vessel for Morandi' - 'A vessel for your thoughts, Mr Brancusi' - 'Vessel according to Klee', where a tiny fragment in a painting turns into a dancer poised in an arabesque.

There is darkness and light. Black vessels can brood - 'Dark air vessel', 'Vessel for dark thoughts' - but there are also 'Vessels to light a dark place' and the joyous optimism of 'Vessel between spring and summer', or 'Cygnus' soaring skywards, 'Nimbus' serene.

The sea is never very far away - 'Sea piece', 'Ocean geometry', a vessel gently but invisibly rocking on its curving keel - and the hours spent on the margin between tide and sand return 'Vessel from the edge of the sea', 'Small vessel to be placed by a dark sea': an exchange of gifts, perhaps.

There is music - 'Sea-drift', recalling Delius as well as winds and tides, or pieces echoing the faraway of George Crumb's 'Ancient voices of children'. There are 'Ancient sounds' and 'Vessels in the form of ancient silences'.

Then again there are 'titles' that remain elusive 'Vessel from an enigmatic form', 'Vessel from another place' - sometimes reflecting the ancient world of oracles and mysteries - 'Delphic vessel', 'Anubis', 'Vessel for Osiris'.

There are pieces, too, that explore the tradition as well as the possibilities of clay and glaze - the 'Great Cups' needing great handles, or 'Vessels for an Alchemist' whose massive forms and heavy lugs hint at the difficulty of controlling the dark forces within - metaphors of the potter's art.

.... and now, the 'naming' done, the vessels are ready to journey on again, through our own dialogue with them. The 'titles' are at once a celebration and an invitation, signposts on an autobiographical map that can evoke in us responses and associations undreamt of by the creator of these potent forms. Yes, we may go with Gordon to his 'place of stones', but also to a Mynydd Penarfynydd of our own imagining ... and many other places far beyond.