



Anne Gibbs' sculpture is delicate, intricate and small-scale, made in opaque bone china in her signature ice-cream colours, each piece is almost impossibly pretty. Together her work forms precise table-top installations, laid out like an elaborate tea party. At first, this sensory indulgence may seem too sickly sweet, but Gibbs then pricks our consciousness with elements such as pins, knotted threads or a tiny bundle of thorns which are altogether more sinister and unsettling, fetishistic even and surreal. One has almost the same odd sensation of looking at a butterfly collection – the sweet pain and poignancy, the beauty and cruelty – and this duality is what makes Gibbs' work so utterly compelling.

Stephen Feeke, Director, New Art Centre, Roche Court



Anne Gibbs

The Language of Clay



Anne Gibbs
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Still



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Still

Anne Gibbs has a lot to say, quietly and assuredly. Take a moment to stop and observe, take another to stop and consider. Then take the time to think about what you've seen and how it's made you feel. Anne is very good at doing this. Anne notices the still points in our lives. She notices the ever present things and how they change. She recognises that the more we look at things, usually, the more there is to see and how rewarding that can be. Anne makes the time in her personal world to notice things in our collective world. She focuses in. The more she does so the bigger things get. Anne has so much to say about little things, things that all stack up to make our world as we know it.

And I don't just mean objects, though Anne has plenty to say about how we use different objects in a variety of ways. I also mean experiential things, things felt, personal exchanges, cultural nuances. Anne keenly observes and considers such things and they manifest in her fine ceramic sculptures and suggest myriad connotations. We bring our own experiences to bear when we see Anne's work too. This affects our viewing and what we take from the work in ways that Anne could not have foreseen. Anne was once asked if she makes work for specific audiences. 'How can I,' she replied, 'how can I know other peoples' minds?' She makes according to what she sees and feels in the world. Calmly or provocatively this will resonate with us the viewer.





I find Anne's work delightfully playful and wittily dark. A smooth, brightly coloured surface is pierced by a sharp pin. Don't delight for too long, reality awaits. In this way her work is alive with contrasts. There is obvious beauty in the bone china pieces she makes and there can be arresting harshness in the objects she sets with them. Her work seems delicate in form yet has a robust presence. There is joy in Anne's work yet it is often subverted by a sombre visual reference. Shallow dishes invite interaction yet they are bound and thus prevent us from using them. Unexpected delight and unexpected pain. It is what we come to expect in the world. It is what, for me, Anne's work explores and celebrates. How honest this exhibition is, her work really is shaped by her life's experiences.

For Anne, this exhibition is a summary of many different things. Things people have given her, places she's been, scenes she's observed and things she's collected along the way. It is a personal map of sorts and represents her journey thus far. Where next we might enquire? 'Scale it up', says Anne, 'I wonder what would happen if I made things bigger.' Then we would have an alternative landscape that we could wander through, and not only in our imaginations. I look forward to that. For Anne brings us still life in miniature form, and her still life allows us a moment of calm, a moment to stop and think.

In Anne Gibbs' exhibition *Still* we have the last in our current series of The Language of Clay. Anna Noël's figurative ceramics delighted us in their telling of tales. Micki Schloessing's wood fired pots have brought pleasure everyday in their use. The work of each of the artists displays skills and application honed by dedication and knowledge. Knowledge of an age-old medium with qualities that continue to endure.

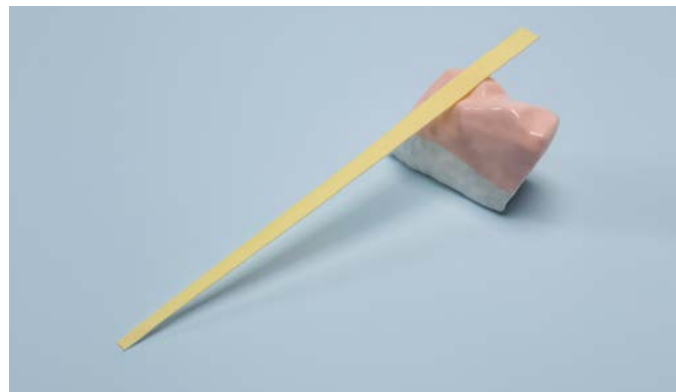
Ceri Jones



Imaginary Hinterlands

Eve Hesse, Gillian Lowndes, Jacki Parry, Neil Brownsword, Joseph Beuys, Rachel Whiteread, Anne Gibbs; a diverse group of artists perhaps, but all have explored with great delicacy and sensitivity the wonders of the familiar, the charge of objects seen and felt around us. It is about corporeal potency, a rich transformation involving sensory properties full of visual suggestion. It also strikes me that, to use a phrase favoured by the late poet Geoffrey Hill, such work is about the power of 'expressiveness' in art, not about the comparative insularity of 'self-expression'. That is to say, in Gibbs' case, such work goes beyond the purely autobiographical, though it does touch on our collective response to what is around us, the strata of meanings in the physical layers of our environment and the furniture of our lives.

Clay is a highly responsive and malleable medium which can bind together (literally and metaphorically) any number of other raw and created components. Gibbs' sculptural collages are still highly personal, but in the sense that they deal with artefacts that connect with us all, they salvage things from our own shared experience and histories. There is a level of familiarity about her imagery and what she trawls, an intimacy about her choice of form and materials. Her use of clay, notably bone china, with other items, found or made, is also a trigger of recognition and memory. Different fragments are transmuted as she binds them together in work that goes beyond any superficial 'style'. It is given a deeper sense of texture, a fertility, through the eclectic nature of the objects she utilises and improvises. They needle her inventive imagination, and they needle ours.





The natural and the human-made, both the valued and the discarded, are bound into Gibbs' own resourceful world of stitching, threading, piercing and joining, where every act of making, of construction and piecing together, is also an important part of her philosophy. It is just as much about the process. The fragile nature of this process adds to its intimacy, another quality she has in common with the other artists I mention. It is a gently regenerative creativity, this bricolage of pieces re-evaluated and remade. Gibbs is artist as retriever, but also as provocateur, in her understated way pricking at our consciousness, making us think afresh about the fabric of our interior and exterior worlds. Like Rachel Whiteread's sculpture, this is an art of the human imprint, about the ghost or residue of our presence and activity. Her sculptures have potency because they are about a kind of interaction, not only between artist and object, but between their constituent elements. They evoke different human rituals, playfully reconfiguring and subverting the often familiar and ordinary into something other-worldly. Her work becomes strangely talismanic, triggering association, a surrealism of the everyday, grounded in fact in our own close experience.





In her *Crossing Boundaries* installation of 2015, there were casts that resembled party-like food moulds, there were charred pin forms, utensils harnessed with thread, a sprig of lichen bonded to a twig, suggestive of a bonsai-like still life. The presentation evoked the layout and various tools of table ceremony, the colours uncannily bright and festive. Gibbs' most recent work continues this sense of studied placement and arrangement, a sense of relationships no doubt deepened by her recent time in Japan, where the sense of poise and the interconnectedness of things comes out in the Japanese approach to objects and spatial harmonies, concentrated and expressed in daily ritual and display.

Gibbs' intensely focused explorations go beyond the purely conceptual. This is a sculpture that is *felt*, visually tactile, in its different textures and surfaces, and where colour too is sensual, even evoking qualities of taste and smell. These are sculptures of reconstitution, taken from landscape and seascape, the urban and the domestic, and on the evidence here, more distant, imaginary hinterlands. They are given new frisson because of the eclectic dialogues and narratives that Gibbs opens up for us, what the art critic Robert Hughes would have called 'play-off'. These become a domestic tableaux of another kind, work that reminds us that nothing in our complex, sometimes hidden and always extraordinary surroundings can be taken for granted.

David Whiting





In conversation with Anne Gibbs

Talking with Anne in her studio, curator Ceri Jones learns a little more about Anne's creative journey.

CJ: Where do you start?

AG: I always have a starting point and for this exhibition it was purely working with a limited colour palette. I spent a few weeks just testing different colours and seeing what worked well together. What I've realised about how I work is that I have a three-pronged approach. I have things that I've collected from local woodlands, I've got objects from car boots sales or charity shops and I also draw with liquid clay. The new work is a combination of those three resources.

CJ: Can you tell us more about the objects you integrate into your ceramic work, are they simply found objects or specific objects you've searched for?

AG: A bit of both. Some of them are items that I've specifically collected on walks and some of them have been given to me by friends. For example Kate, who owns the workshop, is always visiting

interesting places and she'll bring me things back, such as a stone or a stick or some shells. I've used quite a few things that she's given me and in this exhibition I've used a seed that she brought back from Nicaragua. I like that I'm here at Kate's working, she gives me something and I can use it in my work. So some things I collect and some are given and some things I've had for years and years. Sometimes I just use the object in its own right because I think it's quite interesting. I've got a magnifying lens in the exhibition that's come from Philadelphia and you'll also see pieces that have come from the arm of a chandelier that I got from a shop in Philadelphia. I've made a mould of the arm and cast it and sliced it and put it back together, I've changed its original form. I think that's how I like to work, to have an original object and to see how I can alter it, whether it's through colour or cutting it up and putting it back together. Very rarely do I just cast something as it is and that's it finished, I always like to alter it in some way.

CJ: Do you have a pre-conceived idea of how that transformation might happen or do you just let it unfold?

AG: I let it happen really as there are some things I cast and make a mould of and they simply don't work. For example I had a stick that was covered in moss, it was beautiful. I made a mould of it and I cast it and it was terrible, it looked dead, I tried casting it in different colours but it just didn't work, it wasn't meant to be transformed it was beautiful as it was. It tends to be the natural things that are better left as they are. I basically like collaging, putting things together. Composition is really important to me, and editing, making sure you're not overloading work. I might have spent weeks making pieces and they don't work, I might feel a bit resentful, but I've just got to accept it.

CJ: Your pieces are beautifully presented. You present some in pairs, some in groups, some in larger assemblages. How do you approach the placement of pieces?

AG: Well for this body of work I feel like I've been a lot more specific than I normally am. The two

table-top installations for example, one will have variations of shallow dishes and the other will have pieces that have tips of the same colour. I've tried to give a running theme through each installation. Basically I lay everything out as I'm making them and sometimes it works immediately and sometimes it can look too cluttered so I take them all off. If I'm fighting with the pieces to make them work then generally I'm not going to succeed so I disregard them. I live with them for a while. Take these three shelf pieces, I knew immediately that the first one had worked, the second one I had to tweak a bit and the third one didn't work at all, so I've been living with this third composition for three weeks now and I know I'm still not there, this one has become a bit of a thorn in my side.

I took loads of photographs when I was in Japan, I chose 15 of these and pinned them on the noticeboard and decided that I wanted my new work to encompass something from these photographs. For the first time, I've put everything up on the noticeboard, including words such as 'marks', 'still life', 'colour palette.' Japan influenced my range of materials and my aesthetic. Objects



don't have to have a function but can just be beautiful and illuminating. Spacing and editing is integral to allow them to be so. When I was in Japan I went to a museum way up in the mountains, I went to the café and one large wall was canary yellow, the tables were all chrome and I couldn't figure out what the red was in the middle of each table. It was sugar cubes, each one wrapped in red paper. It is those kind of visuals that I want to encompass in my work, that attention to little things that you don't normally look at. I came home and thought how do I edit everything that I've seen.

CJ: It's intriguing how you seem to create miniature landscapes in your work. Do you do so consciously?

AG: Twice a year I walk to Waun Fach in the Black Mountains. There's a piece of gorse on the mountain and the contours around it make it look like a tree on a mountain, but it's actually a very small bush on a mound. I love this. I take the same photographs every year, of this miniature world, it is a landscape within a landscape. Also, when I was a child we always went out to play and just used whatever was around, the ferns or whatever, to invent things. My work reflects that experience, that making things out of other things.

CJ: The colour palette you've created is sweet and bright. Whereas some of the objects you place with your ceramics are hard or sharp and suggest a darker side. Is this a balance you play with?

AG: Yes, I like the subversive. I like the duality of something that lures you in, it might be a smooth seductive surface and then there's something quite sharp and you think oh, that's a bit uncomfortable. I like that. My favourite piece of work is by Marcel Duchamp and it's called The Wedge of Chastity, a small bronze cast. It's very suggestive. It encompasses everything I like to achieve in my work; it's small, it uses contrasting materials, it looks like a landscape but suggests the other as well. I do like to make the viewer feel a little bit comfortable and then they find these slightly odd elements that can be unnerving.

I gave a talk in Philadelphia and at the end of it somebody asked me if I had anger issues, suggesting that my work was voodoo like, because of the pins. I'd never considered that at all. It's interesting how cultural perceptions vary, I've just always thought of it as make do and mend, pins holding things together.

CJ: You've mentioned a few influences, Japan, Gillian Lowndes work, the outdoors, are there other experiences that you recognise have affected the direction of your work?

AG: My residences have been significant and they've made my work shift in different ways. Cove Park was very much about landscape, where Cove Park is situated reminded me so much of where I grew up in the Welsh valleys and I had never thought of incorporating the landscape before this point and yet it's probably what's most informed my work. My Clay Studio residency in Philadelphia was very much about colour.

When my mother died suddenly, my way of coping was by walking. I walked every day in the local woods, it didn't matter about the weather, and I collected things. That's when I started using found objects more in my work. I work intuitively with the process of making, I have a starting point but if something happens in the making then I go with it.

CJ: Given you go with the flow, you might not know what's next for your work, do you?

AG: I've got a starting point. I'm excited about my still life shelf pieces. I like their precision. I think I'd like to apply more rules and boundaries to my work. I think I'd like to do more of these. I don't know where it will go though, I can't repeat things, it's not what I do, every time I make something I think oh maybe I'll slice that, leave the edges, treat it unexpectedly. I'll do what feels right.



Biography

Anne works in a quiet studio situated in a private garden in a rural village in South Wales. There is equanimity about the studio and its occupant, for Anne, it is a place to simply be. Anne maps a regular course between her home and studio, passing landscapes and road junctions that are both constant and ever changing. These changes inform Anne's practice on a particular day and, over time, influence how bodies of work accumulate.

Landscape is vitally important to Anne, be it on a miniature or grand scale. Textures, colours, contrasts, layers, these all inform her aesthetic. In years past Anne worked with a landscape company, designing and creating self-contained landscapes within defined boundaries, such as roundabouts or sidings. Commissioned for design input into public artworks, Anne has focused on the site-specific nature of work, from traffic calming features to ceramic tiles for Welsh chapels to QR code placement.

Anne's recent research visit to Japan was supported by an Arts Council of Wales Creative Wales Award, received in 2015. Previous support by the Arts Council of Wales had enabled research development periods and Wales Arts International supported Anne to take up her residency at the Clay Studio in Philadelphia in 2010.

Anne won the Gold Medal for Craft and Design at the National Eisteddfod in 2012. Since then her work has been bought by public collections at Amgueddfa Cymru – National Museum Wales and Carmarthen County Museum.

Ten years after graduating with a first class honours in Printmaking, Anne graduated from University of Wales Institute, Cardiff with her Masters Degree in Ceramics in 2004. She has been committed full-time to her ceramic practice since and her work has been presented in numerous exhibitions across the UK and North America. San Diego Arts Institute in the US most recently hosted her work in *Sweet Gongs Vibrating*, this came swiftly on the back of being selected for *Award* at the British Ceramics Biennial in Stoke-on-Trent and for *Fragile?* at National Museum Wales, Cardiff. Ruthin Craft Centre has represented Anne's work at *Collect*, Saatchi Gallery, London and the Crafts Study Centre in Farnham selected her work for *Setting the Scene: New Landscapes in Craft*.

Anne's work has been widely reviewed in publications including Craft Arts International, CCQ, Ceramic Review, Ceramics Art & Perception and *New Directions in Ceramics* by Jo Dahn. She is currently Associate tutor at Cardiff Metropolitan University.

For the first time in an exhibition Anne is showing drawings in *Still*. Drawing is an important element to her practice. Choosing to share this marks another subtle shift in direction for Anne. *Still* is a major solo exhibition that will be pivotal in mapping her creative journey.

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