

CONTINUING PRESCENCES.

*Nid yw Hanes ond ennyd;
A fu ddoe, a fu o hyd*¹.

"As we move ever into the future we are always based in the past"²

In 2002 a large exhibition of Ceri Richards' work, accompanying a handsome monograph by the art writer, and son in law of the artist, Mel Gooding, was presented at the NMGW. To augment this occasion, a group of painters to which I belong, *Ysbryd* were asked to make new work based on, or in reference to, the work of Richards. This exhibition would be called *A Propos*. The following quotation is from the catalogue text by Museum and Gallery Director, Mike Tooby; *"Bala is looking for processes whereby he assimilates the tradition of which Richards is a part into his own imagery. It is as if he is inventing a tradition of references"*.³

Perhaps that being born into a minority Welsh speaking universe, a universe whose fragility we ourselves are very aware of, aware that we might be the last generation of natural speakers, we feel the burden and duty of passing things on. Perhaps because of that we become inclined to look at cultural history as a continuum, not so much in the way that Art History has been viewed, not through the humanist prism; the myth of progress, but as a connecting life force that sees no particular "improvements" necessarily, in fact, tends to revere the great achievements of the past (not only nostalgically) in order to gain consolation and strength to survive and persevere for the (hoped and worked for) future. In some ways it can resemble an alternative religion, with the National Eisteddfod its apotheosis. Like religion, it brings consolation to its believers, not least of which is a sense of self value gained from believing that one is adding another stone onto the building, doing one's bit in a worthwhile project. We therefore need to identify with a builder who put blocks in further down the wall, who felt and thought in similar ways.

The reality may well be that we are acting instinctively, that what I have described is merely a form of tribal bonding, of opting for membership of a pack, nothing more than animal behaviour. The option we have is to choose to align ourselves with this ancient instinct, or choose to ignore it. Art is in itself a way of 'bonding', appreciation of modern art for example makes you a member of a fairly extensive club, choose to be a fan of minimalism, and you become a member of an inner club within the larger one. You

¹ Gerallt Lloyd Owen. *Cilmeri*. Cilmeri a Cherddi Eraill. Gwasg Gwynedd 1991

² Mirosław Balka, interviewed by Iwona Blazwick, Amsterdam 12 September 1990.
Possible Worlds. Sculpture from Europe

³ *A Propos Ceri Richards*. Mike Tooby, Director of the NMGW referring to work made in response to Ceri Richards for *A Propos*. Exhibition Catalogue NMGW. 2002

might then split into clubs that follow certain artists within minimalism, or argue about definitions. Beyond that, art has its place within 'membership' of society and a view of culture. For these reasons precisely it was important for the USA to establish itself as the centre of the art world in the twentieth century, to take over the role of 'past' civilisations like Rome, or centres of European culture like Paris. The art defines the image of the place, classical carvings for Rome, impressionist paintings for Paris, socialist realism for the USSR, abstract expressionism for the USA.

I mention this only as an introduction to a piece of writing that seeks to address my own sifting of the recent past in order to "invent a tradition of references"⁴ as Mike Tooby has it; a quotable and particularly Welsh visual art continuum. All artists, whatever culture they come from, respond in one way or another to other art, past and contemporary. Artists are often reactionary and will be vigorously counter assertive to the values of the past. I find it difficult to do that without qualifying the assertion. Without the cultural building blocks of the past, there would be no present, and in order to provide a future, we must be aware of, and appreciatively sympathetic to the endeavours of the past.

People whose culture or way of life has been marginalised, or who come from peripheral and minority cultures and feel the need to identify with their own past, or need to reclaim that past, often found that there were no models to follow. The norm has been to look to the great European canon, or lately, North American art of the twentieth century. There are many artists who have become unhappy with that canon, and the greatest developments in the art of the later part of the twentieth century have been due to these cultural realignments. It is easier for younger artists today to find models, or, if necessary, to invent them. In so doing, they also become models for fellow travellers on similar roads.

Jimmy Durham, Ana Mendieta, David Hammons, Francisco Toledo, Jose Bedia, Tapfuma Gutsa are a few names whose art has inspired my thinking and my work as those big names of the Euro American canon became of less specific interest as models. By that I mean that they were not specific enough to discuss what I felt to be my own condition. In other words, they did not move this "obstinate Cymric's" heartstring. Apart from those artists from conditions that seemed to mirror my own, I had always been keen to absorb lessons from "my own", from Welsh artists rather than anyone else.

As a child, access to art was limited, access to Welsh art even more so. In north Wales, there were no Glynn Vivian or National Museum collections; consequently I did not get to see the works of Ceri Richards, David Jones or Augustus John in the flesh. I mention Ceri Richards first, because out of all three vaunted Welsh talents of the twentieth century, his work seems most apposite as a source of inspiration for my own work, although it is only very recently that I have come to study it closely. It would appear obvious in hindsight that I found his linear method of drawing appealing since it tallies

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with my own graphic style even if my own line cannot, nor seeks to, compare with the fluidity of Richards'. His subject matter, in particular his delving into the Dylan Thomas tropes and the rich mythic landscape of the imagination that, I find, relates to a Welshness that is rarely appreciated in discussions of his work, adds to his relevance in the "invention of a tradition".

Richards, I think, would have condoned my borrowings. He himself believed in the timeless continuity of Art, as Mel Gooding says; *The history of art was for him a living continuum, and works from any period could be approached as existing in the simultaneity of the living moment, their vital power immediately felt in the present encounter. For Richards painting was a Universe of visual discourse in which living artists drew on the researches and discoveries of great predecessors. The historical art to which he turned for inspiration and ideas existed in the here and now of his apprehension, contemporaneous with that of the masters of his own time. It's subjects and techniques.*⁵

As an appendage to that, Richards himself is quoted giving advice to younger artists, a quote which in some way qualifies the above;

The young painter who cannot free himself from the influence of the preceding generation is headed for disaster. In order to protect himself against the spell of the creations of those of his immediate predecessors whom he admires, he can seek out kindred spirits and find new sources of inspiration in the productions of a variety of other civilizations.

It is clear that by "*other civilisations.*", Richards was not referring to the "Other" solely in the sense we do today, but to the artists of the European past. The paragraph goes on to mention the way Cezanne took inspiration from Poussin. That he should mention this rather than Picasso's appropriation of forms from African art indicate that for Richards art was an available resource, either from the past as well as from geographical distance.

The celebrated Basque sculptor Eduardo Chillida passed away in August 2002, leaving a body of work which is eminently 'international' but is nonetheless fundamentally and organically Basque. Whilst the Basques are aware of this and proclaim it, in Wales, we would rather cast off our greatest achievements in visual arts as being London based, thus agreeing with the London critics, than say, hold on, this artist's work owes its uniqueness to the artist's roots (in this case Wales). We can proudly proclaim that Ceri Richards' work owes as much if not more to Wales than to Picasso, Matisse or the European canon. Like Chillida in the Basque country, Richards should be equally celebrated in Wales, since his work is organically connected to that essence of place and character, that very psychology of Wales that links it to Thomas' poetry, to oratory, storytelling and further back, Celtic art and mythology. This done, I add, not in an illustrative, mannerist way, but intuitively. His comment "*I'm a Welshman, a Celt, and what I find lacking in so many artists that I nevertheless love, is the romantic spirit*"

⁵ Mel Gooding. *Ceri Richards* Cameron and Hollis 2002 (p. 80 -81)

suggests that he was well aware of this 'footing". Like Chillida, he is also an artist who has absorbed and developed international trends without losing his footing, and has added to those trends with his own work.

It may have become a device of the post-modern condition to constantly quote from other sources, sometimes creatively and sometimes lazily. It remains true though that an artist is visually bombarded, increasingly so. The visual perception of others is always quick to seek out and make comparisons anyway, that's part of its function in the human armoury. Recognising similarities, in order to assess where we are, "is this our cave, it looks very similar".

My own work has influences that range from Cuba to Bangor; the influence, or example and philosophy of Paul Davies and the Beca group has featured all along. Or maybe it was just natural for me to work that way, and it becomes increasingly obvious to me, that an artists' style is governed as much by an attempt to harness inbred habits as much as anything else. Our style is to do with the kind of person we are, not what we aspire to despite our best (youthful) efforts. In Cuba I found contemporary art that sought to imbue the essence and spirit of indigenous traditions into the present, through syncretism creating an authentic continuum. This was exiting for me in particular, since it showed me a way to approach my own tradition.

The Cuban artist Jose Bedia, now residing in the USA, has gained strength and inspiration from the example of Wifredo Lam, a Cuban artist of a previous generation. Lam is an artist who has suffered, very like Ceri Richards, from being compared unfavourably to, or accused of plagiarising, Picasso. Both artists came from the peripheries to occupy a space on the international stage. I like to think that Lam's adherence to the Afro Caribbean religion of Santeria, drawing imagery from that source that linked him back to Africa, echoes Richard's search for inspiration in the poetry of Dylan Thomas and the Celtic legend of Ys as revealed to him in Debussy's *La Cathedral engloutie*. Like Lam, what Richards discovered was something he already knew, he naturally taps the same poetic energy that drives Thomas' verse, he is inclined to seeing nature as a force that animates from below, through death into new life. Both corruption and decay are sources for energy, life, and blossom. There is no death, only metamorphosis, 'living nature' as opposed to the 'nature morte' genre of western pictorial tradition.

In this, and in his almost obsessive repetition of the trope of drowned landscapes, the Cathedral submerged, engulfed by water, he links to a particular Celtic strand of imagery, both visual and mythic. John Meirion Morris has recently completed a study of Celtic art from the perspective of the artist rather than the classically trained archaeologist⁶. We see in the art of the Celtic period a glimpse into their philosophy and spirituality. Away from the ruling logistics of classic Greco Roman logic, we can once again see the spiral of life erupt from 'the deep' womb of Earth into phallic air and back

⁶ John Meirion Morris, Gwyn Thomas

again, scattering seed wildly. The sexual nature of life is celebrated, as it is in Richards' work, and as it exists in Thomas' poetry. This, although we may have forgotten it, is a religion.

By looking at Richards's work, his sketchbooks and paintings, his writing and writing about him, in turn writing about him myself, I have tapped into a loadstone, which allows me also to be reminded of that which I already knew. I have been painting drowned lands and distant islands for years. From Cante'r Gwaelod to Tryweryn, an unbroken stream, myth and history merge. Thus *La Cathedral engloutie* that Richards comes to from listening to Debussy is also a related Celtic myth of Ys, a drowned land. I now had an excuse to quote from Dylan Thomas, something I had avoided doing because it appeared to be too obvious. "*The force that through the green fuse drives the flower.*" I knew it by heart. I combined Paul Davies' outline map of Wales with Richards' *Afal Du Brogwyr* and further link this, not only with Thomas' poetry as Richards had done, but with the writing of Emyr Humphries, his accent on landscape and memory, his postcolonial treatise on the tradition of Taliesin. Another recurring motif in the Richards cycle of Dylan Thomas works is the skull, a difficult image to use because it is so potent, the excuse of "relating" to Richards allowed it to appear in my own work, and gradually it becomes grafted in successfully, re appearing in an independent guise in other, unrelated works. One thing leads to another is as telling a description of the creative process as anything.

It seems that I had several options for the NMGW exhibition. I could attempt a large painting, or I could try to engage with the process of collecting and collating, referencing Richards in a more direct way. Several elements came together into one assemblage. I believe I took the the option that was truest to my own work at the time, perhaps it was also less demanding than than seeking to encapsulate and capture anything as complex in a single painting would have been. A painting has to be more narrowly focused.

All these drawings and paintings done through the first half of 2002, culminate in an assemblage that I call "*Ceri+Dylan yn Ys*" shown at the NMGW. It emphasises the idea of a garden, an idea that comes from the work of both artists, but it is a garden in flux, some things planted not yet grown, some older. It is rather unkempt, but suggests how cuttings might be taken from other plants and transplanted Richards' work fuses with my own (literally) older pieces. A painting on a tarpaulin from 1994 is nailed to the wall. Drawings, framed sketches and a large oil painting overgrow this wall-hung canvas. Empty frames and unused canvas suggest a possibility either of continuation, work unfinished, or work that will never appear. A tree is added, a trough of peat to emphasis the idea of the garden. It is perhaps here in Ys, an Edenic garden of growth and creativity, which Ceri and Dylan, through their work, live on, like the men of the Mabinogi who lived on the island of Gwales, or Pwyll who spent time in the parallel world of Annwfn. This latter world or "not the world" as a correct translation from the Welsh might be, seems to be a very similar place to Gwales, in that it is a world

imagined. It is a place that artists and poets would find conducive to creativity and reflection, to "dreaming". It would probably be hell for those pragmatic, practical and "worldly". What appeals most to me about Richards, work and life is the insatiable appetite for new invention and the restless seeking. It sums up for me the quintessence of what an artist should be, not a person content with repetition, but knowing also ones limitations, nevertheless pushing the envelope, testing all the time.

Perhaps that this is it, our one and only consolation in a world where many have discarded the comfort of religion, a knowledge that we are not isolated. Time and history do not isolate us, unless we choose to isolate ourselves or deliberately choose to neglect our own history in favour of someone else's.

FOOTNOTE

As soon as one is immersed in another artist's work and life, the brain seems to seek out and find parallels or coincidental factors. Certainly we seem highly attuned to these connections, synchronicities, or accidents of recurrence. I became more aware whilst working on the Ceri Richards theme that there seemed to be coincidences, firstly those pointed out in Richard Burns⁷ book concerning Dylan and Ceri (Richards died eighteen years to the day of Thomas" death), but in other related incidents. I was offered a litho done by Richards the day before he died, it now hangs on my wall. Drawings were sold to people who then contacted me to say they had various connections with Richards. We moved house recently, and it was only after deciding and finally securing a house in Bishop's Road, Whitchurch that I discovered it was the street Richards and his family lived in from 1940 to 1945 whilst he was head of painting at Cardiff College of Art. Lives, lived at different times, become strangely entwined.

⁷ Richard Burns, *Keys to Transformation*