

JOB DESCRIPTION. IWAN BALA. WELSH ARTIST.

The particular background I come from engendered a sense of responsibility to continuation and preservation. The Welsh speaking in Wales are expected to be actively engage in the culture, whether through the Eisteddfod, both local and national, or the chapel, or at a later stage, protest activity for the language. This we felt, and our parents before us, was a necessity since our culture was/is threatened with the extinction of its language. From the 1960's onwards there has been an added sense of grievance and anger.

Anxiety of one kind or another, trauma even, drives art. Artists "find" a subject that underlies their production for most of their career. How do they 'find' it? I drifted by natural inclination into mine. Only later could I analyse my motives, which appear straightforward and culturally predetermined. My only real choice would have been to ignore and deny that predetermined path. An MA course completed in 1992 after I had entered on a career as an artist revealed the developments, and explored my reactions to a prolonged stay in Zimbabwe in 1990 as Artist in Residence at the National Gallery of Zimbabwe.

The external structures that enabled this work to reach an audience were the cultural shift in international art and an expansion of information media within Wales. The former shift exposed the growth of art addressing decolonisation, political, sexual, feminist or ethnic, and crucially, the examination of identity. The latter was the establishing of a Welsh language television channel for Wales, which gave voice to certain agendas, visual art in Wales being one. A byproduct of this new industry was the creation of a newly affluent, culturally aware middle class who invested in art.

In order to bring these factors into play and to redress a perceived deficiency in these areas in Wales' art, I committed myself to seeking to "compensate the canon"¹. This engagement involved expanding my field of practice from painting and assemblage (the studio/exhibition work) to include explanatory texts, interviews and discourse. This led naturally to writing, editing publications and disseminating the work of other artists. Curating exhibitions both of my own work and also of other artists.

Writing in turn has led to lecturing and to "activism", that is, forming groups, making declarations, participating in forum events and, somewhat of a hyperbole, becoming a "theorist".² This whilst also maintaining a studio practice and exhibiting my work (and occasional selling). In many ways these three distinctive areas merge into the one mission and I find the same creative pleasure in achieving goals in each area.

Such practice is increasingly more common for artists, but remains far from being the norm. However I can draw parallels with artists in comparable cultural situations, artists who have inspired me along the way; I have engaged with such artists and their work in several locations around the world as well as in reading and visiting exhibitions.

¹Raymond Williams. the act of "compensating the canon", that is challenging and offering alternative variants to the accepted and "selective tradition".

²Writers' biography, Certain Welsh Artists. Seren, 2000.

The matter of choice, in this career path, is a moot point. How, again, to adapt Raymond Williams' terminology, "formation and alignment" plays its part and how external cultural determinants push one into a given trajectory which one is then forced to accept or to reject, is an area for discussion.

There are, as there are surely in most artistic practices, periods of doubt and conflict and it is the acceptance, appreciation or not, of the work and role of an artist by an audience that serves most to alleviate these doubts. These factors are made manifest by invitations to exhibit, sale of work on the one hand, the publication of texts, student interest and learned research on the other. An artist gains a "position" and an audience by dint of prolonged endeavor in one given field, which in turn escalates the opportunities to expand the practice.

One sometimes welcomes the "retreat" into the studio to make paintings that are devoid of cultural reference, but these rarely surface for me try as I might. The same could be said of the writing or even discourse on art.

Incorporated into the work is the use of certain tropes that can be seen as strategies of postcolonial art and literature. These might include the exploration and contemporisation of myth, as in my treatment of themes from the Mabinogi in *PAIR*, the use of traditional iconography, displaced or re interpreted in *GWALIA*, the use of maps and landscape in *HORIZON WALES* and *MAPPA MUNDI* to create contemporary images that relate to a specific and particular tradition, one that is itself a "selective tradition" even within Wales. It is not a "tradition" that can be recognized by all people living in Wales, but one in which I perceive an "authenticity" pertaining to my own background and in which I identify a continuing presence in the work of poets, writers and artists of the past and present. The *JANUS* figure became for me, an illustration of this, linking past, present and future. Making such work one is always engaged with an involved level of research; in history, ethnography and literature.

These are common strategies, methodologies of postcolonial identity explorations in the art, literature, film and theatre of many cultures in the world. There is a need to capture and re invoke, to unify past with (broken) present; to use an old language in new and relevant ways, leading to hybrid, new forms that bind a continuing cultural heritage to new modes of being. These are tools.

Iwan Bala 10/12/02