

## **WORKING WITH ROBIN WELCH**

I first remember being struck by Robin's work at the Earth & Fire event when a student, and then a few years later in 2001 when I exhibited my own work on a stand next to his. I was very much in awe of him, his reputation, and his work. In fact, I still am. One day I cheekily asked that if ever Robin needed a YTS, for him to just let me know As if! I never dreamed that 3 years later I would work as his assistant on this commission and be mixing the first batch of vermiculite with 375kg of specially prepared clay in his workshop in Suffolk.

Robin's idea was to base the commission on the amazing boab tree. He had already prepared two small 12" maquettes, charred pockmarks of burnt out vermiculite on the surface. Tufts of grass spewed over the top tickling its sides. The challenge would be to translate this idea into two 8ft structures, build them on kiln shelves in separate parts to fit in the kiln, whilst imagining what it would look like installed in its final resting place in the sculpture park at Rufford Country Park.

I had quite a confined and restrictive space to work in – with the kiln shelf pulled out, it was roughly 7ft square with the shelf measuring 6ft square. Construction consisted of coiling in large 6cm deep strips from the base of each section. At first, it was trial and error, gauging the weight of damp clay and the ratio of vermiculite content. The best way was to build a few rows, leave for 4 days partly covered, and then start on the base of a smaller one. Progress on this one by comparison was more rapid and apparent – it was encouraging to see more immediate progress, and to get a feel for how it might look overall. One week later and the pieces were looking much stronger and developing a character of their own, Time was racing by and I started to wonder whether I'd actually get it done in time,. It wouldn't be long before we'd be considering the surface – Robin suggested once dry, to highlight the texture with the application of porcelain slip. The large surface area could take more extreme surface marks and texture – I could really 'rough it up' using an assortment of tools, and by throwing scraps of clay at the pieces to simulate eyes and abstracted pockmarks on the tree bark. With ornamental grasses

(*pennisetum forma viridescens*) placed in planters as the crowning glory, these pieces were going to be huge. By now, I was standing on a chair – any tools that fell in, that's it, they were gone.

The outside world seemed very much on the outside whilst my own internal world was growing ever larger. I'd stopped wearing a watch (and haven't worn one since). My concept of time was marked by coffee time, mealtimes, Robin's sherry time, Radio 4 hourly beeps, and daylight. Senses were filled by the smell of damp clay, evening cycle rides, country lanes, country veg on curbside stalls, and talk of pumpkin soup.

This was such a magical place to work – it was almost surreal. Everywhere you looked, there was an amazing assortment of work either in progress, ready to exhibit, an idea, a photo, drawing tools, equipment... For the number of times I walked through the workshop, I lost count of the moments when I was grabbed by something I hadn't noticed before – a shape, texture, brush mark, glaze surface. If these daily visual feasts were an addictive substance, I'd be in rehab by now!

After 3 weeks, Robin started to apply the slip and copper wash. The effect dramatically brought the surfaces to life, highlighting the character of the textural surface. Right up until placement of the last coil, it was critical to keep checking the dimensions to make sure they would fit in the kiln. The last one was on – where did those 4 weeks go?

Two months later, we prepared the 25-year old kiln (100cu feet). I was surprised in the end by how much the sculpture had shrunk. Robin works on an instinctive feeling about firings and fortunately had a good one this time! The thickness of the clay walls meant that we had to be really cautious about raising the temperature – gas burners gradually warmed the kiln. After 9 hours, and at 250°C, the oil burner was ignited. The roar of the kiln gradually grew to such a tremendous roar, as if it were about to take off. After 150 litres of oil, 2 containers of gas and 37 hours later, cone 10 finally tipped over. The customary spit on the kiln, and placement of fire god at the kiln doors signified the end of the firing. And now the waiting started!

The sheer weight of the 4 pieces will need haulage equipment just to move them, and certainly to install one on top of the other when in situ at Rufford. My time working on

this project has been very special and memorable, but the process hasn't finished yet.  
Given time the surfaces will attract mosses and lichen and will weather with the elements  
revealing a more organic and earthy layer. It's now over to you, Mother Nature.

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