

Carved from Nature

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If you were to ask Rachel Wood what or who had influenced her work, her practice and procedures above all else, she would reply without a moment's hesitation 'Robin Welch'; and equipped with that information you might well make the connection. Yet the similarity isn't so glaringly obvious without that elucidation; yes the textures are familiar, the hues share the same values and the dry, semi matt surfaces are reminiscent but they have an organic quality that is quite their own. Welch's works are of course quintessentially painterly, they are a combination of composite delineations, squares and geometries, juxtaposed with vessel. Wood does not demark areas of colour like this at all. Her surfaces are of the landscape, from strata and fauna, wood-barks and lichens. Her forms have a comfortable, confident irregularity, not forced out of symmetry but alluding to it like a tree or plant might grow, quite organically. It is these qualities together, this combination of form colour and texture that places her work, makes it recognisably hers, sets it apart from Welch.

Her earlier works were predominantly green, even more so than now. They had a strange compelling tactile appearance; almost velvety; they conspired that you should touch them, to reassure oneself that they were not velvet to the touch at all. They were an unusual mottled olive kind of colour with a visual texture cadenced with ochre brown 'finger marks' giving relief and creating point focus. These elements have not been left behind but are still evident, still valid and now part of a more varied palette of textural layering. Her forms are constructed with the simplest combinations of techniques: coiled and pinched they are hand built with layers of slip and engobe, dry glaze and oxides. Cracks and crevasses, sometimes gaping - quite intrusive, are celebrated and integrated into the surface. There is no pandering to function - they might or might not hold water. That they may be titled 'vase' or 'vessel' is notional not definite. This aspect she shares with Welch, a place occupied by many working in ceramics who invoke a questioning of the definitions of art and function, vessel and sculpture.

Wood's connections with Welch were born from a longstanding appreciation and admiration of his work. A chance occasion of showing her work on a trade stand next to his at a ceramics fair gave her the opportunity to offer her services in the event that he 'might need an assistant' at some stage. The offer was timely and Wood found herself working for and with Robin Welch on his commission for a large-scale work that would be installed at Rufford Craft Centre in the UK – a valuable experience in the studio of an internationally renowned artist that would help Wood understand the requirements of working to scale and to deadline. It would define her ambitions and aspirations and set her on a path of self-discovery that would challenge her assessment of what she might be comfortable with. She will recall 'stepping outside her comfort zone' on various occasions. As artists we all, at some stage question our position, our peer

ranking - it's quite normal and part of the territory we occupy. Without that eternal questioning, without that constant assessment and reassessment how can the artist progress? Wood has frequently put herself in places that have challenged her and caused her disquiet. Perhaps her own most profound personal challenge was to apply and win a residency at Sturt, Australia. She was not a stranger to residencies, having already fulfilled a useful and enjoyable placement at Rufford Art Centre, but that was almost on her doorstep, quite different to a place on the opposite side of the world, bereft of familiar 'bolt holes' and friendly support. When we apply for residencies we are often comforted that they are usually in the distant future, and we reassure ourselves that we have 'plenty of time' to prepare ourselves. That time comes around with an unforgiving speed and we are suddenly thrown out of our comfort zone and we have to face the challenge that we seemed so comfortable with not so long ago. So it was with Rachel Wood - yet the seemingly stark empty workspace in that far off land slowly became familiar, strangers became friends and a bond was formed with her surroundings. The Australian Bush, initially daunting and claustrophobic became a new source of information and inspiration. Her vessels gained further connections to fauna and landscape and she evolved a series of works that she would now refer to as her 'Barks' redolent and reminiscent of the native trees that formed and dominated the landscape around her. Ironically her time there would soon be coming to an end and it would be a wrench to now leave it behind, but armed with the knowledge that this was another challenge conquered she would return to her home country understanding the paradox of her exhaustion versus her reinvigoration.

Rachel Wood continues to push her boundaries and exhibits widely through the UK. She has been a familiar exhibitor in mainland Europe for a number of years having shown her work in The Netherlands at various ceramic fairs and more recently in Paris. She is a very familiar exhibitor at Diessen am Ammersee in Southern Bavaria and it was from there that one of her works was purchased for the permanent collection in Munich Museum. In 2016 she was awarded the Neue Keramik prize at Oldenburg, Northern Germany. She has generously passed on her knowledge via many workshops at her own studio in the UK, at Keramikgruppe, Höhr-Grenzhausen, Germany, and at the School of Ceramics at La Meridiana, Italy.