

**Question 5:** With an emphasis on Welsh language, Culture or Identity chose a theme or focus on creative practitioners relevant to your field of study and critically analyse your choices. This essay can be presented in Welsh or in English in discussion with your tutor.

BA Fine Art -studio, site & context

Research in Context - ADAD5003

Lecturers- Alexander Duncan and Holly Slingsby

## Woman and Welsh – Identities and Their Impacts

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Word count: 2,505

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Identities have become an essential aspect of our society, being forced on people and creating prejudices and lack of opportunity, whilst on the other end of the spectrum they are embraced fully and bring overwhelming pride. As a Welsh Woman I feel that I sit in the middle of that spectrum and feel that many others would resonate. I aim to celebrate the women artists of Wales that have been outcasted whilst conducting an investigation into why there seems that there's no space where these women can exist, create and be applauded. In the introduction of *HON-Women Artists in Wales* the term 'artist' is explored, specifically the gendered distinction of 'woman artist' and how it "seems to project the notion that it has to be emphasised in its difference to 'artist', a word historically occupied by one who is 'male'" (H'mm Foundation, 2022, p.3). I think that this notion, although it may often sit in the shadowy corners of our subconsciousness, reigns very true even in our current apparent 'equal society'.

Welsh art throughout history struggled to find a space in the art world, and through *Telling the Story of Welsh art- But Is Anyone Listening?* an article by David. R. Howell I was able to gather a greater understanding of how our country and government deal with the presentation of our art and the complexity of the Welsh identification label that is placed on it (Howell. D. R, 2015). Firstly, he quotes from *Devolution and identity*, "Welsh art and artists had long been marginalized since they lacked an exhibition area dedicated to them" (Housley, 2006). This is used when highlighting the significance of the opening of The National Museum of art which is housed in The National Museum, in the capitol, Cardiff. To me as a Welsh artist this is extremely depressing, especially when reflecting on our rich cultural stories and traditions that have never been given the proper appreciation. When discussing this marginalization of the Welsh, I feel that it is impossible to not also reference the

'Welsh not'. The Welsh Not was used in the nineteenth century to deter school children from speaking Cymraeg (Welsh for the Welsh language) by threatening them with corporal punishment and wearing a piece of wood around their neck. "The idea developed – or was promoted by the English government – that speaking Welsh held people back economically and socially" (Rowlands, 2024). Resulting from this, by the 1911 census, only 43.5% of the population were recorded as speaking Welsh, and 50 years later in 1961, the number nearly halved to only 26%. Welsh is not a dying language, it has been beaten and bruised by a nation of higher power, and I myself feel quite embarrassed that I cannot speak my mother tongue, and equally angry that our present could have been so much more prideful. 17.8% was the recorded number of Welsh speakers in the 2021 census. Not even a fifth of us can speak our language, and I feel that I've been denied (Welsh Government, 2022)



*Figure 1: Welsh Not*

Another provoking element of this article by Howell is the discussion of the criteria that is usually met in order to regard art as Welsh. One is that an artwork is made by an artist born in Wales or associates strongly with Wales or lived here for a

significant length of time. The second is art that has derived from Welsh subject matter, the example that is given is “Welsh landscapes”. The third is “art which has been acquired by a Welsh collector and given to the nation” (Howell. D. R, 2015). This broad sense of being Welsh means is really quite telling of the temperament of the people that live here, and I’ve noticed this same open mindedness when discussing topics with lecturers and my counterparts, that Welsh doesn’t just mean born and bred, it means belonging and community, and I think that’s what prompted me to research this in the first place.

So, as discussed, being Welsh in the art world has many struggles, then you add the even smaller woman and artist identities and them struggles become much harder to conquer. Gwen John, born in Wales, was one of the most significant artists of her time and ours with her works in many prestigious collections, however she has always been outshone by the men in her life. Although many now believe that Gwen was the more skilful painter, her brother, Augustus John was always taken more seriously as an artist. When researching into the significance of Wales on the art world and what the beginnings of that looked like for us, I came across an archived BBC article ‘*Framing Wales: art in the 20<sup>th</sup> century*’ by Kim Howells, thinking that I was going find some valuable information about the forming of the art world in Wales, I found something even more interesting. a recorded account of sexism against a Welsh woman artist, against Gwen John. He praises Augustus’ work, titling him “a force to be reckoned with in every sense” and discussing his work and personality. When discussing Gwen, he states that Augustus “made no secret of his sister Gwen's willingness to pose naked for him” and “while her brother painted the great and the good of British Society, Gwen John became the model and lover of the world's most celebrated sculptor, Auguste Rodin” (K. Howells, 2011). The clear

objectification of Gwen compared to her brother's praise was a startling contrast. The connotations behind vocabulary are so powerful, the use of "willingness", "naked", "model" and "lover" suggests that she was but a tool in the more interesting lives of her male counterparts, used for her body. Gwen was a talented artist showing work in Paris and forming relationships with over artists and writers, and maybe I can see her for her individual self and achievements because I have the female perspective. The way that she is described in Howells writing compared to her career and life as I know it is very juxtaposing. This demonstrates that through living with and being labelled with different identities we perceive things differently. Although me and Howells are both Welsh, we are perceiving aspects of life differently as we differ in gender, and this goes on when we start to think about class, ethnicity etc. "Her demure exterior hid a passionate and strong-willed side to her character" (McIntyre, 2011)



*figure 2: 'self-portrait', Gwen John (1902)*

There have been many great contemporary artists to come out of Wales, but I feel that you need to do a bit of digging to find them, even though the skill, concepts and executions of works are up to the same standards of neighbouring artists, such as those from England or other parts of Europe. Sourcing literature that focuses on Welsh artists is also extremely difficult, especially literature that celebrates or even includes women artists. So consequently, I felt very seen when I came across the *HON- Women Artists in Wales* book where women artists based in Wales or have a Welsh identity discussed their work, ideas and lives in their own words. I also found that the lack of rigidity surrounding the label of 'Welsh' through the book creates a strong sense of community, that if you feel so strongly about the Welsh culture, and if you *feel* that belonging, you can be Welsh, and the Welsh will accept you. Giving women the chance to speak freely about their work, instead of paying an old white art critic to do so is powerful in itself, being able to feel someone's personality through the page is so essential as an artist, especially when you are able to relate or feel represented.

Through this publication I discovered the marvellously accomplished Angharad Pearce Jones, a Welsh sculptor, blacksmith and installation artists. She was born in Bala, North Wales and later moved down to South Wales where she completed her fine art MA in Cardiff art school in 1999, and now resides in the small town of Brynaman. She realised in art school that her Welsh identity had significance after deciding that she wanted to present one of her works in the Welsh language and later realising that she couldn't as she studied in Brighton, and she wouldn't be understood.

“I hadn’t even considered that my Welsh identity could be extraordinary, and that my cultural and social references would be so different to my English contemporaries” (A. P. Jones, 2022)

I think that this implies that the Welsh, and other Celtic nations, are often ‘lumped in’ with the English and put under the umbrella of ‘British’, when its not the case. The Welsh have our own traditions, culture, folklore, cuisine, events, language and customs, which is often overlooked, even by ourselves, like Jones states. She began to explore the complexities of sexism by observing her own life as a woman in a male dominated field, being respected by her male counterparts, but also knowing that they had ‘sexy women’ calendars and posters plastered to their walls. She began to see that “sexism was far more complex than a pair of tits on a wall” (Jones. A. P, 2022, p.81). Blunt and true. Although she is a skilful blacksmith and sculpture artist, one of my favourites of hers is her ‘*Who Wins? You Decide...*’ (2005) where she produced 12 photographs of a young and traditionally beautiful glamor model Katie Wild posing sensually pretending to be different people and professions. She was a beach babe, a chav on a motorbike, a mother holding a baby, a topless violinist, a female GI, a rocket scientist, a wet t-shirt plumber, a welder and most significantly ‘Miss Wales’. She exhibited this installation in various venues, where she displayed the prints in official Cardiff council voting booths, asking viewers to vote for their favourite, the irony being that they were all of the same girl. ‘Miss Wales’ plays a harp whilst topless, draped in Welsh traditional costume, and was also an overall winner in the ballots. Jones decided on this as she had “never really seen a good sexy image of a lady in traditional Welsh costume”. The irony and satirical nature of this piece really spoke to me and found it both hilarious and though

provoking. The representation of the Welsh woman as a sexual being and as empowered instead of the traditional stereotypical Welsh domestic housewife or crafter is really challenging, especially as many people who live in Wales live in small villages or towns. On that ground, people are 'stuck in their ways' or have old fashioned views on society. She concluded from this installation that younger women were critical of her ironic style, criticising it as using women's body for publicity, however older women understood the message. This makes me think of Helen Gorill's 'Women Can't Paint' where she sates that "we are accustomed to female provocation and nudity, it appears, yet the male nude should be censored ("to protect whom?" Reported the Guardian)" (Gørrill, 2020). It makes me question that if this installation was replaced by images of a male in the nude, that the audience would be able to identify that they are all depicting the same man, treating him as an individual, not just another doll being dressed up.



*Figure 3: 'Who Wins? You Decide', Angharad Pearce Jones, (2005)*

Going back to the idea of the more complex Welsh identity, Shani Rhys James, born 1953, Melbourne, Australia. Her father was Welsh and her mother Australian and moved to the UK with her mother in 1963 for her mother to pursue her acting career. Although she didn't move to Wales until later in her life, she is and considers herself as a Welsh artist and was made M.B.E in 2006 for services to Welsh art. Living with her husband in a converted barn in mid-Wales, with large barns turned into studio spaces, to this day she is still exhibiting and making works. her works have often been described as a quiet feminism, being symbolic in her work, representing the feminine through objects such as hairbrushes, mirrors and flowers. Her haunting figures are like a vessel that women can see both the artist and themselves in, feeling both repulsed and comforted. Sue Hubbard, an art critic describes the artists take on the "repressed hysteric". "The domestic face of femininity is contrasted with a fragile, empty self that needs to be filled by art in order to exist" (Hubbard, 2022) this quote perfectly sums up James' work, the yearning eyes of her figures surrounded by beauty, like a form of distraction. Speaking with art writer Ruth Millington, James states that:

"The large overblown flowers of the wallpaper create a claustrophobic interior. They are patterned, yet the flowers in the vase are wild and anarchic. The female becomes part of the wallpaper, part of the decoration, unable to be on the world stage she turns inward and obsesses about her interior space".

(James. S. R (quoted in Millington. R, 2022)

A gut wrenching yet compelling description of what is a very real and prevalent feeling for many women around the world, which James captures so potently in her works. In bell hooks' 'Feminism is for Everyone: Passionate Politics', she illustrates how the entrance of so many heterosexual women into the feminist movement "had been sparked by male domination in intimate relationships, particularly long-time marriages where gender inequality was the norm" (Hooks, 2000). I feel that James mirrors this notion of women feeling stuck in their own homes and lives, especially the traditional Welsh housewife in this context. In 'White Platter', she paints a woman in eye contact with the viewer, almost pleading with us in a way, surrounded by objects of material beauty; flowers, ceramics, and a melody of colours, the figure being engulfed entirely by her surroundings. This sickly image is a beautiful composition of suffocation and melancholy, not just immersing the viewer, but demanding attention.



*Figure 4: 'White Platter', Shani Rhys James, (2019)*

To conclude, I feel that being woman and Welsh is something to be appreciated. Even if there are hurdles to overcome and prejudices that have persisted throughout history towards woman, as we know, but also towards the Welsh. Through my research I have realised the importance of shouting about the identities that you feel proud of, as someone like you will feel represented, feel a part of something bigger than themselves, which is how I felt throughout this investigation. In education often our own culture and history is overlooked, especially women's history, and art as whole really, making it even more important for woman to create communities around them so young women artists have a future to look forward to, something to show them that success can come to you, even if you are from small village in Wales. I also think that's the beauty of femininity, how we form communities based on our frustrations and shared experiences, that if you're not woman, you can't fully understand. "'her' in Welsh means 'challenge'" (H,mm Foundation).

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