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BA Fine Art – Site, Studio and Context

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Question: With an emphasis on Welsh language, culture or identity, choose a theme or focus on creative practitioners relevant to your field of study and critically analyse your choices.

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Exploring what Welsh identity means within contemporary art

Introduction

From around the mid-20th century artists from Wales have challenged the idea of a romanticised portrayal of Welshness and humanise their subjects realistically, employing socio-political subject matter, expressing themselves whilst still exploring ideas surrounding the cultural fabric of the country. These viewpoints are often exploring domesticity, the aftereffects of deindustrialisation and the lasting impact of it being one of the first countries conquered by England. In a lot of ways Welsh culture is about reclaiming something that's been lost, for better or for worse and many artists have explored these ideas in different ways. However, to explain Welsh culture from an angle that can observe itself truly, many artists have fled to places that grant them the chance to navigate these ideas. It's unusual for the artists of a country to have to flee to fully explore their identity however it's something that Welsh artists aren't unfamiliar with having to do.

James Reilly



Figure 1: Rielley, James 'Pet' (2001)

James Rielly is a contemporary painter who makes large-scale paintings exploring the absurdities of human nature. Raised in Wrexham, Rielly's works are distinctly steeped in identity, yet they capture themes that are universally relatable, his works are an opportunity to explore some of the darker sides of what people experience presenting it in such a way that maintains a level of approachability. His works mainly feature children or people in ghost costumes and use simple composition to draw in the viewer, they're conceptually clear though they're open-ended enough for the viewer to apply their own personal meaning. Reviews of the YBA's 'Sensation!' exhibition for which he was a part of described his pieces there as

‘paintings of children as agents of sexual perversions’ ... presenting ‘that which we would repress. Our knowledge of both human cruelty and childhood sexuality’

His work is sometimes compared to Walter Sickertt’s work, in the Spencer Brownstone 2004 gallery catalog on James Rielly, it states that

‘both artists are seen as dispassionate painters, maintaining an essential level of detachment from the subject, no matter how emotionally charged’

The fact that his work is painted like this is a commentary on the overall challenging nature of the subjects Rielly paints. The conversations surrounding the subjects are already sparse and people view them from a distance so Riley paints them like they occupy this semi-subconscious space.

‘Pet’ shows a girl with one eye missing; she has a teddy that has one eye and she has the eye that the teddy’s missing. Removed from context this artwork is still challenging, despite her injury she is still smiling. The girl is wearing a red school jumper and shirt alongside the colours being akin to a sun-bleached toy, adding another layer of both ambiguity and meaning. It’s a painting about normalisation as is with much of Rielly’s work. The viewer may read into the work that since the girl is half-blind and still smiling, she may be happier that way.

It’s a piece that takes something real or dark and presents it on a large scale for all of us to see, most importantly from the girl’s perspective. The cartoonish art style creates a level of humor and approachability, yet it still feels clinical, the YBA art movement he was a part of embraced these aesthetics to explore the post-industrial age and Reilly’s art can also be seen as exploring the psychological impact of that.

The cartoonish style of the characters in Rielly’s work are evocative of old 1960/70s boys DIY manuals, within his pieces Rielly works in both oil and watercolor, using a colour pallet that is bleach-like which can again be interpreted as resonant of memory or childhood nostalgia and

when those aspects are coupled with extreme absurdist scenarios it's almost like they're instructions for people to grow and live up to. On the Celf Gallery website, author Mike Tooby writes:

'That ambiguity – between the apparently safe and charming and the unsettling and disturbing, is also well known and widely seen as a distinguishing feature of his figurative paintings.'

It unsettles the viewer and leaves them to see that it's not a perfect picture, yet somehow it is. Absurdism seeks to highlight the bizarreness and divisive ideas that declare something's purpose since normally the reason is without reason and Reilly plays with this in his work.

Considering the positioning of the piece when it was last on display at the Amgueddfa Cymru, a space for celebrating Welsh art, somehow something this challenging doesn't seem out of place. A large selection of the contemporary works in the National Gallery has a similar resonance to 'Pet', showing that Welsh art can be both resentful and sympathetic to the complexities of being Welsh. The contemporary art spaces in the gallery allow us to question our nationality, reframing Welsh art as something that understands its position and is willing to explore these ideas that are too hard to talk about.

Absurdism relates to Welshness as Welsh identity is steeped in the stories it tells itself, though to no fault of its own, the history of Wales is one that has been fraught by an endless cycle of problems, from it being stripped of its language by England to the aftereffects of deindustrialisation. Myths and stories are ways of reaffirming Wales' identity; Reilly understands this and plays with these ideas to highlight the absurdity of these ideas once they become part of Wales' national identity.



Figure 2: Reilly, James:
'The Destroyer of Some of the Castles' (2024)

Kevin Sinnott



Figure 3: Sinnott, Kevin: 'Running Away with the Hairdresser' (1996)

Kevin Sinnott's 'Running Away with the Hairdresser' was made in 1996 and is a very iconic painting that captures what Wales represents to many.

It's a large oil painting with textured, expressive brushstrokes, very bright, with clear references to art history and a broader cultural context. Composition, shadows, even the tiniest details make this painting work such as the mother with the pram in the light in front of houses that all look the same or the far-off Welsh valley in the background on the top right. Man in the shade but running ahead, woman looking back and in the light.

His works capture contemporary life in places not normally exploring feelings of displacement but also the things that go on in these places, good and bad, importantly painted on a massive scale for everyone to see. In *Certain Welsh Artists* by Iwan Bala, Bala describes the figures in Sinnott's works as "ghosts of a bustling industry", describing the scenes, Bala says that "Sinnott characterises himself as the last romantic, Kevin Sinnott's scenes are often stagy with the figure of the artist in a dirty mac hurrying through other people's lives"(Bala, I. p73) The fact they're

thought of as stagey can suggest several things, that this isn't the first time this has happened in the perpetual shows that repeat themselves, they're predictable stories with an ending, happy or sad. Places like this exemplify human nature. Like this has happened before and won't end anytime soon.

Another quote by Bala says of Sinnott's portrayal of "the Garw valley as bathed in Mediterranean sunlight, the denizens of Pontycymer and the other Hamlets dispart in that sun, stretch on their sunbeds and tumbledown steep steps from the terraced houses and satellite dishes", indicating the colours suppose a level of sickliness. An unreal real place, theatre backdrops with costumes and characters changing scene by scene but always remaining the same. Same stories, different actors, same theatre.

Unlike James Rielly's work, Sinnott's pieces retain emotionally charged brushwork, this can be interpreted due to his pieces having a more neutral stance, he's painting predictability, but his pieces don't immediately provoke this response from the viewer, they seem more proud at first yet the brushwork and the way the figures are depicted gives way to his stance on the matter. He left Wales in 1971 to study at the Royal College of Art in London

The artist came from Bridgend which is a very bleak place and streets like these are all too familiar to those from there. Pride takes its toll and it can follow you so running away can even be affected by that.

John Cale



Figure 4: Cale, John 'Dyddiau Du' (2009)

'Dyddiau Du' is a 5-screen audio-visual installation piece by John Cale commissioned by the Welsh Arts Council and created in 2009 as part of the Welsh entry for the Venice Biennale. It explores Cale's complex relationship with Wales and was filmed in several locations around Wales including Cale's hometown of Garnant. It's a one-of-a-kind piece as it represented Wales on the world stage through a lens of repression and bleakness. The themes of tradition, language and landscape coupled with Cale's personal story is something that has been described as creating an uneasy sense of both pride and sympathy. In an interview with the BBC, he describes that "This was for me an extraordinary adventure into my past, exploring that which has never been removed - the ties to ones heritage and self".

The piece consists of three videos playing simultaneously each capturing an aspect of what he saw as reasons to leave Wales, the language, his grandmother hating the fact he was the son of an Englishman and her forcing him to speak Welsh in the house he grew up in and the parochial aspects of traditional Welsh culture. The piece ultimately ends with Cale being blindfolded and

waterboarded to rugby chants and choir music utilising the full use of the speakers. The installation visualises the complex reasons why people leave but also what draws them back, hiraeth.

The Welsh language is cleverly observed through the lens of it not being just a language but a set of motions that Welsh people are all taught, a language rooted in pride that stems from centuries of cultural repression that for some can be blinding. Observing Wales through the eyes of someone who left and lived gives way to a valuable insight into what leaving Wales can potentially be like for a person, the forementioned artists (Reilly, Sinnott) show this also. The piece is not only about language but the wider issue of communication and how that can hold a person back. Recounts state that 'In the piece you see him go up to a piano in an old Welsh chapel. He sits there, opens it; sits there some more; gets up. He never plays it'. A moment that suggests Cale's inability to 'play' representing him being unable to function freely.

The piece garnered controversy at the time for Cale having lived in America for 40+ years at the time and him not being seen as "Welsh" enough despite his music is rooted firmly in his national identity. Despite him living in America, the contexts, compositions, instruments and his voice all the make a case for him being Welsh but it's clearly approached from an angle opposite from Welshness in a traditional sense. In an interview with the Guardian he did on the piece, he states that Wales in the early 1960s, he remembers, was somewhere you had to leave: "The place scared me; it was going nowhere." He went to the America seduced by "the eternal optimism of American society", the article goes on to say of the piece that Cale has created a magnificent allegory of migration and loss, a poem of memory and distance.

A pioneer of the avant-garde, working with the composer John Cage and being a founding member of the Velvet Underground, Cale's music can be challenging at times, yet it does have a very human aspect to it. His music also explores themes like domesticity, familial haunts, leaving and finding a new, sung in a way that's derivative of traditional Welsh choir music but

actually free from its parochial roots. His creative output has inspired many artists to explore these themes in their work also; it's makes what many contemporary Welsh artists try to visualise audible.

Iwan Bala

Iwan Bala is a Welsh contemporary artist and author known for his paintings and drawings and books that use custodial aesthetics to explore nativism and Welsh culture through a lens that is celebratory but still observed through a bittersweet viewpoint.

His work is characterised by texts and figures in an illustrative style utilising ethnographic element, Bala is a firm believer in custodial aesthetics and the need to

‘Identify our own otherness’, ‘adapting the tradition of other unrelated cultures’, creating a ‘fake celticism’

holding a recurring fascination in his work. Bala’s work ultimately questions ideas of nationality and history and how that impacts the future, it’s all to do with stories and the ways these keep ideas in or out. His works centre around a post-colonialist world and the ways places have deeply rooted ideas of place because of their history whether it’s been reinforced or stripped or replaced. Reliance on the old for the new and how this has an impact on the culture of the places that have been affected.

In the book *Certain Welsh Artists*, Bala quotes Raymond Williams when describing his work stating that there’s a need for ‘counter-modernism’ that would challenge the inaccessibility that Modernism had fostered’. ‘A recourse to ‘structures of feeling’ and it’s observed in Bala’s work, his work is a counterpoint to much of the minimalist, sensationalist art that dominates the art market today. He says that ‘Art has wider implications and value to the continuing idea of a shared community’, his art doesn’t pertain to any contrived qualities that most modern art has adopted. Though there is a case to be made when it comes to minimalist art as it has something to say about 21st century culture, a need to return to formalism especially in an age where humanising artworks is more important given the rise of internet culture and A.I is where his

work lands, especially when it points out the discrepancies of the cultural fabric that is the causation of why these ideas even exist.

The piece “Taff Salvage” best encompasses Bala’s ideas from a relevant perspective. Made in 2024 it shows an armless figure in the shape of Wales with the words “Taff Salvage” on them riding a goat, using muted colours and symbolism to create a discussion about class and Wales’ past. It takes being a “scrap man” in a literal sense, being a job that already conjures up images for the viewer. Metals, slate and coal being a long-pilfered exports of Wales and they’re listed in the text besides the armless figure shown. The figure isn’t riding a horse or mule but a goat implying class, goats having religious implications also. The piece is open ended enough for the viewer to question why or what the reasons are for.

The fact It’s a painting that implements medieval biblical illustration asks the viewer to consider what foundations Wales was founded upon, it also implies the idea that this is a relived thing dating back ages ago. History repeats itself. Wales fits in a grey area where with it being the first colonised country, the period of the decolonisation of the empire in the 20th century hasn’t applied to Wales only somewhat. England and Wales are considered the same countries governed in the same way and most decisions are declared outside of Wales’ control, because of this Bala questions what Wales in a post-colonial world is and why its people have been reduced to these stereotypes. However, making Welshness the foremost concern in one’s work can be like speaking into an echo-chamber so it needs to tow a fine-line.



Figure 5: Bala, Iwan 'Taff Salvage' (2024)

One may say in the case of playing Devil's advocate that there's a bandwagon many young Welsh artists jump onto plays into an 'us and them' mentality. What that meant for John Cale 60+ years ago shouldn't apply to everyone, especially since Wales has more autonomy politically and a stronger sense of nationhood, but it is understandable at the same time which is the stance Bala takes.

Summary

Ultimately, there is a trend in contemporary Welsh art that demonstrates that people are facing the generational consequences of their country's past, and how it stems from deep rooted cultural repression stemming centuries. Even if unintentionally, being from Welsh and making art has liberatory connotations as opposed to that of an Englishman. Wales in old English means 'stranger' or 'other ones' and it's those longstanding cultural setbacks that are at the core of Welsh identity. Welsh culture is one of normalisation which is why each of the forementioned artists have left, to understand their country and explain it to itself. The more art made by Welsh artists that convey that these issues are there, the more awareness there will be. It needs to walk a fine line as to not be exclusionary to a wider audience, art about the wider issue of communication highlights something about human nature and most contemporary Welsh art stands as a unique example of that.

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