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BA Fine Arts: Studio Site and Context

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Image Making – Welsh Culture and its context within Art

What is Welsh Culture? What does it mean to be Welsh? What makes someone Welsh? How do Welsh Artists explore their cultural identity through Art? These are several questions that I will seek to answer throughout the duration of these writings.

What is Welsh Culture?

This is an interesting question that you can tackle in varying avenues, be that the native language of land Welsh, The people that belong to our many villages, towns and cities, The music and art we make and our traditions and myths. In my opinion it is not one singular thing, it is the mixture of all the above. Wales is a land and a people of Celtic origin and this is most acutely represented within the language of Cymraeg (*Jacob, 2017.*) that provides it with a unique place within the family of European languages when compared to the more widely spoken Germanic and Romance languages.

Through having this distinct language makes Wales feel unique with how its words flow, you need look no further than the National Anthem “*Hen Wlad Fy Nhadau*” – (*Wales Online, 2019.*). An anthem that stirs pride and unadulterated passion whenever I hear it during any Rugby or Football game involving Wales, that presents the Welsh as a peoples with deafening pride for the land of their fathers which showcased to the world during these events like the fixture between Wales and Ireland (*FA Wales, 2017*).

When looking at Welsh poetry that best emulates the beauty of the Welsh Language I would quote:

*“Croesodd sawl cantrif, fesul fflam, calon cytseiniaid, yn llusern o gan yn y
duwch” “Gillian Clarke – Y Fflam” (Pritchard, H. 2015.)*

which translates to “Heartbeats went in unison through many centuries, like flames, a lantern of song in the darkness” and to me this represents the Welsh people through all the suffering and persecution of our geographical neighbors to the East. That our resolve and will cannot be extinguished and that we will persevere. We could look towards the lyrics of “*Yma O Hyd*” (Genius, 2020.) whose title translates to “*Still Here.*” Whenever I hear the song I feel totally moved to the core and it stirs emotions of passion and pride, in particular the lyrics of the chorus “*We are still here, in spite of everyone and everything,*” These words are so powerful to me because we as a people of the past 1000 years have been subjugated and held back from the death of the last true Prince of Wales “Owain Glyndwr” that extinguished Wales as an independent nation and becoming the play thing of King Henry IV and his heirs until its total incorporation within the Kingdom of England with the “*Acts of Union of 1535 and 1542*”, The Merythr Risings and the Rebecca Riots, The flooding of the village of Capel Celyn to provide water for the city of Liverpool which has now become a martyr of sorts for Welsh Nationalism and unity through the phrase of “*Cofiwch Dryweryn*” which translates to “Remember Tryweryn” and that we will never forget the tragedy of what happened.

The Welsh Not was a piece of wood that would be worn by school children for the remainder of the day if they were caught speaking Welsh, It was introduced through the “*Blue Books*” that spoke of the apparent evils of the Welsh Language (Welshnot. 2020.). It was used to systematically reduce the number of Welsh speakers and almost resulted in the extinction of the Welsh Language. The children would often be ridiculed by their peers. The Welsh Not was used in Welsh Schools from the 18th Century up until the 1940s. It was a horrific tool that was used to systematically remove Welsh culture in Wales. When looking at the legends and myths of Wales, of which there are too numerous to write down within this essay, So I will focus on a few that I particularly enjoy.

Firstly, I look to probably the most famous legend within the Welsh Culture, that of “*Y Ddraig Goch*” Which translates to “The Red Dragon.” The legend goes that there was a fierce battle between a White and Red Dragon in which the Red Dragon was victorious and ever since throughout Welsh History the dragon has been adopted as symbol for Wales and its people as a protector of sorts (Visitwales, 2020).

When speaking of Owain Glyndwr and his uprising against King Henry IV and the Guerilla tactics he undertook to gain an advantage against the English in which he described by Cuban leader as “the world’s first Guerrilla leader” whom with Che Guevara he saw as an inspiring figure (Hemming, 2017.)

When looking further into the Merthyr risings, I found out that this was the first recorded use of the red flag as a symbol of revolution anywhere in the world and led to the adoption of a red flag as a symbol for Socialist causes ever since, see examples in the flag of the Soviet Union and Vietnam (Skinner, 2017.) When looking at the impact of the Merthyr rising, it provided a monumental moments for history of the working class and in conjunction with first use of the red flag, one could draw to the conclusion that the Merthyr rising was a major turning point for working class and showcased the power of the voice of the workers and provided a starting point for movements like workers unions, Socialism and Communism that would go on to dominate the next century of world politics. I also believe that there is a sense of poetry with use of Red to signify the uprising at Merthyr and, that of the colour of the Welsh Dragon, the same Dragon that the people of Wales have adopted as the symbol of protector and stands centre frame within the official flag of Wales. Finally, on a final note when speaking on the Merthyr rising, I would like touch upon Richard Lewis, better known as “Dic Penderyn” who was a Miner at Merthyr, originally from Aberavon was aged 23 years of age at the time of his arrest and eventual death. “Dic Penderyn” was accused of the stabbing of a Soldier however many now believe he was used as scapegoat in order to quash the Uprising in Merthyr and this believed innocence, coupled with his presumed final words “O Arglwydd, dyma gamwedd” which translates to “Oh Lord, here is iniquity” allowed him to become a martyr for Workers rights after his death (*Carradice. 2011.*)

When looking and exploring the flooding of the village of Capel Celyn and its historical impact. We would firstly look at in further context why a small village in the North of Wales was flooding to create a reservoir? The city of Liverpool was apparently in need of more added water than it already had so, the UK Government proposed that the village of Capel Celyn would be flooded to create a new reservoir that would be called “Tryweryn” would suffice this need of the City of Liverpool (*BBC. News, 2013.*) The proposed flooding was unanimously voted down by every Welsh MP and shows the utterly powerless position of the Welsh Voice within the UK Government that still exists to still to this day with the fact that in last 80 years the Welsh electorate has never voted for a Conservative Government. The flooding and creation of the reservoir not only emphasis the evidence of Wales not having a say in Welsh issues at the time as previously mentioned but the displacement of hundreds within the community and destruction of their very way of life, Could you imagine being told the place you, your parents and grandparents grew up and had fully lived lives in with countless

cherished memories would be gone and you could never return and the amount of strife that would have caused, two comparisons I look to with people being displaced would be that of The Chernobyl Nuclear Meltdown, when the thousands of residents within the town of Pripjat was evacuated due to the meltdown at the Nuclear reactor, never to return to their home. Also I look to an example closer to home for myself with my hometown of Port Talbot in which many streets and homes were destroyed for the construction of the M4 Motorway the M4 Motorway is massive monstrosity that tears and purges through the very soul of Port Talbot, For the people of the town I would say it's the thing that has the biggest impact and is the most encompassing and visible thing ahead of the place Port Talbot is most Famous for the Steelworks. I remember when I was younger seeing photographs of what Port Talbot used to be, A lovely town that had a character of its own however, the passage of time and "progression", saw this amazing Town being torn into two and changing its foundation and landscapes forever, I look mainly to Llewellyn Street, In which one entire side of the street was demolished to make way for this monstrosity, Changing the lives of the residents forever.

When exploring the “Remember Tryweryn” sign or as its known in Welsh “Cofiwch Dryweryn.” The sign is a memorial to before mentioned flooding of Capel Celyn and after the original memorial was defaced in 2019 by Vandals however it was later repainted to resemble the original, the new reemergence of Tryweryn within the consciousness of the Welsh people has seen the words “Cofiwch Dryweryn” appear all across various areas of Wales as symbol of sorts for Welsh national pride. However, we must look at if the “Cofiwch Dryweryn” sign being graffitied on both public and private property and causing costs to both the Council of the respective areas and Private businesses to remove and that if that’s worth it being a martyr for the cause of Welsh Nationalism or are these murals right and allow the Welsh people to reclaim an event that they were against and use the event as a reminder that the tragedy at Capel Celyn and those of similar will never happen again (BBC. 2019.)

Artists that have explored Welsh Culture

Richard Page



Richard Page is a photographer based in Manchester that in created a series of photographs around the landscapes of the Tryweryn entitled “Landscapes for the Tryweryn Valley” between the years of 1996 and 1997. I find these images to have a certain somber and absent atmosphere to them and present a look at life or to a greater extent absence of, after the flooding of the valley. I find the lack of a human presence in these images provide a haunting and sad feeling as the memories and lives of those that once lived there have been washed from the face of earth.

Dylan Thomas



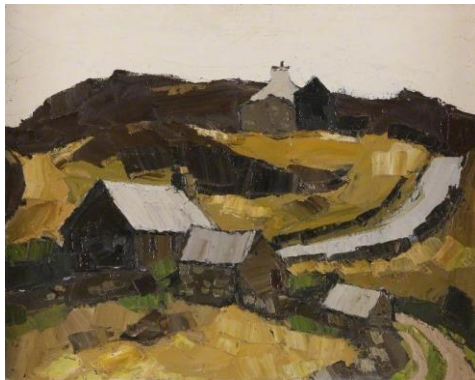
Dylan Thomas was a writer and poet from Swansea who created many poems that were influenced by Wales and it's landscapes such “Poem in October” in which he describes his walks through the town of Laugharne in the South West of Wales, I think the poem does a terrific job in describing what it's like to be in just environment as that of Wales but in a manner of profoundness that only a writer of Thomas stature could've of mustered with lyrics such as;

“It was my thirtieth year to heaven
Woke to my hearing from harbour and neighbour wood
And the mussel pooled and the heron
Priested shore
The morning beckon
With water praying and call of seagull and rook
And the knock of sailing boats on the webbed wall
Myself to set foot
That second
In the still sleeping town and set forth.

My birthday began with the water-
Birds and the birds of the winged trees flying my name
Above the farms and the white horses
And I rose
In a rainy autumn
And walked abroad in shower of all my days
High tide and the heron dived when I took the road
Over the border
And the gates
Of the town closed as the town awoke.”

These words evoke a sense home for me as I could easily exchanged sentences presented by Thomas and imagine a walk on a trail besides the Port Talbot Docks and hear the smashing waves upon the rocks and noise of seagulls bustling above head. Dylan Thomas also described the City of Swansea in which he was from as a and I quote “A ugly, lovely town... crawling, sprawling by a long and splendid shore.” Which you take in many avenues in how you could articulate it, however I would draw the conclusion that Thomas meant that Swansea is a rough and tough place to be in due to the industry there from Copper and Coal both socially and environmentally but the people and place create a sense of pride and make it feel like having pride in a place that is flawed.

Kyffin Williams



Kyffin Williams was a Welsh Painter that was primarily known for his Landscape paintings of the Rural communities of North Wales. His paintings not only explored the landscapes of the land but of the rural communities, communities like the previous mentioned Capel Celyn. Kyffin Williams is someone who's work is what I think of as the quintessential encapsulation of Welsh Landscape within the medium of painting in the way he has been able to use his use palette in conjuncture with his marks he created with a palette knife that showcase the rugged and mountainous landscapes of North Wales and more specifically Snowdonia.

Tim Davies



Tim Davies is a Multimedia artist based in Swansea and originally from Pembroke. In 1997 he created a piece entitled “*Capel Celyn, 1997.*” In which Davies responds to a five-inch rusty nail that found on the site of flooded valley of Tryweryn that we’ve previously touched upon within this writing, Davis took the nail and created a cast from it around five thousand times to then make a floor from. In my opinion, the work is captivating, in the way Davies has reclaimed something that was lost and forgotten into something entirely new.

The Davies Sisters

The Davies Sisters, Gwendoline, and Margaret respectively were responsible for the collection of over 260 artworks ranging from the works of Paul Cezanne and Claude Monet in which the donated entirely to the National Museum of Wales in Cardiff. Their donation resulted in the rise in the quality of works within the museum and their selfless act enabled world renowned works of art to be seen by the people of Wales and likely inspired a generation of young Welsh artists that wouldn’t have had the chance to view these great works without the Davies Sisters and putting Wales on the world stage as a home of world famous art

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