

*Nicky Bird, Art Walk's latest residency artist was interviewed by Genevieve Fay about her project 'The Decorators'. Here, they discuss how the project evolved, the inspirations behind it, and what we can expect from the upcoming events that mark its completion.*



**The two Buchan Pottery kilns are in some ways the starting point of your LandMark residency with Art Walk Party. Can you tell us more about that?**

I was intrigued by the two bottle-shaped kilns in the heart of Portobello, surrounded by new flats, and the gaps in the landscape, the piece of scrubland that surrounds them. The kilns are a reminder of the pottery industry, they are 'landmarks' in that sense, but they also point to things that are no longer there. I am very interested in the people who have worked in these places, in locations which have now been somewhat erased.

**How did your project evolve to focus on the women who worked as the Buchan Pottery decorators?**

When working in different communities, there's often a trusted person who can open up doors for an artist not from the area. Rosy Naylor (Curator, Art Walk Party) put me in touch with Margaret Munro, of the Portobello Heritage Trust. I don't live in Portobello, and its local people have a deep knowledge, and a strong sense of the location's history. I wouldn't want to create an artwork that tells the viewer-listener what they already know, so Margaret's generosity and knowledge were key. She put me in touch with Mairi Fortuna, a Buchan Pottery decorator she had interviewed a couple of years before, and I followed in her

footsteps. Mairi then connected me with other decorators she had worked with, building a chain of connections which lie at the heart of the project.

### **Can you take us through your process, from early research to the culmination of the project?**

The process begins with lots of different conversations, with really listening, and looking at any photographs that come up. Some of them are personal 'family-style' photographs, some are from the formal archives and newspaper articles. This is a research and material gathering process, but all the while, the visual materials are being shaped by the stories being told.

When I interviewed Mairi, as I hoped, she had a few photographs waiting for me: small, colour, square photographs from the late 1960s. There, the kilns are not the main focus, they're a backdrop. For instance, she had a photo of two women going through the skip where all the flawed pottery was discarded. Through photos like this, suddenly the past doesn't seem so distant.

I knew when I saw one picture that it would make a striking banner image, that it would transfer well from the domestic to the public domain without too much explanation. It has three women in it, two of whom look quite young, and a man looking out from a workshop window: it is quite a painterly image in my mind. I thought this image could act as a signpost to the kind of working lives that were once in the location. For an outdoor project like this one, the image has to be striking enough so that people stop and ask, 'what's going on here?' Another layer is that Mairi took the photograph, so we are looking through the eyes of a teenage woman.

### **How do the blurred boundaries between art and heritage inform your work?**

I think the issues around heritage are fascinating. Heritage is a big thing now, connected to funding which supports local communities to decide what is their heritage, what should be preserved, and how should it be preserved. As an artist coming into this, I'm always drawn to what *hasn't* been preserved, and how to deal with the missing pieces. This project takes different elements, including people's personal photographs, voices, memories, and of course the pots themselves - the decorators' signatures marking their pottery. There are different ways of putting these pieces together, so this project will hopefully draw attention to some of the forgotten histories around the kilns.

### **How are you planning to bring these multiple elements together in the culmination of your residency?**

There are a number of different elements that will be on show over the weekends of 29th February - 1st March and 7th-8th March. Alongside the group portrait image, a soundscape will be playing inside the space of the kiln, which will be open to the public from 11am-3pm throughout both weekends. For the kiln that is under restoration, we're working on a wrap-around banner. This will have the names of the women I've met during the residency, and also those who have in turn been remembered by my three interviewees. On one of my artist walks, I hope to map the extent of the workshops around that area.

On Saturday 29th February, there's going to be a decorators' tea party. This is to celebrate the women I've collaborated with, as well as show them all that has come out of the residency. As an artist I make editorial decisions when moving other people's memories and materials into artworks and events, so I am very careful not to be appropriating these memories or experiences. The encounters with these decorators have shaped and influenced the artwork, the aesthetic, and the material itself.

**The soundscape playing inside the kilns is bound to be an immersive experience for the listeners, was that your main intention?**

In many ways the sound is really quite simple: I just tried to make the best recording I could of three women speaking about their memories of being decorators. There aren't any other special effects, just the human voice narrating how they got the job, what they remembered of painting the pottery, the social side, the conditions they worked in. The interviews are shortened from the full versions, edited with the kiln and an intimate audience in mind.

**Your projects often link up the history of a place to our experience of it now. How important is the concept of place when you are shaping a project?**

Place is interesting to me, especially those places that have had some form of erasure done to them. Walking around that part of Portobello, there are lots of flats and new buildings, and that's good. But every time something is changed, something is also lost. I am interested in that tension in a place, how is it still evident or haunted by its past: a sense that something has gone, but still has a presence in a strange way. I'm interested in places when their narratives are possibly at the point of being lost.

**What's next for you after you've completed your LandMark residency with Art Walk Party?**

I would really like to produce a mini publication about The Decorators project - perhaps which takes inspiration from an appendix in Robin Hill's 1990s booklet about the Buchan Pottery. The interviews and photographs of the Decorators deserve a lasting legacy from the residency.

I've got a solo show at Street Level Photoworks in Glasgow from July-September which I'm really excited about. The exhibition will feature a series of site-specific projects that I have done over the last 10 years or so, and I am currently working on producing these for the gallery space.

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