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EXHIBITION REVIEW

GestART: The Art and Archaeology of Barclodiad y Gawres

Oriel Gallery, Llangefni, Anglesey, Wales: 20 June–16 December 2015

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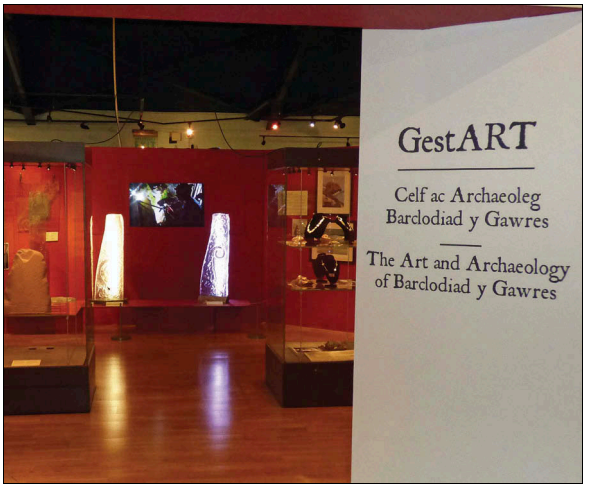

Figure 1. Entrance to exhibition.

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Voces de muerte sonaron
cerca la Guadalquivir.
Voces antiguas …

F. Garcia Lorca

The evolution of academic disciplines makes for an immensely revealing subject in itself. At the Courtauld Institute of Art in the early 1960s, for example, art history, a discipline then still very much in its comparative infancy, was almost entirely self-reflective in character, with matters of stylistic development and attribution still predominant along with an insistence on the application of some kind of scientific objectivity as to what could be said about a work of art. All fine up to a point, except that teaching about the social, political, and cultural context in which works of art and architecture were created was limited to a degree – poetry, literature, music, philosophy hardly, if ever, got a mention. However, in the following decades the subject completely transformed itself, infinitely for the better, and something very similar seems to have been happening to archaeology in more recent times. Thus a subject, once defined by the simple premise – "the material study of the past" – has gradually weaned itself away from solely an examination of the physical remains of that past circumscribed by the cognitive and largely materialist prejudices of our current historical worldview and begun to more readily open itself out to other disciplines and modes of understanding that seek to explore more profoundly the very different cultural values and belief systems that would have informed prehistory. Even so, it is perhaps fair to say that while this important paradigm shift in approach may have become much more apparent in the recent academic literature of archaeology, it still has not, to my eyes at least, been anything like so obvious within public museums and the wider media.

All of which makes this exhibition of a multi-disciplinary engagement with the later prehistoric monument of Barclodiad y Gawres in the archaeological section of Anglesey's Oriel Ynys Mon museum so particularly innovative and exhilarating in its approach. It features the outcomes of a three-year-long project by artists, musicians, scientists, and archaeologists based around this celebrated Neolithic passage grave/ritual site on the island's remote west coast, and was funded originally through a grant made to a Portuguese-based team by the European Union through its GestART project (Artistic Gestures revisiting European Artistic Diversity and Convergence). Archaeologist George Nash, part of the editorial team of this journal of course, was given a substantial portion of this grant to project-manage an art/archaeology project in Anglesey. A key part of Nash's highly imaginative proposal was to commission seven contemporary artists "to consider their perception on the various *scape*s that form the backdrop to a prehistoric burial-ritual monument": silversmith (and also archaeologist) Carol James, glassmaker Bill Swann, printmaker Ian Mitchell, landscape artist Professor Dragos Georghiu, musicologists Ian Duggan and John Nash – and then get them to work alongside the painter/archaeoacoustics specialist Paul Devereux, also of this journal, and the 3D laser scanning specialist/surveyor Andrew Beardsley of Terra Measurement.

Beardsley's work involved not only a new tracing regime of all the engraved

rocks but also experimentation with 3D laser scanning and printing, a unique approach to recording archaeology, an example of which is displayed in the exhibition. He had also previously 'reconstructed' the inner world of the monument in 2011; the imagery created was not a photograph (see Figure 2) but a point cloud of millions of dots. The various stones that constructed the passage and chamber were also analyzed by geologist Leigh Weston. His great depth of knowledge established a number of crucial discoveries including an assessment of the capstone of the dolmen-like structure inside the monument's chamber – he ascertained that it was of sedimentary origin and that it contained marine fossils. (Sadly, in September 2015, Leigh suddenly passed away.)

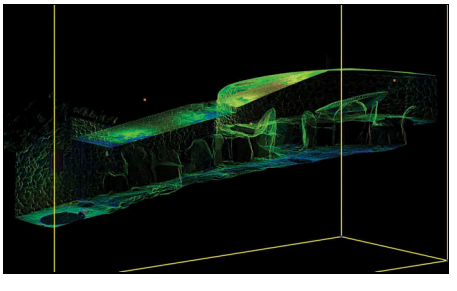

Figure 2. Andrew Beardsley made a 3D laser survey of the entire interior of the monument. This is just one frame from the rolling video display in the exhibition. (Andrew Beardsley/Terra Measurement Ltd.)

Indeed, the exhibition represents a truly collaborative project, as many of the site photographs there make plain – artists, archaeologists, and scientists all pooling their individual insights, reactions, skills, and interpretations of the place and its still-mysterious art and material culture.

And what a site George Nash chose! Not only is Barclodiad y Gawres ("Giantess's Apronful") regarded as containing some of the finest examples of prehistoric engraved rock art in the British Isles, but it also occupies one of the most powerfully evocative geographical positions imaginable – on the edge of a remote, rocky promontory jutting westwards out into the Irish Sea (nothing between here and Ireland), with uninterrupted views of the steep promontories of Holy Island 15 km or so to the north and the great craggy peaks of Snowdonia fading away into the Lleyn Peninsula far to the south.

Figure 3. The mound of Barclodiad y Gawres, on the tip of a rocky promontory, as viewed from the landward, eastern side. The entrance to the interior is out of sight in this picture.

Meanwhile, much closer at hand, below its immediate southern flank, lies the small, perfectly-formed crescent of Porth Trecastell Bay whose waters, when not battered by westerly gales, can often create the most dazzling ripple wave patterns in sunlight – patterns which Paul Devereux has remarked "shimmer light frequencies into the viewer's eyes … that induce a sense of reverie" ().

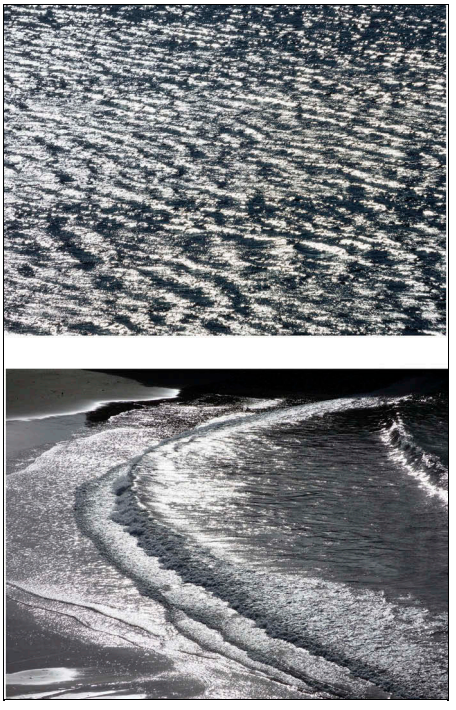

Figure 4. Moods of the reverie-inducing shimmering waters of Porth Trecastell Bay.

But, as the title of his exhibition contribution, "Seen and Heard," suggests, it is by no means just the visual elements that make the place so particularly atmospheric but the aural as well – the constant, primordial roar of the surf on the rocks below and the almost ceaseless sound of the wind, which coalesce into a "pink noise" which can also induce a meditative state.

Figure 5. The "primordial roar" of the surf …

None of this, at an earlier period of British archaeology – such as in 1952/53, when archaeologists Glyn Daniel and Terrence Powell first excavated Barclodiad – would have been considered to have very much to do with a "serious" study of the site's historical/cultural significance, but today it seems that a more sensory approach to understanding such sites has found gradual academic acceptance. This acceptance may be the result of the way archaeology is now perceived, not just as a single subject dipped in a bit of science but as a multifaceted discipline that involves the social sciences such as philosophy and sociology – here archaeology has become of age.

Greater attention to its natural landscape setting, in all its sensual power, can now be seen as an essential element in the study of an ancient site like Barclodiad y Gawres, probably itself a metaphor for a cave, quite as much as the architectural, man-made remains. As many have pointed out, the prehistoric (even medieval) mindset was premised on an utterly different view of the world to our own largely materialist/urbanized mindset – so very much closer to nature, myth and ritual, ancestor-worship, even use of natural mind-altering drugs derived from the local flora (like psilocybin mushrooms, still to be found on Anglesey), and the like. So the choice of setting for a site intended to be of such ritual significance would have been made with quite as much care and attention as the astonishing labors that went into its making. The Neolithic world would have been a largely sensory one in ways which we can only begin to guess at, hence the true significance of this show in its enlisting of visual and musical artistic sensibilities to be displayed alongside the archaeological and scientific. This

approach, drawing on the universal sensory responses of human beings, helps us in a way to cross the millennia – literally across time and mind.

All this is, of course, before we have even got inside the monument itself, so to speak. Technically termed a passage grave, it is a massive round mound with a splayed entrance facing north-south rather than the usual east-west, with an outward view (perhaps intentional?) due north to Holy Island, and leading inwardly into the cruciform main chamber, at the center of which is the massive dolmen-like feature. It is here within the chamber that the six engraved stones can be found. All well documented academically by members of the GestART team, notably George Nash and Carol James, the artistic focus here is very much on finding ways in which to bring out and make clearer to a modern audience the quite extraordinarily hypnotic visual energies of these rock markings – the almost dance-like, or dancing, forms in the diamond/lozenge-shaped markings and sinuous base lines of stone C16 and the more characteristic (of Neolithic art) spiral forms to be found on most of the others.

For Devereux, a painter by training, this has taken the form of four photographically-derived pieces, two from his creatively-lit, color-enhanced photography of the interior of the site and two from his digitally-manipulated photographs of the rock art engravings themselves, all of which have been transferred onto quite large canvases. If that might offend painting purists, the actual effect is really surprisingly successful, much more so perhaps than a C-type photographic print might have been, in giving a physical solidity and sense of presence to these images. In the two "straight" rock art works, the process succeeds equally well, lifting the markings off the often quite hard to read (in situ) stones and allowing them to float free visually, with vivid results (Figure 6).

Figure 6. Devereux's rendering of the markings on Stone C16.

The glassmaker Bill Swann comes up with some equally successful work, in this instance incorporating the spiral forms of some of the rock art into, among other pieces, simple, handsome, standing shards of glass (Figure 7), tinted with ochres and other minerals found on Anglesey – evanescent and somehow evocative of a profound antiquity. Carol James' bold silver jewelry which, reflecting her ongoing love for and deep knowledge of Welsh rock art, suggests something of the intense and

innate decorative sensibility of the Barclodiad engravings, and by incorporating elements of the local landscape – grasses, plants, and sand – into the texture of their surfaces, it makes for a strong poetic connection at a natural as well as a human level.

Figure 7. Two of Bill Swan's glass renditions of engraved Barclodiad stones. (Video screen in background shows the splayed entrance to the monument.)

Ian Mitchell's contributions consist of spare graphic images depicting both the site and its surroundings, along with other images of a somewhat more abstract style showing highly schematized renditions of some of the carvings. Dragos Gheorghiu's land art involves very large-scale white lines forming various configurations embracing the monument itself. A series of three narratives were considered: "Linearity" – a processional pathway leading from the open landscape, "Circularity," a delineation of the monument itself, and "Patterns," bringing the inside out. These landscape configurations were photographed from the air by Andrew Beardsley, using a drone.

Figure 8. One of the land art configurations created at the monument (in this case on the monument) by Dragos Gheorghui. (Aerial photo: Andrew Beardsley/Terra Measurement Ltd.)

Turning to the acoustic aspects, the project has come up with some equally powerful explorations of the nature of the Barclodiad site. As well as the naturally generated ambient "pink noise" referred to earlier, the monument itself has a sonic dimension – the great horizontal capstone of the central dolmen feature being what is known as a "ringing rock," namely one that when struck deliberately and selectively with a small hammerstone strangely produces metallic ringing noises rather than the usual dull, clunking sound of rock on rock. Wearing his archaeoacoustic hat, Devereux claims it is the only stone in the monument he could find with a ringing, "lithophonic," property. In any event, its place here would seem to be crucial to whatever rituals or ceremonies took place within the chamber, its resonances within the enclosed stony spaces of the structure fusing with the noises of the crashing surf and wind outside would have created haunting, magical effects on the Neolithic participants, quite possibly

already in a state of altered consciousness deriving from ritual activity and even, possibly, the psychotropic effects of magic mushrooms. In his segment of the rolling video display in the exhibition, Devereux suggests that it might have been interpreted by the Neolithic users of the place as representing in some way "the voice of the ancestors." These are hard things to convey in exhibition terms (or in print), of course, but the video sequence showing images from both the landscape outside the monument and its interior, accompanied by the recorded raw, ringing sound of the rock being struck repeatedly, gives at least some idea of the effect. (An acoustical resonance study of the monument's chamber was also undertaken, apparently, but its results were considered unreliable given that the acoustic properties of the place were severely compromised when it was covered with a concrete dome in the 1960s, replacing what once would likely have been a stone constructed chamber).

Figure 9. An artwork-rendering of the dolmen-like feature in the heart of the monument's chamber.

Staying with the sonic context, mention should also be made of the musical contribution made by musicologists Ian Duggan and John Nash (of Dynamic Audio Productions), who chose deliberately to abandon electronica in favor of a music inspired by the place and the landscape. Both musicians, working with a twenty-first-century mindset, produced sound that is powerful, intensely rhythmic, and, in its incorporated percussive effects, quietly atmospheric. Not archaeologically correct, perhaps, in the way it was once practiced, but just another element of an exhibition which had the courage to bring richly diverse and unorthodox approaches to the project.

All in all, this exhibition shows that the GestART project, experimental and innovative to its core, achieved a beginning, middle, and an end, a rare occurrence in projects of this size. Its legacy will not just be a series of compartmentalized focus areas but a point in time and space where art, archaeology and science fused into one.

As the great polymath Gregory Bateson () wisely observed:

> there are bridges between the one sort of thought and the other, and it seems to me that the artists and poets are specifically concerned with these bridges; it is concerned with the levels of mental processing … Artistic skill is the combining of many levels of mind – unconscious, conscious and external – to make a statement of their combination.

He also went on to point out, in his conclusion to this same essay, "Form, Substance and Difference" (1970,):

> if the mind is immanent not only in those pathways that are located inside the body but also in external pathways then death takes on a different aspect. The individual nexus of pathways which

> I call "me" is no longer so precious because that nexus is only part of a larger mind. The ideas which survive to be me can also become immanent in you. May they survive if true.

In the context of the Barclodiad y Gawres passage grave with its role as a place of burial and ritual, these words take on a moving resonance.

Acknowledgements

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Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes on contributor

Nicholas Usherwood trained at the Courtauld Institute of Art, and is an independent curator and writer specializing in twentieth-century and contemporary art. He is currently Features Editor of *Galleries* magazine. His recent publications include books on Sonia Lawson RA, Norman Adams RA, Evelyn Williams, Sidney Nolan RA, and Joash Woodrow.