

I am writing this blog post from a distance. (Sorry Tina!) I stayed at Grinneabhat over a year ago, but my brief stay in Bragar is still with me, in the form of a hat that's since been to Japan and back, and clay that lives in the cracks of the concrete floor of my studio in Glasgow.

My residency was primarily concerned with researching Barvas Ware, a type of pottery produced just up the road, at the turn of the twentieth century. I first came across the pottery in a programme for the International Exhibition of 1901 in Glasgow 6 years ago and was taken with the caption "a survival of primitive times". During an iteration of the same exhibition ten years later an entire "Highland Village" was reconstructed complete with actors dressed up imitating an idealised daily life of residents of this imagined village for the entertainment of Glaswegians and industrialist visitors from across the British Empire. Looking at the form of the tea set I wondered what was seen as primitive about this pottery which looks so similar to some popular ceramic work produced now? And what are the political implications of exoticising a speculative past in the present?

Barvas Ware was produced purely for a tourist market, modelled on China tea sets produced in factories and popular at the time but made with techniques used for domestic functional ware - simply produced and easily discarded. The pots were produced with humour and a knack for tapping into the economy of identity - playing on outsiders preconceived fictions of a primitive rural culture to generate effective financial gains. But these methods of firing unprocessed clay and sealing it with milk have siblings across the world - Ukrainian milk glazing and Tibetan black pottery sealed with whey are just two I have come across in my research. These processes require a sophisticated knowledge of material and place, one that has never been stuck in time, continuing to evolve and drawing on both practicality and play.



Barvas Ware Teacup engraved with design at Highland Folk Museum, 2022



An' Clachan Postcard from Glasgow International Exhibition, 1911, Kelvingrove, from Mitchell Library Archives.



clay running over rocks by the coast

It's rare to spend time a place where the past lives so close to the surface of things. Pottery erupts from the peat by the shore in Arnol, bone needles come out with potatoes at the machair, the schoolhouse itself still holds the names of those who built it, right there in the walls. It's easy to get swept away in the romance of the past, to inhabit a space apart, to be the outsider, the observer, the postcard sender. But if I took anything away from my time at Grinneabhata it was the care with which these legacies are held by those that live there, in CD's of songs that were sung together, in the upkeep of the graveyard, in coffee mornings and Gaelic classes and in the experiments that artists were already doing with clay and milk and fire, which served me well in figuring out my own interpretation of the methods used to work with the clay there.

As a visitor, I didn't want to go around digging holes and disrupting a landscape already so eager to reveal itself, so during my time in Bragar I took to walking around and pawing at the dirt accessible from the surface as I went to see if it would stick. For any curious wanderers, look out for edges of exposed earth along rivers, burns and coastlines. If you notice a difference in the colours of the soil, take a piece and roll it between your hands into a sausage shape, try bending the sausage. If you can create an arch with it, there's enough clay in the material to work with.



Foraging Clay by the river in Barvas, October 2022

Like the potters of Barvas, who worked by the hearth, the kitchen of the hostel became my studio, where I spent hours wedging handfuls of clay brought back in plastic bags and coaxing it into shapes that might just survive a fire. I was lucky, a passing comment led me to a good wee source at the coastline, another conversation and some research with Jon took us to the river which was likely the source for the original potters of Barvas, and we gathered some (quite peaty) clay there too. Talking to Sue Blair about at Borgh Pottery about the reconstructions of pottery she made in the 90's likewise gave me some ideas to chew on, which eventually led to further experiments mixing forged clay and studio clay to create a taxonomy of clay behaviour.

The little vessels I made at Grinneabhat were fired in peat on a pebbled beach, warmed by the fire for a while before resting in the embers to heat up to temperature before being plunged into warm milk. It was a small miracle that almost every piece survived, the only breakage happening due to my own clumsiness as I moved the steaming cups around. It was my absolute pleasure to see them a few weeks later arranged by Alex Hackett and Anne Campbell alongside her collection of pottery found in the area. I'm glad they live at Grinneabhat still.

Grinneabhat was the starting point for a body of work that continued for a year or so longer than my time in Bragar and what I learned during that time will continue to influence my work in ceramics for a long time to come.

In August 2023 I presented the resulting work at An Lanntair in Stornoway, which you can see here: <https://fionnduffy.co.uk/smooth-weight.html>

And I look forward to returning sometime in the future, as an artist or as a tourist, either way.



Visit to Museum Nan Eilean, Stornoway, to view the Barvas Ware in their collection with Sue Blair and Jon McLeod, 2022



Pots by the peat fire, October 2022



Pots on display at Grinneabhat with Anne's finds, 2022