Some student of psychology must have addressed the question of the relationship between artists’ work and their morals. Leaving aside the thorny question of ‘How are you defining morality?’, it sometimes seems as if there is no connection at all. The whole concept of the vie de bohème is based on the co-existence of artistic talent and a relaxed lifestyle, and some of the greatest artists (Caravaggio?, J.L. David?) have been pretty unattractive as human beings.

Equally, of course, sweet people can be hopeless artists. We probably know a few ourselves. But we should be wary of assuming that virtue has no relevance to artistic pre-eminence. Plenty of good artists have been sterling characters, even if few have gone as far as Fra Angelico, who ‘never took up his brush without first making a prayer’, if Vasari is to be believed.

In case anyone is feeling apprehensive about where this subject is heading, I hasten to add that I raise it purely for comparative purposes. For it seems to me to offer an analogy, both in terms of dynamics and complexity, to one that we should be considering, namely the impact of an artist’s environment on his or her work.

Obviously where you live does not necessarily make you a better or worse artist. If it did, Lord Leighton in his Holland Park palace would ipso facto eclipse William Blake pegging away in his poky court off the Strand – a manifest absurdity. Indeed it could be argued that Leighton was a lesser artist than Blake precisely because his surroundings were so grand. The artist’s muse is a simple soul and is apt to take flight if she feels she is being asked to live above her station.

On the other hand, there is plenty of evidence that habitat can have the most profound bearing on the style and character of an artist’s work. We have only to think of Van Gogh discovering Provence, Gauguin Tahiti, or Matisse Collioure. It was not just that the imagery of their paintings changed as they encountered fresh subjects. Something in their new milieu unleashed an energy, a freedom, a confidence, that their work had not exhibited before. They could have been abstract painters or decorative artists, makers of three-dimensional things, and still experienced a work-transforming epiphany.

Philip Eglin’s latest exhibition seems to me a textbook case in point. Eighteen months ago he and his family moved from a small terraced house in Newcastle-under-Lyme, Staffordshire, to a valley in Powys. The new house is larger, with a good-sized garden, and instead of travelling some miles to a rented studio, Eglin simply crosses the lawn to a converted barn where he can work as the mood takes him by day or night. The scope this offers is all the greater now that he is free of the energy-sapping teaching commitments that he had before moving south.

The area did not escape the harsh weather that afflicted us all earlier this year, but on the weekend I saw
it spring had finally made a late, unheralded appearance. J.W. Inchbold, the Pre-Raphaelite painter who specialised in springtime landscapes, could not have found a more congenial theme. The palest of yellow-green leaves sparkled and shimmered in the sunlight against a vivid blue sky. Lambs scampered away in the hillside fields as you trudged up the country lane, while a recent canine addition to the family, a five-month-old cross-breed, bounced with the irrepressible vitality of puppyhood. ‘The Sleeping Giant’, the valley’s Mont Sainte-Victoire, dozed in the far distance.

Eglin’s new exhibition is dominated by a series of enormous jugs. A few are blue-and-white; some are honey-glazed over trailed slip or sgraffito decoration; many are polychrome, revelling in the most brilliant hues in the paintbox. There are also three massive drug-jars, one polychrome, two blue-and-white. Executed in stoneware fired to an earthenware temperature, all the pieces are press-moulded, with the handles pressed separately and attached. This is hand-building in its purest form.

Such technical details will hardly surprise aficionados of Eglin’s work, but what may come as a shock is the ambition and joie de vivre of these latest pieces. An explosion has occurred in terms of scale, colour and technical virtuosity. Eglin has made large and colourful things before. His ‘buckets’, the drum-like vessels that have so often served him as canvases for narrative imagery and decorative effects, were substantial and brightly painted objects. He has recently created some hefty blue-and-white tureens and chargers; and the seated Popes that defined his last Marsden Woo exhibition were significantly bigger than the Venuses and Madonnas that preceded them. But whereas in the past size and colour have tended to be at the service of some conceptual agenda, now there is a sense that they are creative imperatives themselves.

In fact both the forms explored in the exhibition have their antecedents. The blue-and-white drug jars emanate from the recent tureens and chargers, although they go beyond them in power and authority. True exhibition pieces, designed to make a telling ‘statement’, they almost plead for a permanent home in some major public collection. As for the jugs, they seem to spring from a collision between two distinct aspects of Eglin’s earlier work, his small ‘medieval’ jugs and the ‘buckets’. It is as if the force of the impact has caused the shape of one to fuse with the scale and vibrancy of the other – to dramatic and almost alarming effect.

Style is integral to these developments. Eglin has always been a master of abstract design, deploying a variety of techniques – drawing, transfer, splash and dribble – with dazzling aplomb. His characteristic combination of transfer-work and painting is still seen on the blue-and-white pieces; indeed it has seldom been so brilliantly handled. But the new spirit in his work finds its richest expression in the untrammeled brushwork and trailed slip of the jugs. Marks surge across surfaces, and even, finding these inadequate for their intoxicated revelry, plunge headlong into interiors. The effect is of almost reckless abandon, although this of course is deceptive. ‘Happy accidents’ may be welcome but control, judgment and discrimination are present too, proving, paradoxically, the true guarantors of all this visual excitement.

Eglin’s work has always been a gift to ceramic historians. Intensely aware of his inheritance and determined to harness it for his own creative ends, he gathers his sources with the insouciance of a bee in a garden or a child in a sweetshop. This show is no exception. The forms betray his devotion to medieval pottery, the jugs looking back to English wares, the drug-jars to early Italian maiolica, which he studied in the Bargello during a recent visit to Florence. Decoration is more promiscuous. The honey-glazing reflects a knowledge of English lead-glazed earthenware with slip-trailed motifs, the style most famously represented by Thomas Toft. The blue-and-white taps into an English tradition so entrenched in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries that it embraced both Delftware and porcelain, with specific images borrowed from the Indian sporting scenes that Spode favoured for its printed earthenwares during the industrial period.

The real triumph of eclecticism, however, occurs on two of the blue-and-white jugs, where the surfaces are adorned with, of all things, drawings of Blanc-de-Chine figures. Blanc-de-Chine has long fascinated Eglin, helping to inspire his white porcelain Madonnas, but there is an innovation here in that the standing human figures
are joined by a seated dog. The motif is based on a piece in the Glynn Vivian Art Gallery in Swansea, a new stamping-ground for this most museum-conscious of artists.

Is there a further reference to the lively quadruped that has recently joined the Eglin household? It would certainly be in keeping with the potter’s vivid sense of how the quotidian interrelates with the mythic, a sense that has caused him to draw parallels between football and religion and to fashion Madonnas from ceramic fragments press-moulded from consumerist waste products.

Yet oddly enough the iconography that has so often sustained these musings – the Popes, the prostitutes, the footballers, the Madonnas, the figures of Venus and Cupid as envisaged by Cranach – these are in almost complete abeyance in the present exhibition. Three Men of Sorrows retain a foothold on the jugs, lending a sacramental gravity to these pieces, but for the most part the figures have retreated before the decorative pyrotechnics. Gone, too, is the genial scatology and Rabelaisian humour that have also been essential components of the Eglin world. Only a mild double entendre survives in the show’s title.

Needless to say, the shift from symbolism to style profoundly colours our response to the exhibition. No longer called upon to engage with story-telling or ponder significance and meaning, we inevitably focus on formal values as never before, savouring some particularly exuberant gestural flourish, worrying about profiles, the shapes of handles, and so on. In some ways Eglin has embarked on a high-risk strategy, laying his work open to a whole new area of critical analysis. But it is a challenge he relishes. He will tell you, for example, that he likes the way some of the jugs do not sit foursquare; rocking slightly, they suggest to him that they are already beginning to ‘pour’, while the slight shadow cast by the uneven footrim is an added bonus.

What, then, are we witnessing? Eglin on his best behaviour? Possibly. Eglin the reformed character, no longer in danger of receiving a complaint from ‘disgusted of Tunbridge Wells’ or wherever? Hopefully not. Some years ago David Whiting astutely described him as ‘a modern-day Hogarth’, and perhaps in due course he will re-connect with the noble tradition of hard-hitting British satire, excoriating, with the anger that only increases with age for the true iconoclast, the sins, follies and pretentions of our time – worthy targets, heaven knows. Meanwhile I am happy to wait, if waiting means being beguiled by an exhibition as seductive and delectable as this one. A little aestheticism, art for art’s sake, is no bad thing, so long as deeper realities are not forgotten.

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