I’m not quite sure whether the Upper Swansea Valley is pre- or post-Industrial, as it looks like a place where someone might start panning for precious metals, or excavating for tin, finding rarity by pressing on further towards the river source across cattle grids and rusting bridges, beside sheep wire and scrubby evergreens, but nevertheless with the purest water splashing past from the Black Mountains and the old Forest Fawr. It may seem a bit of a push to get there, but this is an honourably artistic spot as well, where the Eglin family live, near Ystradgynlais where Josef Herman worked after the war, and below Craig-y-Nos were Adelina Patti retired and built an opera house. But anyway the Heads of the Valleys Road is only a few miles away, which runs along this extraordinary frontier between the wrecklands of the old industry of South Wales and the primitive mountain emptiness of Mid Wales.

This area has various personal links for the Eglin family, but it must be emotionally a place where Phil can work, and this sense of a borderland between nature and pioneering industry can be felt as a part of his sculpture. A fired pot or figure is of course also just such a mix of new-found chemical-electrical processes and an ancient humanly skill with handling wet earth.

A head from Hugo van der Goes, of all people, is pictured and labelled on one of the pieces. This old master artist sent a triptych to Florence from his studio in a monastery near Brussels, which was evidently so much better than anything the Florentines could do that they began to copy it, a notable triumph for the North. Standing at the back of this painting is this wild-looking peasant brandishing a long-handled trowel (exquisitely made, and which much actually be something to do with looking after sheep) and an open mouth. I suppose some colleague of the artist posed in costume, but this looks like one of the great portraits of a working farmer. He is also a wonderfully borderland person, between the land and the new religious order, country and town, traditional and the future. And Eglin chose him for a ‘Bucket’, inscribed with the name of the artist and looking even a bit wilder than in the painting. He shares this Bucket with two other images, a panel of calligraphy looping over blue (a bit like at Twombly, but Eglin had used this already) and a printed image from a photograph of a group of Edwardian workers of some kind, on which someone had for no known reason written A READ. But it turns out that this A READ was written on a different male group photo, mostly of blokes in white overalls looking like the cookery department of a Scottish field regiment. Both photos of these men preserve the forceful stare while all of them, forgotten now, the boss and the workers, glare hard at the camera lens as if willing it to get them right. The peasant staring at the baby Christ, the soldiers and workers staring at the photographer – of course this is the territory where art can take place, between our searching gaze and the frozen look of the past, asking us to be remembered.

There is no interpretation of these collaged images and graphics, only the art itself knows what it is about, and does not tell the artist, just directs him or her to assemble the contents, of which the imagery is only a part.
Eglin’s jugs and buckets have immense presence, and scale, and not just because they are larger and heavier than usual, often at the last point before they become too weighty to lift. But pottery exists in that glorious and productive position, it is not sculpture, painting, printing, drawing, modelling nor carving, but is all of these, and each thing made takes its place in comparison free of style to the immense history of the ceramics seen in the great museums, mostly a folkish art, but a part of our everyday crockery. It is the opera of the visual arts, combining all the others, and adding its access to the everyday, whether cooking, or singing.

Eglin makes vessels and figures, and his output overspills into drawing. But the vessels are a disguise. Sometimes what artists announce, in titles or statements, although it may be true, is a blind alley, to mask what they are really about. Buckets? Like a waste bin? These things are not going to live their lives on the floor, nor in the garden shed (and I hope for a decent time not in a glass case either). Try picking one up, and closing your eyes. What you hold is a body, a torso, naked, living and dimpled, moving to your touch (it is relative), a body of some other kind. For the art is on the other side of the frontier, living for us in our imagination.

The figures and buckets possess a richness as art, in their colour, texture, surface, shape. It is personal to this artist, and is again at a borderland, an overall wry gracefulness, which has to be counteracted within the same medium if it is not to be precious, by a startling everydayness, and in the past in his work by a cheery vulgarity. In his studio it must seem that the figures of Cranach and Picasso have come alive at night, and walk about in timelessness.

There are two ghosts, rather similar really. One, a memory of Paolozzi’s magic gift of giving life to a quantity of ordinary childish plaster-casts of all kinds, which I presume Eglin encountered while he was in his class at the Royal College sculpture school. The other is as powerful, and also has that visual touchability, and is the sight of Eglin’s own copious gathering of old galvanised and once ordinary watering cans, with a few jugs and buckets, that he keeps crammed onto three big shelves at one end of his studio. They are also just the weight that can be held (when full), and are distinctly male as they jostle embarrassedly in full extension, watching like Duchamp’s nine bachelors as the newly made ladies are put together at the other end of the room.

The nudes are made by a succession of procedures, the clay pushed into plaster moulds, which were invariably made from casts of ordinary stuff like supermarket plastic drink and food cartons. The clay itself to start with was extruded from a hand-plunger through a shaped disc, that turns them into ribbons of any surface, maybe fettuccine one time, or penne rigate the next. These earthy pastas, squeezed into the moulds, make vertical shapes, which when fired become the most delicious tumbling flesh, just slightly making its weight felt against the muscle and structure of the body.

But as I look at the new work, I am conscious that it should have been John Christian guiding my mind, as he wrote outstandingly three times, at least, in catalogues of Eglin’s new exhibitions. But Christian died, totally unexpectedly, in March this year, and as I write I remember him.

David Fraser Jenkins
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