

# Celebrating the carriers of tradition

*Basketry: Rhythm, Renewal & Reinvention | Ruthin Craft Centre, Denbighshire*

*25 September 2021 – 9 January 2022 | Reviewed by Ellen Bell*

The rapid extinction of animal species across the world is a devastating but widely known fact. To find similar language applied to traditional basketry skills requires some mental adjustment. As part of its *Basketry: Rhythm, Renewal & Reinvention* show, Ruthin Craft Centre's decision to dedicate one of its three galleries to an exhibit of the Heritage Craft Association's Endangered and Critically Endangered baskets is both salutary and potent. It's a reminder of all that's been lost through our reckless pursuit of new technologies, efficiency, cheap goods and labour, and sets a sombre and reverent tone.

It's not just the forms and functions of the baskets that have vanished but the language, specificity of place and once-thriving trades that they embody. The names – such as the Devon Stave Basket, the Kishie, the Withy Pot, the Bee Skep or the Whisket – are an etymologist's dream. As a means of contextualising the show, the inclusion of the Heritage Craft exhibit is a masterstroke.

Respect for the traditional skills associated with basket-making underpins every element of this monumental show. Its functional range is extensive: there are trugs, wastepaper baskets, log baskets, ring baskets, couture handbags, shopping bags, lampshades and a stunning thatched heather screen by Annemarie O'Sullivan. Under Gregory Parsons' curation the

functional and the conceptual become poetically symbiotic, as with the juxtaposition of Mary Butcher's glorious, abstract array of beach flotsam with the open weave of Hilary Burns' functional *Large Tendle Form*; the loosely drawn circles of Patriza Sascor's arguably less functional *Variation on Lightness* series, with Mary Crabb's exquisitely rendered copper pod and urchin forms.

Though the intrinsic basketry skills of weaving, twisting, coiling, knotting, plaiting, twining and interlacing are inevitably present with practitioners as masterly as these, some of the works question the necessity for the basket to be seen as purely functional: to hold, embrace and contain. Among them are Tim Johnson's flattened rattan trapped in recycled ceiling plaster (*Earth Platters*) – which pay homage to the fact that pre-history basket-making was first known through the marks of plaiting on tiles – and Mary Butcher's *Considering Our Seas*, a wall-hung relief of woven plastic strips. Though this choice of material might be considered contentious, the range of those on show – from jute cord to sash cord, from antlers to skulls, from crisp packets to tatami paper thread – is a marvel.

But it's the long-established materials that truly conjure up magic. As with the descriptors of the heritage baskets, terms such as cherry wood, honeysuckle, white willow, rye and oat straw, riven oak and elm summon up



a rural arcadia that's hard to resist. It's the particularity of trees such as the Orkney Elm or the marvellously titled Dicky Meadows Willow – and the stories they tell of a region and way of life – that's so evocative. And with many of the makers harvesting and husbanding the woods and coppices they source their materials from, the baskets exude a quality of belonging.

Such traditional materials also dominate the aesthetic of the show. There are synthetic colours present but these mostly belong to the recycled pieces and are mainly on the outer reaches of the exhibition. The extent and subtlety of the hues of the organic are far richer, as with Rachel Bower's *Shoulder Strap Basket with Tri-Colour Accent*, where some of the willow's colour has deepened

from exposure to frost.

The techniques on show are breathtaking – see Rosie Farey's deftness at weaving her nanoscopic *Micro Baskets* – as are the makers' willingness and passion to engage with, and sustain, a hand-craft that surely deserves more attention. Some are the children of makers – Rachael South is a third-generation chair-cane and seat weaver, and Willow with Roots is a mother-daughter partnership. Others have come to the profession through an inspirational teacher, or like Ewen Balfour, who is the last remaining maker of Kishies (tapered baskets for transporting

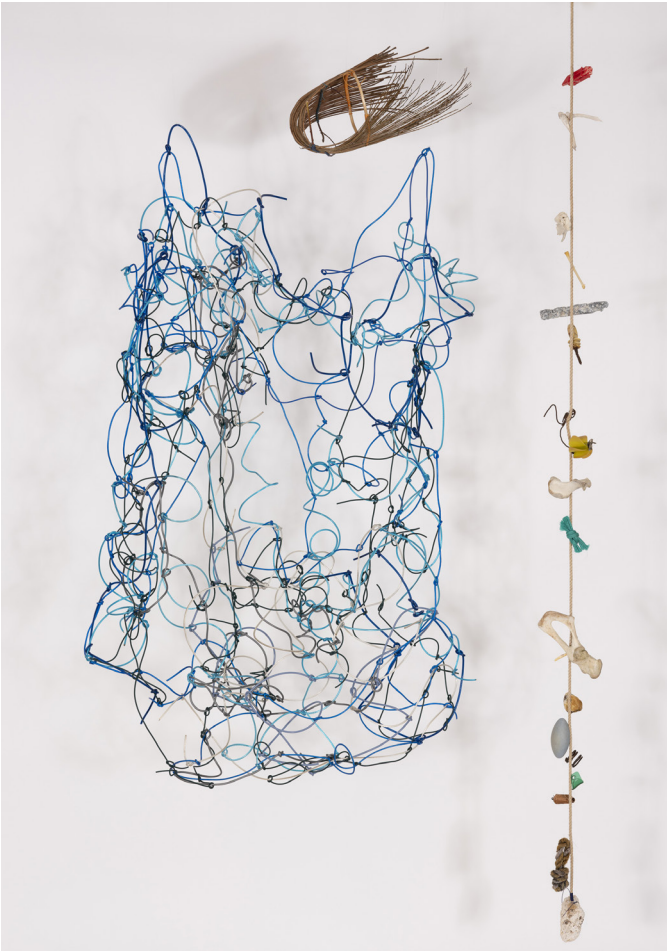
Above: Oat Straw Kishie by Ewen Balfour. Right: a selection from Lois Walpole's *North Atlantic Drift* series

# Reviews

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peat), are motivated by a desire to save a dying art.

*Basketry* is a beauty, but there's too much to take in. Circumnavigating an exhibition representing 35 makers, all with fascinating bios to read, is no mean feat. If it had been pared back a little there could have been more focus on the sensual experience of basketry. Perhaps there could have been a recording of the sounds of Judy Simmonds weaving her spiral baskets in her Devon farmhouse studio or a film of Rachel Bower harvesting

her willows in north-east Scotland. Or even, though a matter of debate as to its acceptability, the opportunity to touch, say, one of Polly Pollock's tiny 'amulets' or Clare Revera's large Welsh cyntell – in effect, the chance to smell and feel the weight, be it light or heavy, of a basket in one's hand.

*Ellen Bell is an artist and writer*

**Clockwise from top: various works by Tim Johnson; *Micro Baskets* by Rosie Farey; *Considering Our Seas* by Mary Butcher**

# A rosy take on a colourful life

*The Colour Room* | Sky Original film, on general UK release

Directed by Claire McCarthy | Reviewed by Isabella Smith

It's finally happened: first reality TV came for craft, and now film, too. *The Colour Room* dramatises the rags-to-riches story of British ceramic designer Clarice Cliff, played by *Bridgerton* star Phoebe Dynevor. Fans of the corset-ripping romp may be disappointed: *The Colour Room* foregrounds sentimentality, not sex, as it tells the tale of Cliff's journey from poverty to pottery superstardom.

Born in 1899 to a working-class family in Tunstall, Staffordshire, Cliff was sent to work in the potteries aged just 13. In life, she was one of seven siblings; in *The Colour Room*, she is shown living with just one sister and their mother. We see the grind of their lives rendered in sepia tones – all smog, mud and smoke-belching factories – as Cliff toils first as a 'paintress', then as a lithographer. Stealing offcuts to secretly practise clay modelling at night, she is caught and narrowly avoids ruin. Her efforts catch the eye of Wilkinson's factory owner Colley Shorter (played by Matthew Goode), who makes the highly

unusual decision to promote her to the rank of designer.

Here, she struggles against the misogyny of her all-male colleagues and the vulgar Victoriana that the factories were churning out well into the 20th century. Her first task: to design 50 variations on the ever-hideous Toby Jug. In a moment of frustration, Cliff squashes a pirate-themed effort, saying: 'Long John Silver – now Flat John Silver'. The comedic moment symbolises her wish to innovate: to break through the old and create new shapes, new approaches. Some of director Claire McCarthy's other metaphors are more heavy-handed. A bright butterfly beats against a filthy window, trapped, yet still spreading its wings; an orange crocus emerges pluckily from industrial grime (crocuses formed the basis of one of Cliff's most iconic ranges in 1928).

The moment Cliff steps into the Colour Room, where precious pigments are stored, is like when Dorothy's world turns technicolour in *The Wizard of Oz*. What follows is a tussle between tradition and innovation, the safety of the familiar versus the new and unknown. In the face of personal tragedies, financial disasters, a burgeoning romance and professional power struggles, Cliff creates *Bizarre*, a cheap and cheerful tableware range that appeals to post-war housewives hungry for colour and life. Fussy decoration is thrown out in favour of bold, brash designs – all sunbursts, zigzags and abstractions – with brushstrokes purposefully left visible.

We are not shown Cliff's stint at the Royal College of Art in London, nor her trip to Paris to take in the latest fashions, which – in reality – helped inform this

iconic 1927 range. Instead, we see cutting-edge Art Deco designs spring with naturalness from her hand. We do, however, see another key area in which Cliff innovated: marketing and sales. We see her pieces fail to catch the eyes of the pale, stale establishment males responsible for distribution, and the smiles they provoke in maids cleaning up after their trade fair. To market directly to such women, Cliff entered what is now called the 'experience economy'. With her 'Bizarre Girls' – the team who hand-painted her designs – she created pop-ups that saw the prettiest among them painting pottery in shop windows, among other eye-catching shenanigans. The stunts worked: Cliff sold over 8.5 million pieces in her lifetime.

Fashions since have waxed and waned, but it's easy to imagine a new generation of collectors appearing in the wake of the film – something that auction houses are anticipating (see Woolley & Wallis' 'Clarice Cliff, Art Deco & Design' sale on 16 March). Ceramics lovers will be pleased to learn that the pottery featured in *The Colour Room* is authentic, sourced by Fieldings Auctioneers' expert Will Farmer. Equally, they will be satisfied with its technical accuracy, thanks to the guidance of Kevin Millward, co-founder of Stoke's Clay College.

One gripe: was it really necessary to cast the doe-eyed Dynevor in this role, an actor whose flawless face bears scant resemblance to Cliff's homely countenance? For a feminist director proud of her all-female team, this beauty-washing feels wrong. All the same, this feelgood fare is bound to create a new admiration for both the woman and her work. *Isabella Smith is assistant editor of Crafts*

