



STORM OF INSPIRATION

Stunning pots at Blackbird Ceramics owe artful designs to dramatic West Wales skies, so it's no surprise that the nation's top weatherman is a fan

WORDS BY DECLAN HARTE

The restless climate of West Wales has long influenced the work of ceramicist Richard Prentice, so the day job of a certain guest who popped into his Saundersfoot studio for a lesson could not have been more apt. Popular TV weatherman Derek Brockway visited the workshop to craft a colourful clay pot as part of his BBC One show *Weatherman Walking*, which showcases the best Welsh views and the fascinating people affected by them.

Richard, who runs Blackbird Ceramics in the seaside town, was impressed with how quickly the jovial meteorologist took to the delicate practice, after sitting down at the traditional kick wheel.

"He was good actually, we did everything in one take," Richard said. "It's very difficult working on a kick wheel, as opposed to an electric wheel, but he did alright. He was pretty good, seeing as he had never done it before and it was a fun day filming."

The artist believes that the episode, broadcast earlier this year, should inspire more people to try out pottery for themselves. "The programme is great, because any programme that promotes ceramics or working with clay is brilliant," he added. "There are a lot of people who touched on it at school and never thought of picking it back up. People have come to my gallery and been inspired to go back and study it again.

"It is quite resource intensive, having kilns and wheels and stuff like that, so if you can

find a local studio or workshop you can join, it's a great thing to pick up at any age, to be honest."

Richard himself took a long time to become a professional potter, saying he studied it at school in Cheshire, then "didn't touch clay for nearly 32 years".

He always harboured artistic ambitions, but it was the stunning scenery of West Wales which convinced him to fully embrace those urges. He moved to London after leaving school and, following a number of careers, including working in the youth criminal justice system, he re-located to Pembrokeshire. He said: "I always knew that when I did get back into it, I would get back into it as a serious profession and become a ceramicist."

He describes the dramatic West Wales



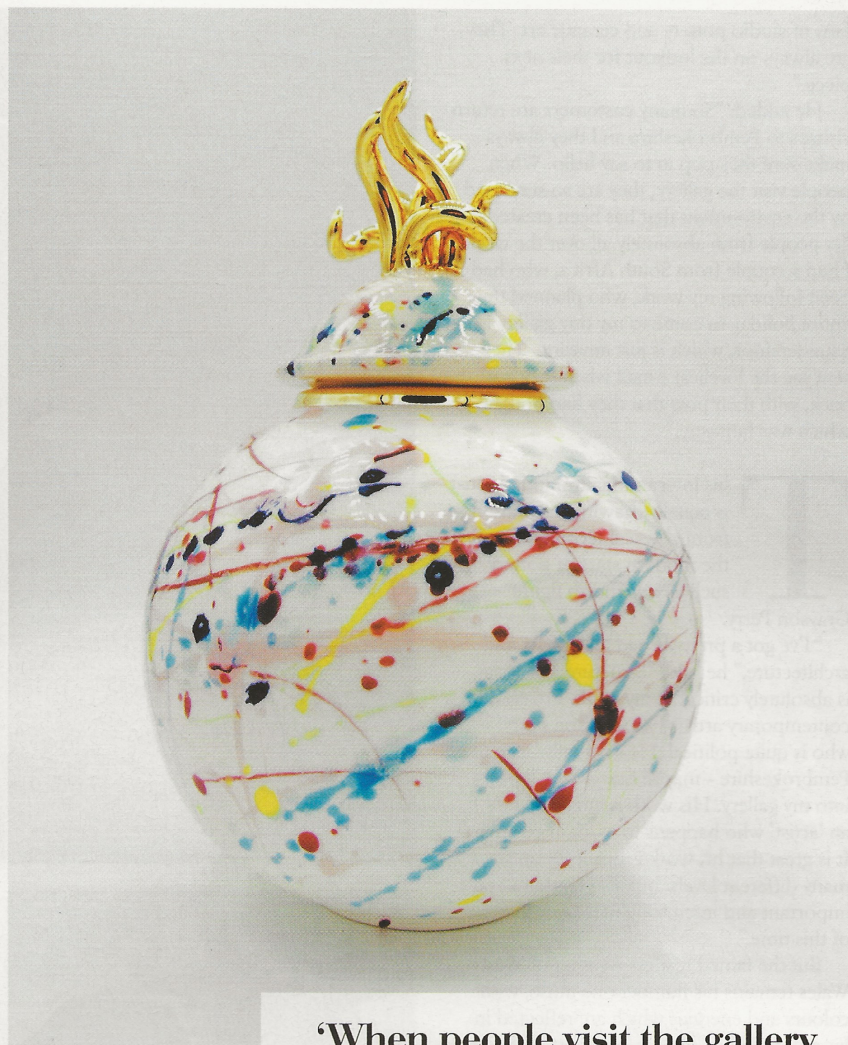
Richard Prentice

landscape, with tempestuous skies, as “one hundred per cent the influencer in my work”.

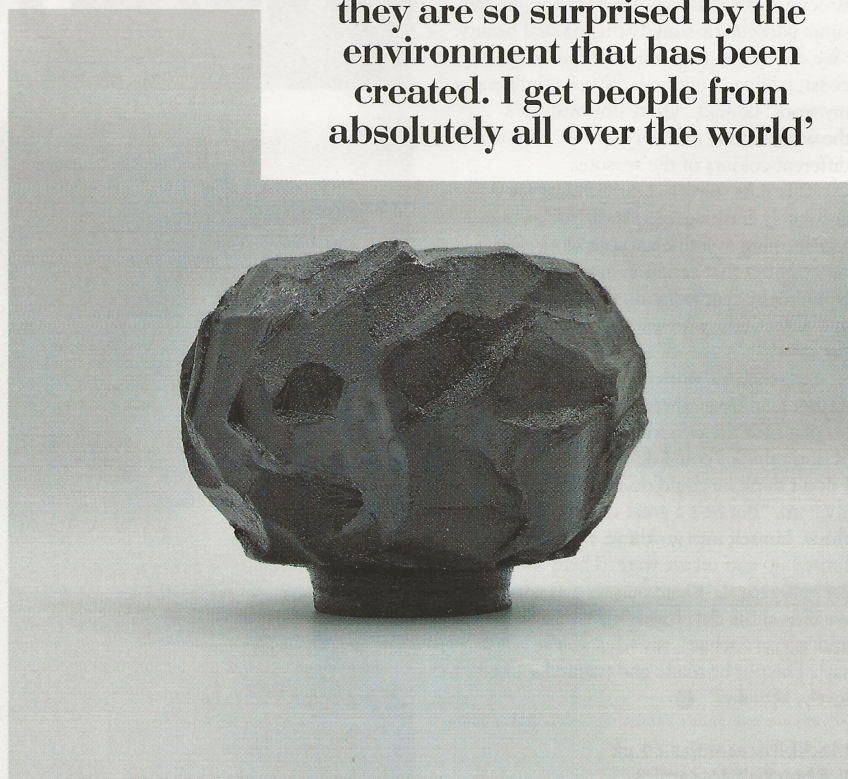
His colourful pots, with swirling designs, are showcased and sold from his Blackbird Ceramics gallery/shop on The Strand, a former pharmacy building which dates back to the 19th century. Each delightful clay pot you see is for sale and everyone who makes a purchase will also receive a letter from Richard, explaining the history of the piece and how it came to be.

He said: “When I bought it, it was very, very run down. It’s a single room, so one of the smallest galleries in Wales and I’ve done it up so it looks like it used to look. It has the old floorboards, but has a contemporary look, with hand-painted Japanese wallpaper depicting mountains, and an old Pembrokeshire farmhouse long table. It’s not designed as a gallery that’s all white and minimalistic, it’s designed as an extension of the work I produce, so when people come in, they get a real sense of the place and the work that I’m doing.”

Blackbird Ceramics has fans and customers from across the world, with Richard shipping pieces as far as New York, Australia, Hawaii and Singapore. He said: “There are a lot of people who are real avid →



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fans of studio pottery and ceramic art. They are always on the lookout for their next piece.”

He added: “So many customers are return visitors to Pembrokeshire and they always make sure they pop in to say hello. When people visit the gallery, they are so surprised by the environment that has been created. I get people from absolutely all over the world. I had a couple from South Africa, who had been following my work, who planned their entire holiday to come to my tiny gallery in Saundersfoot, which is just amazing. They sent me the loveliest e-mail when they got back, with their pots that they had bought, which was fantastic.”

This internationally-minded artist is equally drawing inspiration from classical techniques and the modern stars of pottery, such as outlandish figure

Grayson Perry.

“I’ve got a pretty broad love of art and architecture,” he said. “Structure and form is absolutely critical in my work. I really like contemporary artists like Grayson Perry, who is quite political. He’s actually been to Pembrokeshire – maybe one day he’ll pop into my gallery. His work is amazing, he’s an ‘artist’ who happens to work in ceramics. It is great that his work is beautiful on so many different levels, but also contains very important and interesting messages that are of this time.”

But the famed restless weather of West Wales remains his number-one muse, with colours and energies which are reflected in his pieces. When filming outdoors with Derek Brockway for *Walking Weatherman*, he saw some particularly soul-stirring natural beauty. “We did spend quite a bit of time on the coast, talking about how the coast influences my work” he said. “Quite obviously, it’s the weather that influences it too, with the different colours of the seasons.

“When it’s stormy and the waves are absolutely crashing against the rocks, that’s a great thing to influence your work. For me, without that variation in weather, there wouldn’t be that variation in tones, colours and reflections, which is so important in my work.”

But while his work is just as reliant on the unpredictable weather as Derek’s, there are no plans for the two to swap professions. “I don’t think I could do his job as much as I don’t think he could do my job,” laughed Richard. “But he’s a great chap and he’ll throw himself into anything. He literally turned up and off we went. There was no prepping for it. What you saw was what we did on the day. It was lights, camera and ‘go on Richard, say what you’ve got to say’. The pot he made and painted looked lovely, actually.”

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I: @blackbirdceramics



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