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# ARTicle

CULTURAL LIFE ON THE EDGE

2006

John Knapp-Fisher

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**CHANGE OF ART**  
*with the* CHANGING LANDSCAPE

Above: John Knapp-Fisher: *Yachts at Porthgain*  
Below: Tim Davies *Llawr Forestfach/Returned Parquet*

# CHANGE of ART

## with the CHANGING LANDSCAPE

Oriel y Parc's new exhibition is 'The Changing Landscape', a title that conjures up images of shifting seasons and the play of light on land- and seascapes. To think that is all it is about, however, would be to do a disservice to the curator, Bryony Dawkes of Amgueddfa Cymru – National Museum Wales.



Graham Sutherland *Boulder with Hawthorn Tree* © Baer Karrer, Zurich

The exhibition explores the impact of human changes to the landscape as well as the natural ones: natural erosion at one extreme, man-made pollution at the other. Walkers of the Pembrokeshire Coast Path over the years notice the changing route as it is reclaimed by the sea; residents and visitors alike will remember more dramatic one-off events such as the *Sea Empress* disaster when 70,000 tonnes of oil spilled into the Milford Haven waterway and contaminated 120 miles of coastline. However,

boundaries blur as human development influences the climate – causing changes in sea levels, which in turn accelerate coastal erosion. And new interventions on the skyline, in the form of wind turbines, appear in an attempt to live with nature rather than exploiting it.

Pembrokeshire has always been a place of contradictions, with industry amongst the beauty of the surroundings. John Knapp-Fisher's pared-down *Porthgain* in the first room, with its simplified view of the harbour, reminds us that Porthgain is a classic example of old industry. With a man-made harbour for the fishing fleet flanked by industrial buildings and vast brick bins for storing the stone quarried nearby, it is now paradoxically one of the most picturesque spots in the county. ARTicle is pleased to feature a profile of the renowned artist in this edition, by Solva photographer Heather Bennett.

The exhibition is also a chance to see three pieces by Tim Davies, who is the subject of the first half of Iwan Bala's essay 'Art in Wales': *A Place I Know Well* from 2002, *Distant Views* from 2008 (which was re-edited in 2010), and a brand new example of his *Postcard* series. The first-named is a loop of phrases on a white background, describing his childhood experiences of the village of Solva. They are detached, indeed could be abstract descriptions of anywhere, until old family pictures (his?) ground you. The re-working replaces the white background with Solva harbour, filmed on a blustery day. It is not a 'classic' view; one wonders if this was intentional. The phrases 'only a stone's throw', 'all mod cons', 'if you so desire' would surely have been accompanied in the estate agents' brochures by a sunnier shot?

The large, predominantly green, Sutherland canvasses in the second room are as captivating as ever, and the chance to see work by Ceri Richards and Richard Wilson reminds us what an achievement Oriel y Parc is: this latest, year-long, show bringing home to us the impact of the Changing Landscape.

# ART *in* WALES

## IWAN BALA *artist & writer*

**Artist and critic Iwan Bala presents an overview of political Welsh art from its inception in the 1970s to the present. In this first part of his critical essay, he concentrates on the work of Pembrokeshire-born artist, Tim Davies; in the next edition, he takes us through the Welsh arts movements of the 1970s and 80s.**

Tim Davies, born in Pembrokeshire and spiritually attached to his grandparents' home, the once fishing village of Solfach, has a deeply felt political awareness in his work. *Black Black Walls* of 1993 first brought him to attention in Wales when it won a prize at the National Eisteddfod in Neath in 1994, but it had previously appeared at the East International exhibition in Norwich previously. Lumps of coal, 28,000 in all, are pierced and strung up in rows, much like bead curtains – forming a series of screens hanging from ceiling to floor. They are striking as objects in a white space, but they are also reminders of each job lost in the south Wales coal industry under Thatcher's policies. The coal is reduced 'to an impotent, decorative element, like black coral threaded on string' as Dr Ann Price Owen has said.<sup>1</sup> Work or the lack of it, and the loss of social cohesion that goes with unemployment, are recurring themes in Davies's work.



*Capel Celyn*

© Tim Davies

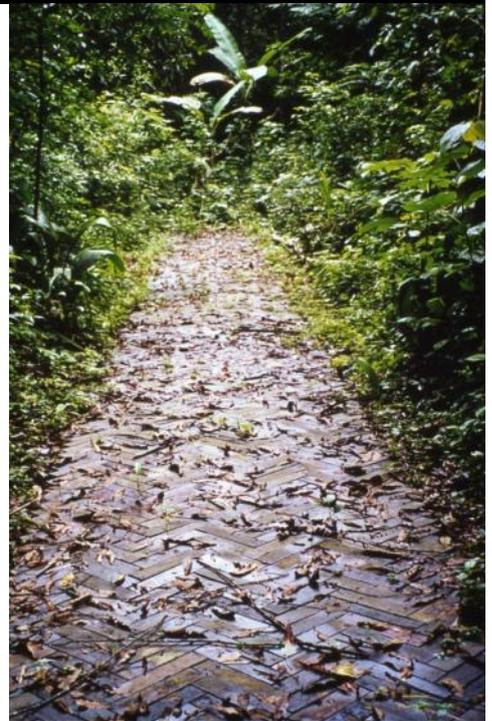
*Capel Celyn* (1997) is a floor piece made up of 5,000 cast wax nails inspired by the discovery of one rusty five-inch nail which Davies reclaimed one rainless summer from the dried up bed of the Tryweryn Reservoir in north Wales. The work can be viewed purely as a self-contained piece of art, austere and haunting; yet a deeper meaning can be found hidden under the outward appearance of an international style. Like the culture and history of Wales, submerged like the village of Capel Celyn, the deeper meaning needs to be worked at. Visitors to Wales (or viewers of the work) or indeed inhabitants, often remain completely ignorant of this national story, and Davies's work could be interpreted as an illustration of this process of rediscovery in that it makes visible this cultural phenomenon that is so easily overlooked.

*Capel Celyn* won the Mostyn Open Purchase Prize in 1998, but before that it had been enthusiastically viewed in an exhibition also called 'Capel Celyn' in the Spacex Gallery in Exeter in 1997. This surprised the artist somewhat, proving that the mythic nature of the work and the historical events it alluded to (supported by accompanying text) could be well received outside Wales. This is not art that is simply 'about' one country's history, nor does it hijack history in order to create a 'message'. The message is inherent and self-contained, and therefore universal. It is also minimalist in the sense that it is pared down completely to one element, and that element is repeated over and over in a labour-intensive process, which the artist undertakes himself. Its politics go further; they question the supposed 'content-less' ideology of Minimalist art. The viewer sees a 'field' of wax nails, a carpet that seems to hover in a ghostly way across the gallery floor. Beyond that, they interpret the meaning of the piece, aided by its title and the statement made to go with it. In the catalogue essay for Spacex, curator Alex Farquharson writes: 'Art on the margins, can still act for the community in place of absent governmental or media representation, and one cannot help feeling that in Davies' hands what began as a single rusty nail that

# POLITICS *of* ENGAGEMENT *or* ENGAGEMENT *with* POLITICS

*was duplicated by wax casts, has taken on the votive function of a candle in a church for the lives dispossessed at Capel Celyn’.*

The *Returned Parquet* piece made for the Poustina Earth Art project in Belize in 1999 emphasises the process of political awareness that is part and parcel of Davies' work. Looking out for new materials to use, Davies found a pile of salvaged mahogany blocks in a yard outside Swansea. Realising the significance of these blocks - once the floor of a grand house in south Wales made from wood cut down by slave labour in Central America before being shipped to Europe, perhaps via the port of Cardiff. He made a decision to ship it all back to Belize. Aided by an Arts Council of Wales grant, he duly shipped the blocks back to the forest. There he laid them out as a pathway, where they remain, gradually being truly reclaimed by the undergrowth and the termites. Another work that shows his response to current events is the video piece *Drumming* of 2003, where a drum is beaten loudly and continuously. Made to be placed near the famous statue *Drummer Boy* by Sir William Goscombe John in the Amgueddfa Cymru – National Museum Wales, Cardiff, it shows us how art reflected its time, a propagandist drum, beating a roll call to arms that is repeated today as an ironic comment about the propaganda that once again has taken us to war.



Tim Davies

*Llawr Fforestfach/  
Returned Parquet in Belize*

In a series of postcard ‘interventions’ (a series of 12 was purchased for the Contemporary Art Society for Wales [CASW] in 2003), Tim Davies has turned his attention to that icon of the tourist postcard, the Welsh Lady. In these found postcards, the central figure or group of figures is meticulously removed, leaving a neat and empty, yet recognisable, silhouette. Getting rid of these outmoded views of Wales, he seems to say, lets us see the reality that surrounds them.

Also on the CSAW purchased list in 2003 was an early Peter Finnemore work in which political engagement was most obvious. The work, *Lesson 56 – Wales* (1998) is a series of six C. Type colour prints on aluminium, and features pages from his grandmother’s school history textbooks. They contain such gems as: ‘When speaking of England it is understood that Wales is also meant’ and show the majority of the atlas coloured the pink of the British Empire. He has gone on to represent Wales at the Venice Biennale exhibition of 2005 with a series of humorous yet telling short films.

David Garner began his political engagement in his ‘miltirsgwar’ (square mile) of mining town Blackwood, dealing with industrial decline, new short-stay technology industries and his own father’s death from pneumoconiosis contracted from years underground. His *Political Games 2* (1995) is in the CASW collec-



Part of *Lesson 56-Wales* © Peter Finnemore

# IWAN BALA *artist & writer*

## ART in WALES



*Pockets of Resistance*  
© David Garner

tion, an iron target filled with discarded work boots. *Pockets of Resistance* (2003–4) is a huge tarpaulin pocket covered with pockets from everyday garments, and was first shown in the exhibition FACT, held in a disused shop in Swansea in 2004. Names of various resistance movements are attached in fabrics associated with women's clothing, together with the iconic face of the first female suicide bomber, Wafa Idris. *They Shoot Children Don't They?* (2003–4) is a welded steel-framed globe in which a video monitor is suspended which repeats a five minute loop of footage extracted from the banned Arab film, *Jenin Jenin*. The extract is a monologue from a twelve-year-old girl, Najwa, as she scampers over the bombed remains of a Palestinian

village. The original film was directed by Mohammed Bakri, and is dedicated to its producer, Iyad Samudi who was shot and killed shortly after its completion. Behind the monitor is a suicide bomber's vest on a clothes hanger, as if ready for use (and made following instructions taken from the Internet). A thick rope coils around the lower half of the globe, and unravels across the floor. Another work, *Intelligent Information?* (2004) is a single-line LED display that runs a continuous message. What does it mean? Is it poetry? It turns out to be a tactic deployed by the US Department of Homeland Security, giving information useful in airport departure lounges. One of the telltale signs for recognising a terrorist bent on suicidal action apparently is: 'Behavior is consistent with no future'.

This is not an issue for one people and one place only; it is global – the rope that binds us is unravelling. The work of artists like Garner points the finger at this continuing human folly. It is cultural and political imperialism, multinationals and greed that should legitimately be described by that line: their behaviour is indeed 'consistent with no future'. The future looks bleak for us all, and the threat to our environment by far exceeds the threat of terrorism.

Whether art can make a difference is probably a moot point, but without art that challenges then we have even less to look out for that will be of interest in this homogenised world. Art offers alternatives to the tired imagination, so that some recipients of the 'message' can gain another view on the world – one that might indeed affect real politics at some point. Over the course of the 20th century, art had become largely removed (and has removed itself) from the overtly political concerns of the day to day. An ideological conspiracy in effect isolated art in institutions, much like 'ivory towers'. Today, more and more artists (in Wales and elsewhere) are becoming genuinely engaged with the wider community and with issues such as the environment. It seems that right now, we are of the generation who can see the end, truly the catastrophic end, of civilisation as we know it within a century. This 'political' reality – of global warming – surely becomes the theme of Art. As more people question the way we live and see that a change is inevitable, voluntarily or not, they see the art that was practised in the West (and now globally exported) to be part of the same destructive self-indulgent system. It becomes clear that alternative ways of thinking and being must be offered by artists; this is the greatest political challenge of all.

1. See Anne Price-Owen 'Fire', *Process: Explorations of the work of Tim Davies* (Bridgend, Seren Books, 2002) p. 50.

# A PEMBROKESHIRE LEGEND

## JOHN KNAPP-FISHER



John Knapp-Fisher in his studio Image © Heather Bennett

It is difficult to know what to include in this profile, as listening to John Knapp-Fisher presents a multi-faceted experience of a richly lived life. It would be easy to write a book around this artist.

Born in London in 1931, there is a strong life force in John which defies time as he generously shares the core of his artistic drive and beliefs. He trained in Graphic Design at Maidstone College of Art, where he found himself strongly drawn to the works of the British Artists – especially John Piper and to the qualities he recognized in Van Gogh. These artists and his father's encouragement drew him into the world of Fine Art. John's father was Head of Architecture at the Royal College of Art and lived long enough to see his son's success in his chosen world.

Van Gogh remained a formative influence as John, painting a windmill in Ramsgate, was aware that Vincent had lived there briefly in his youth. He likens his time there – living through a bitter winter in a Victorian apartment block, frozen and shivering in front of an old gas fire – to Van Gogh's garret studio. Here, painting became his life.

John's first serious exhibitions at Kensington Art Gallery rapidly bought recognition and sales, confirming his belief of 'Yes, I can do this'. Other early exhibition spaces were The Coffee House, Northumberland Avenue and The Archer Gallery – both important spaces in the history of 20th-century art.

National Service intervened, and two years of stage design where the theatre and its hard-working people opened up a new world. Daytime stage sets sprang into different and magical life lit by spotlights at night, and began a lifetime's exploration of what light does to form and colour. Asked what drives his unique talent, part of his reply is 'The presence of ever-changing light, particularly in land and seascapes'.

In earlier years, John painted outside in oil on canvas, but he grew to prefer making sketches and rudimentary notes on colour/light and form; these were then worked up into finished paintings in the studio. More exact sketches often failed to materialise into these as they felt complete in themselves. The looser, notated, more rapid ones somehow held more of the artist's first emotional response to a scene. They were often small parts of a subject:



Tenby Luggier

© John Knapp-

# PROFILE

by HEATHER BENNETT *photographer*

planes of walls and odd corners, offbeat things, light and dark skies, and ever-changing images of weather. His sketch books are sometimes included in his exhibitions: he likes to see those of other artists such as Graham Sutherland, for sometimes they tell him more than finished works.

Work in the studio is concentrated mental and physical effort, seeking to bring to life a relationship between what John sees and what he wants to transmit emotionally. Colour is important. Asked about his palette, he says 'It is of earth colours in low tonal ranges with a touch of primary creeping in now and then to surprise'. I find his work captivating, and ask if he enjoys it. His response is that during the process he is completely engrossed in creating the feeling of place and time he has experienced. There is a determination there which would drive him to a space of exhaustion as he searches for completion.

Painting is like breathing to John as he unites landscapes, people and boats into haunting and memorable images. He speaks sadly of what the world of art is now, with painting often being considered a poor relation, but as we talk about Oriol y Parc bringing new hope to this area of Wales he is cheered and hopes the pendulum will swing away from Brit Art and back to a more crafted and skilful scene.

John lived and worked on a seagoing vessel early in his career, and boats appear in many of his works. He left his boat, drawn to Wales by his friendship with John Seymour, the self-sufficiency guru. He and his then wife lived initially in Carmarthenshire, in a cottage up a track on the side of a mountain; the postman trudged across fields to deliver their mail. They stayed for two years: a time for of recognition that changing weather – here the fine rain and mountain mists were new experiences – would form a lifelong inspiration. Recognition that they needed a gallery drew them to John's present space in Croesgoch, where he has been for the last 42 years. The sea is close, the weather is changeable and here is everything John needs to inspire his work.

This is an artist who has exhibited in most major galleries in the UK and has pieces in collections like Amgueddfa Cymru–National Museum Wales, as well as private collections worldwide. He has been filmed by TV companies and written about in many publications, and yet he is open and accessible and genuinely interested in other people and the world around him. He is an instinctive communicator at all levels.



Solva

© John Knapp-Fisher

See John's work on [www.john-knappfisher.com](http://www.john-knappfisher.com) or at Trevigan Gallery in Croesgoch, open 10.00 am to 5.00 pm Easter to September; or outside these times, call 44 (0)1348 831374 to arrange an appointment.

# HIGHLIGHTS

## ARTicle RECOMMENDS for LATE SUMMER

- St Dogmaels Gallery's Summer Show runs from 24 July to early September, with an Open Evening on Thursday 5 August from 6.30 to 9.30 p.m. The exhibition brings together a selection of artists representing some of the best contemporary work in Wales. With painting, photography, sculpture and film, the exhibition includes, amongst others, Elizabeth Haines, Tricia McParlin, Peter Taylor-Wood and Susan Sands. The film on show comprises works by Penny Jones, Ruth Jones (see ARTicles Autumn 09 and Spring 10), Sinclair Stammers, Jacob Whittaker and Simon Whitehead. The show also includes an evening of mask and music (free entry) at the gallery on Friday 27 August at 7.30 p.m: stories and relationships emerge as the different characters meet and interact, inspired and influenced by live music and the images in the exhibition. On 28 August, art-tour guides Maggie Nicols and Claire Turner will accompany visitors on a journey of discovery and delight, opening and surrendering to the images in the exhibition through a sensual theatre of sound, movement and word play. Contact 00 44 (0)1239 612677, or email [saintdogmaelsgallery@hotmail.co.uk](mailto:saintdogmaelsgallery@hotmail.co.uk)
- It's Summer Show time, too, at Milford Marina's pureART gallery, from 1 until 26 August. Artists include: John Cleal, Marijke Braaksma and Philip Sutton. Call 00 44 (0)1646 694591 or email [galler@artpure.co.uk](mailto:galler@artpure.co.uk)
- St. Davids Studio Gallery will be showing the exhibition *Naked landscape, paintings and engravings* by Ross Loveday from 11 August to 5 September. Further details on 00 44 (0)1437 720648 or email [info@stdavidsstudiogallery.co.uk](mailto:info@stdavidsstudiogallery.co.uk).
- The latest David Tress exhibition runs at the West Wales Arts Centre in Fishguard until 28 August. Call 00 44 (0)1348 873867 for more information.
- The Waterfront Gallery in Milford Marina is showing two exhibitions until 4 September. 'The Capital Comes West', artwork by Cardiff-based artists Anthony Evans, Alun Hemming, Elfyn Lewis and Adrian Paul Metcalf. And 'Emergence', graduates of the West Wales School of the Arts at Carmarthenshire College, Coleg Sir Gâr, show their ceramic work. Contact them on 00 44 (0)1646 695699 or email: [david.randall@btinternet.com](mailto:david.randall@btinternet.com)



Some of the work on show at St Dogmaels Gallery



Valley of Fragments © Ross Loveday at St Davids Studio Gallery

# LOOKING FORWARD

## EVENTS

Just across the bay from Tenby, the dramatic location of Kidwelly Castle is playing host to 'Ironstone - an international exhibition of contemporary cast iron sculpture'. Arts Council of Wales is working in partnership with Sculpture Cymru, the Sixth International Conference on Contemporary Cast Iron Art, and Cadw on this remarkable exhibition. Exhibiting artists include Wendy Earle, Geraint Edwards, Susan Forsyth, Wally Gilbert, Andy Griffiths, Charles Hadcock, Jenny K. Hager, Kate Hobby, Harvey Hood, Coral Penelope Lambert, Nick Lloyd, Antonio Spowers, Kazys Venclovas and Marcus Vergette. The exhibition will run until 24 September, with more details on 00 44 (0)29 2044 1344 or email: [sian.james@artswales.co.uk](mailto:sian.james@artswales.co.uk)

## LISTINGS

- ARTists PEMBROKESHIRE's website is now live, and includes a constantly updated listings page, as well as giving visitors the opportunity to pass on their 'hot tips' for events in the county. Visit [www.artpembrokeshire.co.uk](http://www.artpembrokeshire.co.uk)
- Information on Oriely Parc's events can be found on [www.orielyparc.co.uk](http://www.orielyparc.co.uk) or by calling 00 44 (0)1437 720392.
- *Western Telegraph*, weekly local newspaper, out on Wednesdays, also *County Echo*, based in Fishguard, the *Tenby Observer* and the *West Wales Mercury* covering the Milford Haven area.
- *Pembrokeshire Life*, published monthly and *Pembrokeshire Country Living*, six editions published each year.
- Arts events can also be found in the listings of [www.acw-ccc.org.uk](http://www.acw-ccc.org.uk), [www.bbc.co.uk/wales/southwest](http://www.bbc.co.uk/wales/southwest), [www.eventsinpembrokeshire.co.uk](http://www.eventsinpembrokeshire.co.uk), [www.visitpembrokeshire.com](http://www.visitpembrokeshire.com) or [www.pembrokeshire-online.co.uk](http://www.pembrokeshire-online.co.uk)
- And if you want to track down the artists yourselves, see Pembrokeshire County Council's Art and Craft Guide 2009 available to pick up throughout the county and to download on [www.pembrokeshire.gov.uk](http://www.pembrokeshire.gov.uk) (type 'Pembrokeshire Art and Craft Guide' into the search box).

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