



The animals in Anna Noël's small sculptures tread a delicate line between folk art and modernity; she has a particular sensibility that can include humour and solemnity, and an economy of form and painting. Combining form with painting is one of the special skills of work in clay. Anna has worked consistently for several decades in this exploration of the animal figure, sometimes paired with humans, and the necessary conventions of supporting thin legs in clay sculpture are beautifully resolved. Not the lion leaning against a clunky tree we find in the Staffordshire flat back, but a horse or a fox supported by a small hill, enigmatic and understated. Her avoidance of sentimentality is her great achievement.

Alison Britton, ceramic artist and writer



Anna Noël

The Language of Clay



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Telling Tales



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left: *Gafr du*. previous page: *Greyhound*

Telling Tales

We all enjoy a good story. Be it an intriguing myth, a local happening, or a fantastical tale, there is pleasure to be shared in the telling and receiving of stories. Anna Noël conjures stories out of clay. From early childhood to the present day, Anna's creative instincts are imbued with tale telling.

As the big sister in the family, Anna would guide her younger siblings on dreamlike adventures. Props and costumes would add layers to their escapades. As Anna warmly recounts these familial scenes, it's easy to see how this creation of tableaus decades ago translates into her ceramic sculptures today. Her assemblages of animals and people, mounted on plinths that are inscribed with carefully selected excerpts from rhymes or fables, are evocative of childhood make-believe. Though for Anna, this strong draw to make-believe persisted through youth, when walks with her dog would transform into wild imaginings, and into adulthood when, still, anything seems possible.

It is this enduring belief in possibility and potential that is the essence of Anna's ceramic practice. What was innocently made up as a child now brings, through experience, different resonance. There is plenty that is untold in Anna's sculptures. Anna sets up the tableau from which we can let our own stories unfold, allowing for happily ever after or a grisly end. The joy is that we have the freedom to add narrative.

Anna chooses not to lay bare the stories that she has at her creative fingertips as she models the clay. Instead, she revels in the moment that she is capturing in clay. Here are moments suspended in time. Here, for this instant, is equanimity between people and beasts.





Anna has long been fascinated by animals, indigenous and exotic, and by peoples' relationships with animals. Growing up in the countryside, with a dog at her side and free roaming cats, she has keenly observed animals in their habitats. Agricultural animals, woodland creatures, seashore life, Anna has allowed herself insight into animal habits and characteristics. She has also found quiet companionship in animals, trust and reassurance. It is owing to her observations that she knows to take nothing for granted.

And so it is, that Anna's work opens our conversation about the rich and varied languages of clay. This exhibition, *Telling Tales*, is the first in a series of solo exhibitions of work by practitioners who use and express clay in very different ways. *The Language of Clay: Part One* comprises three touring exhibitions by artists Anna Noël, Micki Schloessingk and Anne Gibbs. Each artist approaches the medium with varying perspectives, experiences and skills. Being an organic medium, clay responds to such variances dynamically.

The language of clay is wonderfully diverse. The manipulation of clay leads to functional, sculptural, figurative and abstract forms. Ceramic pieces can have a transient fragility or a long-serving robustness. They can assume a purpose or simply delight, or both. *The Language of Clay* series is an opportunity to explore and discover the diversity of the medium and the plethora of talented artists working with it. The practices of the three female artists, whose work is being celebrated in Part One, are each pivotal to the ceramic genres in which they work. They each speak very differently through clay, yet the creative explorations of all of them touch on elements of humanity.

Ceri Jones

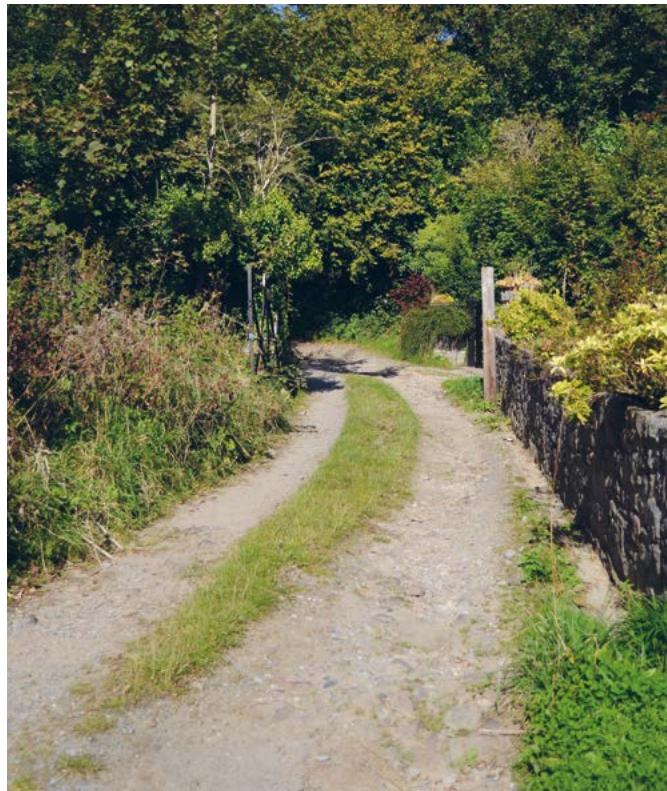
left: White hart. previous page: Rider on a windy hill



Anna Noël: In the Telling of Tales

The journey to Anna Noël's studio seems significant. Passing through Swansea's out-of-town shopping zones, suburban neighbourhoods and congested coastal perimeter, the density of this conurbation disappears as the car is plunged into a rural backdrop of picturesque villages and spectacular scenery. Emerging from a tunnel of foliage draped around a winding lane, I arrive at my destination. Nestled in a valley on the idyllic Gower peninsula, Noël's place of work is removed from all other habitation. I feel as though I have journeyed metaphorically and physically from one state to another; like Alice, I have fallen down a rabbit hole and discovered another world, one where storytelling underpins the amorphous boundaries of fiction and reality. It is unsurprising that Noël's creative practice is rooted in myth, legend, folklore and rhyme; this bewitching location is itself steeped in fantastical narratives and intrigue. Historically a smuggling hotspot, anecdotes of smugglers, witches and murders abound. Rich tales weave themselves through the very fabric of this place.

Sat in her small, unassuming studio Anna Noël introduces her work, sharing the wealth of stories that form the backdrop for her ceramic sculptures. Tales from the medieval Welsh collection Mabinogion feature widely alongside other Celtic legends, while childhood songs, fairy tales and rhyme also provide stimuli. The influence of the Red Riding Hood fable, Edward Lear's limericks and William Blake's poetry can be clearly identified in her making. While she works figuratively, Noël is not interested in creating realistic representations; instead her sculptures inhabit a stylised simplicity, offering narratives that lure us into a fictional realm.



right: Anna's studio at Lower Hareslade Farm; *Sitting hare*
previous page: *Oes gafr eto? / Counting the goats*

In all Noël's creative references we find animals. With an interest in anthropomorphism, she sees their symbolic potential as a powerful tool to explore the emotional, spiritual and humorous facets of life. Noël evokes childhood memory and sentiment through her animal sculptures, using both domesticated and wild creatures in her work, from pigs and horses to wolves and tigers. Through their illustrative qualities and carefully constructed naivety she projects comfort and innocence. However, like all good tales, beneath the humour and idiosyncrasy of her forms lies an undercurrent of uncertainty.

While animals provide inspiration for Noël's making, they have always assumed a significant role for her. As a shy child, she talks of her ability to place trust in animals more easily than humans, and it is this notion of trust that perhaps best frames her work. Noël's sculptures examine the relationship shared between humans and animals. In particular, she identifies the instant of animal-human encounter as key. Here vulnerability is recognised, but also equivalence, a suspended moment where trust is established, or not.

Stillness pervades Noël's arrangements, yet there is something precarious in their nature. Horses and goats perch on hillsides, figures sit calmly astride wild beasts. Ambiguity and absurdity gently converge. These themes are most explicit in her series of riders. Powerful symbols of animal-human correlation, questions of equality arise. Without harnesses, any sense of dominance or control is removed; there exists a cheerful naivety to these peculiar pairings that Noël enjoys. Their stillness conveys the ambiguity of in-between state, a passive moment of trust prior to change, and, as her sculpture *Lady of Riga* demonstrates, it does not always end well.



Man of Courage; lead letter imprints



Perhaps the female rider with wolf best describes this transitional condition in which Noël is so interested. For her, this union, with its fairy-tale allusion, represents the unknown, a procession through life where childhood and adulthood intersect. These contrary states are referenced elsewhere. Many of Noël's sculptures employ plinths bearing texts, such as an excerpt from Blake's celebrated poem *The Tyger*, itself a meditation on the co-existence of innocence and experience.

These press-mould bases allude to Noël's interest in historical British ceramic tradition. From American folk art to Tang Dynasty horses, her culturally diverse artistic references demonstrate a focus on visual language imbued with simplicity. More recently however, Noël has been looking to her roots and the figurines and Pew groups of early Staffordshire-ware. She responds to their uncomplicated forms, haphazard glaze quality and seductive earthy palettes, as well as their often-quirky narratives that express, she believes, a very British sensibility.

Anna Noël is known for her hand-built stoneware sculptures, with their matt surfaces and neutral palettes achieved through subtle use of slips and oxides. Her latest work however, situates itself more overtly alongside the early Staffordshire pottery. With the recent introduction of white, green and ochre glazes, the lustrous finishes and notes of warm colour intentionally connect with that well-loved tradition of mantelpiece ornamentation from which they arise.

The mantelpiece is an appropriate reference for Noël's loquacious sculptures; it alludes to an oral folk tradition of fireside stories, told and retold. And like their historical ceramic precedents, her curious compositions share in the retelling of those tales, silently commanding our attention as they wait to begin.

Catherine Roche

left: White horse; Sitting hare; Sitting dog and Sitting cat
overleaf: Lady of Riga





In conversation with Anna Noël

Chatting in Anna's studio, curator Ceri Jones discovers what is at the heart of Anna's creativity. Here, an extract from their conversation.

CJ: Let's explore a little how you came to be a ceramic maker, did you find yourself making early on in your life?

AN: Yes, I come from an artistic family, my father being an architect, mother being a painter, so from a very early age I was always making things with my mother, she would run art classes and we'd make things like papier-mâché heads. The house was always full of things... mother would paint us and we would paint everything else, so I was always surrounded by art and making. Also, when I was young I had hearing problems, so I think making was a way for me to express myself. My communication skills were better through visual means.

CJ: Did you find yourself enjoying using one material more than others early on?

AN: Well the first time I did ceramics was when somebody bought me some self-hardening clay, and I made a little head with it, and I loved it. I think I still have it.

CJ: Have you always had an interest in nature, and in animals in particular?

AN: Yes, I think I've always liked living on the Gower, walks on the cliffs, seeing what you could see. Having a dog growing up was a real companion. I find I naturally bond with animals... perhaps if I'd lived on a street with lots of kids around it might've been different, but I didn't, and I needed a companion and so I had my dog, we'd share our adventures.

CJ: Have adventures and stories long been integral to your life?

AN: Yes. When I was younger I'd always look after my little brother and sister and I'd have these stories in my head and I'd say things like 'now we're going to go to Africa,' and in the outbuildings my father would have stored all this wonderful stuff such as mattresses and furniture and we'd use a mattress as a magic carpet and we'd fly to Africa. We found a box full of old hats from the '30s, like lampshades, and we'd put them on our heads and imagine we were in another country, then perhaps our driveway would become the river Orinoco and we'd pretend we were rafting down it ... When I was older, when my brother and sister didn't need me for walks and stories, I'd go off by myself and would scare myself sometimes, thinking that there were wolves around... and before I knew it I'd got myself so carried away in my own little world that I'd believe there were dangers in the wood I was walking through with my little dog and I'd come scurrying home.

CJ: Did you find the make-believe stories infiltrating what you were making at that stage?

AN: No, not that early on, I don't think I'd found a way to express my stories. I think I'm starting to express more so now... I think that skills and knowledge of materials take time to filter, perhaps I did not realise that this desire for telling stories was something that was in me.

CJ: The stories that you explore through your work now, a lot are of your own making but some are responding to other peoples' words. Are there any favourite writers or words that you find yourself returning to time and time again?

AN: Well I have used Edward Lear frequently because of his images, he does a lot with people and animals and he is so quirky... his work is quite eccentric, and does reflect that childhood belief of thinking that anything can happen... like riding a tiger or a pig. I like that innocent world of childhood that Edward Lear conjures up, that sense of possibility.



CJ: And some of the animals that Lear references and that you're making are quite exotic, whereas others are indigenous and inhabit the woods around you. Are you conscious of that breadth of interest?

AN: Exotic animals are part of our storytelling as children, tigers and lions and wolves, we hear about them... I like the idea that you can ride a tiger, the ambiguity of something such as that evoked in 'Tyger tyger, burning bright,'¹ it is something like a dream, a night time dream. That's why [in my sculpture] the person's lying on the tiger, because it's symbolic of what you can do when you dream, you can be anywhere, go anywhere... When we were younger my father used to take us to these old houses and in one old house there were lion and tiger skins on the floor... and at another we'd be allowed to roam the wild garden... and I think all these places got mixed up in my mind... and so I'd remember the tiger and remember the garden and they'd merge into a story about tigers in the garden. A child muddles things up in strange ways, but it doesn't matter because, as a child, it all has a sense.

CJ: Most of the people and animals in your work appear very calm, there is a sense of equanimity. Is your approach to how you present the relationship between people and animals deliberate?

AN: I like that sense of being in the moment, of a moment of calm... Sometimes, when you look into a field and you see a horse or a bull then there is that moment of contact, when you are just looking at each other, and it is a moment of calm... you're sussing each other out. After that anything could happen, it could go either way, so I just want to capture the moment when the animal turns its head as if to say 'I can see you,' and then you have to decide what to do, do you run? I'm interested in the balance, the harmony between animal and person at that moment in time. But it doesn't mean necessarily that it's going to end calmly. When you look at a bull in a field, it's beautiful and fierce, and calm, but it could be that you're about to be tossed over the hedge, you just don't know. I think that moment is quite powerful.

CJ: Your work is accomplished in technique, you employ such a simplicity and strength of line in your modelling. Is this something that you're continually developing?

AN: To a degree, I try and make things simply. I simplify. That's why I like folk art... If I tried to make things anatomically then... it would end up being too tricky and I'd lose the dynamism of the form... so I simplify... but I maintain the spirit of a horse. When you look at folk art it's not anatomically correct... it's more powerful to me than if I were to look at a realistic model of a horse, I'd find that a bit dull, it might be a perfect miniature horse but it hasn't got anything else to say.

CJ: You're home here, at your studio, and in the most beautiful rural location, surrounded by woodland and with the sea almost audible. Do you ever imagine working in any other environment?

AN: When I was studying in London I was in a studio in the middle of the city. I felt very claustrophobic and it did something to my head, I couldn't work there... I stopped making in clay, I thought I didn't know how to use clay any more, I was looking at the clay and panicking... And then when I went to America for a residency I had a similar reaction... It seems to me to be very important to be surrounded by nature. I'm realising more and more that the natural environment is very important.

1. The Tyger, poem by William Blake published in 1794.



Biography

Working from her studio on the Gower peninsula in south Wales, Lower Hareslade farm has long been a familial and creative home for Anna. At the side of one of the barns, Anna's studio looks out into woodland.

Animals have fascinated Anna since childhood and their imagery fuels her imagination. Animals in stories and folklore often symbolise complexities of childhood, and of adulthood. Anna is interested in how the animal form can express emotion, spirituality and ways of seeing the world. Her fascination with storytelling and perceptions of narrative lead her to include text in some of her work. Excerpts from poems, riddles and rhymes are often etched or pressed into her work using lead type.

Simplicity of form inspires Anna, such as that found in ancient sculptures and folk art. Her sculptures of animals and of people with animals share both a simplicity and a strong definition of form.

Hand-built in white earthenware, Anna uses a variety of construction methods for her pieces. Press moulded bases create an environment for the animals and figures and, often, a background for text. Anna manipulates slabs of clay from the inside to form the different elements of animals and figures. These, and sometimes the moulded plinths, are then modelled together and finished using either earthenware glazes or brushed slips and oxides. Anna also makes a range of individual animals, based on simple press moulds which she then models and applies decorative features to.

All her sculptures are fired up to earthenware temperatures of 1100°C.

Having graduated from Bath Academy of Art with a first class honours degree in ceramics, Anna went on to undertake a Masters in Ceramics at the Royal College of Art, graduating in 1991. Anna has worked full-time in her ceramic practice since.

Anna's work is represented in several public collections including Aberystwyth Ceramic Collection, Shipley Ceramic Collection, and the Clay Centre collection in Philadelphia, U.S.A.

Anna exhibits her work at galleries throughout the UK, as well as taking private commissions. Recent exhibitions have included: Collect 2015 with Ruthin Craft Centre – presented by the Crafts Council at the Saatchi Gallery, London; The Open Eye Gallery, Edinburgh; Eton Applied Art; Beaux Art in Bath; Broadway Modern; John Noott Galleries; Pyramid Gallery in York; Montpellier Gallery in Stratford-upon-Avon.



right: *Rider on a windy hill*. overleaf: *White harts*



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www.fieldworking.co.uk

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Mission Gallery
Gloucester Place, Maritime Quarter
Swansea, SA1 1TY
Tel: +44 (0)1792 652016
www.missiongallery.co.uk

Ruthin Craft Centre,
The Centre for the Applied Arts
Park Road, Ruthin, Denbighshire LL15 1BB
Tel: +44 (0)1824 704774
www.ruthincraftcentre.org.uk

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cover: Anna's studio at Lower Hareslade Farm, Gower peninsula. right: *White horse*. back cover: *Fox and a crow*

