

Hiraeth: Designing a Welsh Identity

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This work forms the initial stage of a research project entitled '*Hiraeth: Designing a Welsh Identity*'. *Hiraeth* is a Welsh word that roughly translates as 'longing for home'.¹ The project explores issues of national identity in relation to both Wales and a wider context, and also explores related issues such as legends, myths, language and culture. The paintings in this gallery have been produced using laser cut painted papers, which are then collaged into compositions that have been designed using Adobe Illustrator. Primary photographic research was taken in Porthcawl, a seaside town in South Wales where I grew up. This focused upon 'The Tarmac Beach', which is an area of beach that has been somewhat bizarrely covered in an enormous amount of Tarmac, and the battered sea wall adjoining it.² This place forms an integral part of the research project as it holds strong mnemonic energy and links with nostalgia, memory and the melancholic aspects of *hiraeth*. I was not interested in the notion of more traditional panoramic landscape, but the patterning in natural forms, or in this instance pattern formed by nature. I began to look at colour and how colour palettes could be formed from the photography, particularly the idea of using the neutral colour of the sea wall combined with the bright colour of washed up or discarded debris.

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¹ 'Hiraeth' has no direct translation in English but exists in other languages e.g. 'heimat' in German, and 'saudade' in Portuguese.

² 'The Tarmac Beach' is a name I have given to an area of beach below the main promenade in Porthcawl.

Exploration of Line and Tone

Using photographic research, I started to produce drawings. The drawings initially looked at exploring line and tone in combination and were also intended to exist as drawings in their own right, i.e. not only as working drawings for future work. As the project has a very definite design focus to it, whilst also aiming to retain elements of fine art based processes, I felt it would progress further if the drawing stage became purely a means of starting the design process and therefore seen solely as a tool for future work. To this end, I started producing drawings that concentrated upon the linear qualities in the photography. The purpose of these was to record pattern and I found that linear drawing was the most effective and immediate way of doing this. I also compared these to drawings produced digitally by using a photograph as a direct template. The free-hand drawings produced a more personal approach, as I was able to be expressive and also to explore line quality and use of mark-making. Conversely, the digital drawings allowed me to record a greater degree of detail and also to more accurately replicate specific shapes and forms from the photography. These two approaches to drawing, although both looking at the linear quality within the photography, produced very different results. The intention was to design compositions that portrayed or reflected the factors that drew me to take the photography in the first place, i.e. nostalgia, memory and *hiraeth*.

Using Adobe Illustrator, I began to combine the hand drawn and digitally-generated drawings using the original photographs as compositional reference. Initially, these digital compositions were literal translations of the digital pattern drawings, i.e. they were only abstracted or simplified marginally from the digital drawings of pattern in landscape. I continued to produce more photography based in Porthcawl and the surrounding areas and one body of this work held my attention in particular. It was a series of photographs, again recording close up detail rather than panoramic landscape, of the sea wall immediately behind the tarmac beach.

The Tarmac Beach

The wall was photographed systematically in sections, which allowed me to frame the patterning occurring in the concrete wall. The craggy gaps between each pre-cast section of concrete wall filled with thick weatherproofing tar were initially of interest as they formed such interesting shapes. On closer inspection the weathered concrete and the sections that had been repaired forming smooth clean geometric blocks of new concrete, contrasting the rough organic older areas, had an enormous amount of detail. At the top of the sea wall there were strips of sea and blue sky, these bands of colour made the photographs look similar to the traditional panoramic landscape photography I was keen to avoid. I was interested in the fact that the main bulk of foreground was a battered old sea wall, not rolling hills or a seascape, and also in the contrasting pattern between the geometric and organic forms. The traditional landscape compositions that were mimicked in the photography led me to produce drawings using Adobe Illustrator that were similar to previous work in that they were direct translations of the photography. Although the shapes and forms were being abstracted, the overall compositions were recognisable as being directly related to the photography and especially the drawings. At this stage I was not concerned with further abstraction.

Based upon the ‘Tales of the Mabinogion’, an ancient Celtic text, and looking specifically at the unique combination of prose and poetry, I began to look at simple repeating pattern.³ Taking shapes and motif from the photographic research I formed repeating patterns, some of which were simple geometric pattern using circles and others taking organic shapes from the drawings and repeating them. The use of these repeating patterns was based upon an idea derived from the use of prose and poetry within *The Mabinogion*. Often, the poetry was the only form of the tale, either recorded or written down. The prose served to link the poems or verse, in the process providing the narrative of the tale. The verse represented lyrical expression and also held significance with regard to oral storytelling. They had a fixed length and shape and had to be remembered verbatim, but the prose could alter both stylistically and in terms of content. As a result the exact details of the tales could alter from teller to teller with no particular details attributed to any one author. This in turn has led the tales to become part of traditional folklore.

Pattern and Prose

These elements have impacted upon the creation of the paintings in several ways. Firstly, the use of repeat pattern in conjunction with asymmetric shapes, with the repeat pattern taking the form of the verse and the asymmetric shapes representing the prose. Secondly, the idea that a tale, or piece of work, can evolve as it is retold by different story tellers, or in the case of the paintings, through different processes, i.e. photographic, drawn, digital, painted and laser cut. This process of evolution is particularly evident when looking at the digital process and following the continued use of abstraction. As the work progressed using Adobe Illustrator, the compositions become more abstract as the original patterns and shapes were literally taken apart and then recomposed.

A significant aspect of the paintings is the use of colour. As mentioned, I chose initially to focus upon neutral colours broken up with bright secondary and primary colours, which was based upon the rock and concrete and washed up debris from the photography. This colour palette progressed throughout the work, but shifted drastically in terms of the quantities of each colour used. The notion of using predominantly neutral colour with small quantities of bright colours dramatically breaking it up was inverted to do the exact opposite – neutral colour was used in much smaller quantities to break up large areas of tonal bright colours.

The use of colour is also linked to the idea of poetry, although in a much less physical or literal manner. The colour is used in a poetic way to introduce drama, or to tell a story in conjunction with the abstract patterning. These paintings are stories of my childhood – they illustrate my identity as a Welshman living in England.

³ ‘The Tales of the Mabinogion’ is an ancient Welsh text that prior to being ‘written down’ in the *The White Book of Rhydderch* (1300-1325) and *The Red Book of Hergest* (1375 – 1425) (held at the National Library for Wales, Aberystwyth), only existed through oral narration i.e. by bards. This text refers to the translation of these stories in *The Mabinogion* by Jones, G. and T. Jones. 1976. London: J. M. Dent & Sons.