Notes Bound By Clay Remembering Women’s Contribution to the Ceramics Industry in Stoke-on-Trent – Notes accompanying conference Slides

Vicki McGarvey Working Class Studies Association Conference 2019

Slide 1

National Lottery Heritage funded project, for which we received funding.

In the following I will give an overview of the challenges with respect to accurately documenting the contribution women have made within the industry and recording their memories. In particular the responsibility of depicting industrial heritage, specifically in media and the risk of nostalgia distorting the local collective memory.

Slide 2

**Read quote**

As this project would be classed by default a heritage project because we were funded by the National Lottery Heritage Fund money which is raised by National Lottery players to resource UK’s heritage, we need to consider the complex arguments around the use of the word heritage and the heritage industry. For Hewison, heritage distorts the images of the past, creating a distraction from todays difficulties that have resulted from the break down on industrial society

Slide 3

**Read quote**

However, if we do not capture our heritage we are in danger of losing it. The challenge I suppose is how we do this in a representative honest way, without being distracted by mass consumption. Can we lift that bell jar and allow heritage to critically frame the past before stories and the intangible skills disappear, we have a responsibility to record the past make the unknown known. This is particularly urgent when acknowledging the contribution and integration of women into heritage, and we need to make sure that those women are known

Slide 4

An example of where women have been hidden from history is within the School of the Bauhaus which was a progressive art school, with an ethos of absolute equality amongst the sexes. Anni joined as an aspiring fine artist but when she joined the school she was told that women had a choice of 3 subjects, textiles, bookbinding and ceramics, not giving women the same choices as men was active discrimination. Anni chose weaving and ironically this turned out to be one of the most commercially successful areas of the Bauhaus, Anni Albers eventually moved weaving into the exclusive area of modern art

Slide 5

There were many women that contributed to the success and were a major part of the Bauhaus history they were lesser known, like Gunter Stolz, the first official department lead, and there were many other women who studied at the Bauhaus who remain unknown

Slide 6

Likewise in ceramics there are known women like Clarice Cliff and Suzy Cooper that will be remembered for their progressive contribution, to ceramics. Clarice Cliff studied at the Royal College of Art and is well known for her art deco bizarre wear.

Slide 7

There are many women like these women that worked at Meakin Pottery who also made a major contribution from painting to more heavy warehouse work that may be remembered collectively but not are unknown individually, just a mark on the underneath of the ware being the only identifiable link to their creative input to an internationally renowned ceramics industry

Slide 8

As a result of the Bound by Clay project we can now not only celebrate the women but we now know some of them by name

Slide 9

These are the women of Bound by Clay

Slide 10

The pottery industry is possibly one of the major industries where women have been most influential, from creative design to production, working in a very challenging situation, socially, economically and environmentally. In the early 20th Century women were considered lazy if they did not contribute to ceramics and there would not have been a pottery industry if there had not been women, as they were needed at the creating and the making end, because initially there was little mechanisation, and they were also a cheap form of labour.

Slide 11

Bound by Clay was a 7 month project to capture women’s recollections of working in the industry, so that we could preserve, document and evidence their contribution to ceramics, in Stoke-on-Trent. It had 3 main outputs, a film of women talking about their experiences, an educational resource that referred to the film and a book of anecdotes.

Slide 12

Stoke-on-Trent is one of the few cities affectionately known after the product it produces.

**Go through bullet points**

I’m from Stoke-on-Trent, I was brought up in Burslem often referred to as the mother town. My parents were not employed in the pottery industry but my grandparents were and my great grandmother went to Glasgow to pass on her skills.

Slide 13

This picture very much tells the story of Stoke-on-Trent – the decaying industry, and the success story of Middleport pottery, home to Burleigh Pottery which still produces its own pots and Clay College – it also represents the tension between the old and new the tension of preserving the past whilst welcoming the future, through new initiatives and projects

Slide 14

Critical heritage, and in particular feminist studies are useful in reviewing the Bound by Clay project and the many aspects of heritage that need to be taken into account to assess the representation and presence of gender

Slide 15

Reading’s work on gender and heritage has suggested representation, production, consumptions and policy as areas of enquiry, which help in assessing heritage projects and activities, with respect to the representation of gender

**Slide 16**

**Read the slide**

**Slide 17**

Applying this model of enquiry to Bound By Clay, we can see positively identify influence of gender in the representation, production and consumption of the project.

**Read the slide**

However it must be acknowledged that the film production company was run by a man, who asked the questions within the film although these were edited out, the film company also identified some of the women. The web site for the educational resource has been designed by a man.

**Slide 18**

With a project like this nostalgia impacting on the authenticity of what is being told is a considerable challenge, simplifying the story and distracting from the contributions individuals make, and if the outputs are not purely academic they can creep into all aspects of presentation and production.

**Slide 19**

Stoke people can very nostalgic, this type of image is very popular, often type of image used in the marketing of the Potteries - this a still from the Bound by Clay film

**Slide 2**

**Read quote**

For Neil Brownsword is the Professor of Ceramics at Staffordshire University whose fine are practice is focuses on the preservation of intangible industrial ceramics skills, as he says the temptation to move into nostalgic recollection distract form the complexity of the industrial production

**Slide 21**

We found that creating a documentary film had its own challenges, it needed to present a lot of information in a concise way that engaged the viewer, but also the women needed to feel that they have been honestly represented, even though is not possible to include everything they said in the finished item. Nostalgia can help with this although we had many robust discussion about the imagery, the music, the light and shade within the Bound by Clay film.

**Slide 22**

However, nostalgia can be a useful mechanism in storytelling to help people dig deeper into their memories of the past.

**Quote**

Storytelling was a central part of the Bound by Clay project, this is an affecting observation by Moghadam and Bagheritari, for our project it was a mechanism that identified a whole range of sociological, cultural and economic aspects that impacted on the women whilst working in the ceramics industry

**Slide 23**

It is not possible for me to present all the stories today so I recommend you see the film and look at the individual interviews which include even greater insights but I think the women of Bound by Clay should have a voice here today, without them I would not be here presenting and celebrating today – so here are their voices, the quotes relate to the major themes in the film

**Slide 24**

**Read Slide**

**Slide 25**

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 **Slide 26**

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**Slide 27**

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