

BURNT *into* CONSCIOUSNESS

TIM DAVIES



Tim Davies in his studio Image © Raul Speek

With his roots in Pembrokeshire but a European outlook, Tim Davies took time off from preparing to exhibit at Venice's world-renowned Biennale this summer to speak to ARTicle about Culture, Politics and the question of being a 'Welsh artist'.

His 1992 work *Solfach*, the Welsh name for the north-Pembrokeshire harbour village of Solva, appears on our front cover.

Tim Davies' studio sheltered in a quiet Swansea backwater brings alive the basic dichotomy of his life as an artist. It affords peace and undisturbed space to think deeply and create ways in which to connect, in a mix of medias, balanced against the need for outside stimulation which helps crystallise the powerful political statements underlying this artist's work.

Tim is to represent Wales at the 2011 Venice Biennale: his studio reflects his working process, with a centrally placed architectural drawing of the physical space his entry will inhabit. This is a deconsecrated ecclesiastical space. Part of his early training encompassed architecture, and it is immediately recognisable that much of his work is site specific. If created for one space and moved to another, it is re-formed so that it 'belongs' each time – a recent exhibition at Chapter in Cardiff, '50th Year to Heaven', will form part of this genre.

Tintoretto is the Biennale's chosen link artist. Asked how he saw his work in respect to the Venetian Renaissance master, Tim emphasised that it was not so much the universally acknowledged use of light obvious in his masterpieces but more the fact that Tintoretto chooses to explore the familiar and gives importance to a sense of community. This theme also informs much of Tim's work. He went on to talk passionately about the early-Renaissance pioneering painter Masaccio, who has been more of an influence in his work.

Asked whether he is a Welsh artist and will represent Wales specifically at the Biennale, Tim quickly, whilst acknowledging his debt to his roots, claims a

- Figures on a London catwalk
- Mug shot of a figure on trial for drug smuggling
- Young figures arriving at university
- Libyan figure in a mask
- Two figures dancing for the cameras
- Figure – the young Muslim of Devon
- Young figure moving a giant chess piece
- Figure in an interior
- Two young figures waving flags in a Middle Eastern landscape
- Figures eating in a Tokyo park
- Large group of figures holding banners in Washington
- Figures on a train
- Figure in a gallery
- Two figures – mother and daughter
- Figure running for charity
- Figure of the silver screen
- Figures, wearing green, in Tehran shouting, "Death to the dictator"
- Sad figures outside remembering their hero
- Female figures
- Iconic figure of fashion who says, "I think when somebody finds their style, they keep it"

PROFILE

by HEATHER BENNETT *photographer*

European and global connection. In thinking thus, he validates his right to comment on how humankind exists within this world, and creates or desecrates it by turns. A discussion on the importance of different perspectives, and the need for them to be empathically heard, reflects the considered depth of this complex man. For him it is unifying and connecting to share dialogue inclusively that is vital – not ignoring but accepting differences.

This inner spring of the need to connect reaches out to use whatever media is required to make it happen. Words are fragmented throughout many of Tim's works. Part of the '50th Year to Heaven' exhibition was a work called *Figures*. For 365 days, Tim studied photojournalistic images from one single newspaper, writing truncated descriptions of them interrupted by blood-red bullet points. He emphasises the importance of these marks in splitting up the stac-

cato black texts and spattering them across the mind of the observer. He ex-

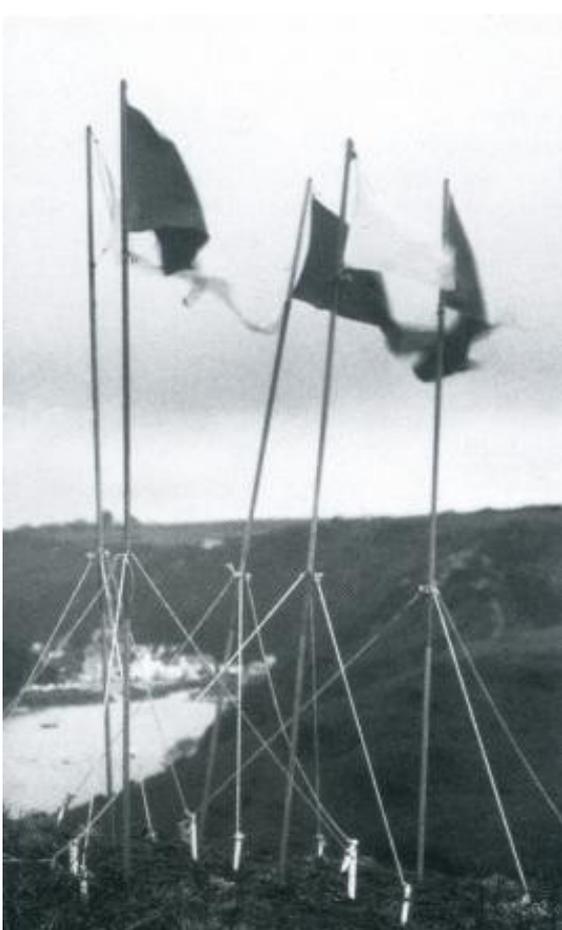
plains passionately how images can actually make us distant and emotionally disengaged, if we are seduced by them. Photographs stop time and are not necessarily put into context – what has caused the events glimpsed in them, or what will happen next? Each short phrase held against another shocks in its contrast – one moment an expensive catwalk scene, the next a war-torn body left lying in the streets of Afghanistan. It is an invitation to see the stark differences in a world where some think nothing about having everything, and some live with, somehow, less than nothing. We cannot comment from inside our own experience of the world, but an overview can let us learn to recognise the difference and be less proscriptive.

Burning and fire have featured frequently in Tim's work, leaving the observer aware of the transmuting power of heat and searing the multi-layered meaning of the pieces



Nage (detail)

© Tim Davies



Flags over Solva, VHS still, 3-minute loop

© Tim Davies

BURNT *into* CONSCIOUSNESS

TIM DAVIES



Tim Davies assembling *Llawr Fforestfach/Returned Parquet* in the forests of Belize
Image © Luis Ruiz

into the mind. In *Nage*, Tim burns the word repeatedly and emphatically into old Welsh woollen blankets, produced originally from Welsh hill-farmed sheep and an item of comfort but more recently discarded into the embrace of charity shops. The use of recycled or inexpensive materials often gets labelled *Arte Povera* or becomes part of Minimalism, but here it is not only that. It holds political and national symbolism. 'Nage' is one of the Welsh words for 'No', and it attaches directly to the loss of Tim's grandfather: it cries from deep within the soul the protest Mr Davies made about the loss of homes in his native Solva being purchased by wealthy incomers and then being left empty for most of the year. Local people could no longer afford to buy a home in his Solfach. Here is a strong plea for the world to realise what happens when some are affluent and some are not: dispossession occurs.

Tim, born in Haverfordwest, spent much of his childhood in Solva with his grandfather. His site-specific work *Flags over Solva* attempted to reset the boundaries of the village, and his 1992 installation *Solfach* at

Swansea's Glynn Vivian Art Gallery explores his relationship with this early life and the historic relevance of the village as a microcosm of what is happening to the world outside.

Roots, community and a recognition of their importance thread through all of Tim's works, alongside an acknowledgement that we are not only all connected but in that become responsible to one another for speaking out against injustice.

Searching reclamation yards, Tim came across a pile of wooden flooring blocks: he saw in them the horrific contrast of a parquet floor laid for wealthy British Victorians to dance on, and the slaves who had felled and prepared the wood in their native Belize – once a colony known as British Honduras. Again: the haves and have-nots. In a carefully orchestrated gesture, Tim transported the parquet back to Belize and relayed the blocks in the forests from which they came. They will eventually rot and

PROFILE

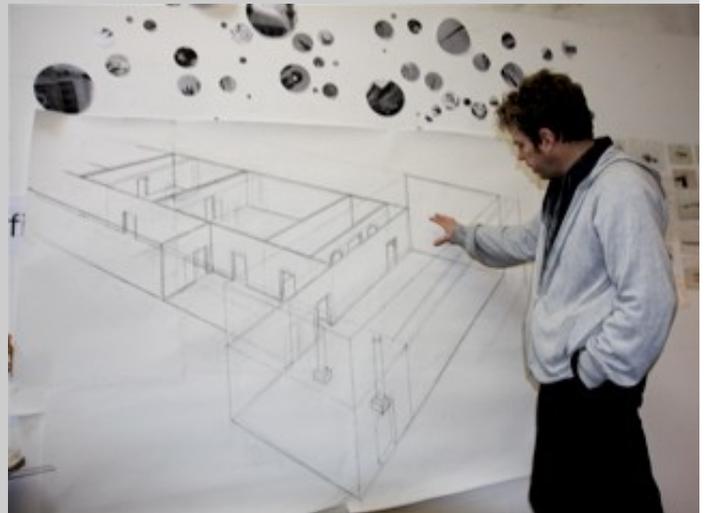
by HEATHER BENNETT *photographer*

return to be a part of the natural cycle of their world – no longer displaced. Layered beneath this, the observer is tempted to see an apology for the slavery that we in the West were all part of, encouraging it by our use of products involving the labour of those who had no choices.

Asked about influences on his work, he cites not only art-world figures like Joseph Beuys and Richard Long but also hears clearly the words of Dylan Thomas. As Tim rages in *Nage*, so did the poet in his 'Do not go gentle into that good night'. The spare, carefully composed music of minimalist composers such as Steve Reich and Philip Glass are also discernible – particularly in his untitled 'Screwdriver drawings', which hold the semblance of a musical score. The marks are burnt through four sheets of paper placed one on top of another becoming fainter both in colour and in texture both as the screwdriver cools and as the 'canvas' lies further from the initial contact. Line after line of exactly placed notes singing their way into consciousness repeating their message in fainter tones yet leaving an impression of studied cadences which will the viewer to remember. As in *NAGE* it is the repetition which increases the power of the connection.

Tim Davies is an excellent communicator; he listens thoroughly, and there is a sense of his emotional being fully present as he thinks and then responds to the world and to questions asked. His Welshness does not define him, but he is a major Welsh artist and is placing Wales further onto the world art stage with every piece he creates.

Works like his always leave themselves open to interpretation. As Tim writes in *Process* (a book of essays on his work): 'some of the essays in this book demonstrate how far other people's interpretations differ from my own intent'. What does rise constantly to the surface looking across his considerable body of work is the idea of the artist as our conscience, and how honestly



Tim Davies in his studio with a perspective of his Venice Biennale space
Image © Raul Speek

they seek to expose issues in contrast to our politicians. A final dichotomy seems to be that politicians receive relatively large salaries and yet an artist who is driven to work in this way may struggle to be commercial. Maybe society needs to rethink its values?

This can only be a short essay but to see more of Tim's work search the Internet, for he is well represented there. His axis site is: <http://www.axisweb.org/seCVPG.aspxARTISTID=4192>

The 54th International Art Exhibition at the Biennale will take place in Venice from 4 June to 27 November 2011 at the *Giardini* and at the *Arsenale* (preview: 1 – 3 June), as well as in various venues throughout the city. For details, go to www.labiennale.org/en/art/index.html