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West is best

Hauser & Wirth's newest gallery in the market town of Bruton is giving local makers an influential stage

Over the past few years, something strange has happened to the craft world. Whisper it quietly but it has become ever-so-slightly fashionable. In many regards this is a huge surprise. After all, it wasn't that long ago that the New York-based curator and commentator Glenn Adamson compared craft to a nerdy teenager at a school disco, forced to watch on the sidelines while the cool kids (in this instance contemporary art and design) strutted their stuff on the dancefloor.

Yet here I am at a new gallery devoted to the work of makers by Hauser & Wirth, recently opened on Bruton High Street in Somerset. Called Make, it's pretty convincing, managing to pull off the neat trick of feeling domestic in scale – it was originally the front two rooms of a Georgian townhouse that Hauser & Wirth has been using as offices – while maintaining the clean minimal appearance of a gallery.

The exhibition on during my visit, *Retracing Nature*, featured a pair of artists who are both inspired by the landscape around their coastal studios, but with hugely contrasting results. Ceramist Adam Buick, based in south west Wales, makes Moon Jars (a traditional Korean form) from stone and locally dug clay. Meanwhile metalsmith Stuart Cairns creates pieces that combine found objects and materials (collected during walks around the shoreline across the Irish Sea) with steel and patinated silver. At first glance they can seem slightly scrappy, home-spun affairs. Look

a little harder and there is wry commentary on man's relationship with nature, as well as huge skill and an intuitive beauty. To my slight surprise, the pair work very nicely in tandem.

According to the gallery's director Jacqueline Moore, the whole venture is very much the brainchild of Manuela Wirth. "She's personally very interested in textiles and ceramics," she explains. The idea, she adds, is to look "very broadly at materials from wood to ceramics, via textiles and metalwork to glass. Everything where there's a strong sense of materiality, process and technique."

Meanwhile outside in the garden, four artists who will be taking part in the gallery's next group show, *West Lands*, are busy having their portraits shot and getting to know one another. One of Moore's aims is to periodically present work from makers based in the south west, and the first such exhibition will include ceramics by Joanna Still and baskets from Hilary Burns, as well as textiles courtesy of Bristol Weaving Mill and some startling black and white photography by Jonty Sale, among others.

On the face of it they're an eclectic bunch who hail from quite different backgrounds – Still, for instance, was born and bred in Wiltshire, while Burns harks originally from South Africa – and covering a variety of techniques and materials. However, seeing their work gathered together for the first time, it's clear that there is a thread running through all the pieces.

Words

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Images

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Facing page
Work from
(clockwise from
foreground) Bristol
Weaving Mill,
basket-maker
Hilary Burns,
photographer
Jonty Sale and
ceramicist Joanna
Still, all taking part
in *West Lands* at
Hauser & Wirth's
Make gallery





Left
The Make gallery sits on the High Street in the market town of Bruton, Somerset. Here, Hauser & Wirth seeks to highlight work "where there's a strong sense of materiality, process and technique," according to director Jacqueline Moore

"There's definitely a sensibility and aesthetic that we share," says Bristol Weaving Mill's co-director Juliet Bailey, pausing for a moment. "I'm trying to put my finger on it. I think it's sort of a rough, rustic-ness. That might be a response to the region." Moore adds: "I think with all of them it's the sense of material. It's very strong with the work that they produce and they are all informed by the area."

It seems to me that they're both right. Many of the pieces exude an unrefined (in a good way) quality. Still's vessels are unglazed and smoke fired, for example, giving them a pleasing rawness that's designed to reflect the Wiltshire landscape, while Burns grows her own willow on the Dartington Hall estate in Devon and uses it unstripped. Sale's textural images are created through multiple exposures, using a large-format camera.

"We wanted to recognise the makers who are here and on our doorstep," concludes Moore. "I think that will become a recurring motif in our programme. So I've begun with the makers that we have on this occasion. And they're good representatives of all the very talented artists in the south west, but there are many more... We want to create beautiful exhibitions and we want to make the work look its best and give the makers the opportunity to see their pieces in a gallery context."

Returning to Adamson's allusion, it looks as though craft is the nerdy teenager no more. It has its feet firmly planted on that dancefloor.

Right
Architectural details from the Georgian building, which was formerly used as office space for Hauser & Wirth

Facing page
Makers based in the south west taking part in the current show: left to right are basket-maker Hilary Burns, photographer Jonty Sale, ceramicist Joanna Still and Juliet Bailey of Bristol Weaving Mill

