

LLANELLI COMMUNITY HERITAGE

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Diana studied for five years at Birmingham College of Art, gaining the National Diploma in Design (NDD) in 1961, and the Art Teachers Diploma (ATD) in 1962.



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DIANA ROBERTS ARTIST

Written by Brian Davies

DIANA ROBERTS ~ *by Brian Davies*

The Llanelli Years 1965 – 1975

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Diana Roberts was born in Worcester in 1941. As a young girl she was a pupil at a Primary School in Studley and, at the age of eleven, went on to study at Alcester Grammar School. Throughout these years, art was the subject of greatest importance to her, and she commented, 'I was always making things, drawing things. It was the thing that I was primarily interested in. (*Diana Roberts, 2019.*)

At Alcester, she studied art to O level, and was fortunate to have a good teacher in Kathleen Lavery, who she described as a striking-looking person, who wore different clothes from the other teachers in the school, including 'a fantastic orange corduroy jacket'. (*Diana Roberts, 2019.*) Importantly, Kathleen recognised Diana's ability, and encouraged her. However, the school had no facility for pupils to take Art to 'A' Level, which meant that Diana would have had to make her own arrangements for that course of study, if it had come to that.

Fortunately, however, it did not come to that, as a student from Birmingham College of Art came to do teaching practice at the school, and gave Diana some good advice. Having seen her work, and recognising her ability, she asked if she was thinking of going to art school. Diana replied that she wanted to do art to A level first, though she would have to do it all on her own. The student, however, had clearly been so impressed that she felt that Diana should by-pass 'A' level, and apply to enter the college at the age of sixteen, which was possible at that time. As an encouragement, she told her, 'I think you're already at a higher standard than I was when I went there. (*Diana Roberts, 2019.*) As such, Diana applied to enrol at the college and, after two days of tests drawing and painting, was accepted as a student at the young age of sixteen, with most of her peer group being eighteen. She completed her O levels, and entered art school.



Coming of Age, 1962. This self-portrait was painted in 1962, the year in which Diana Roberts completed her studies at Birmingham College of Art.

In 1962, at the age of twenty-one, Diana completed her studies at the Birmingham College of Art, having gained the National Diploma in Design (NDD) in 1961, and the Art Teachers' Diploma (ATD), in 1962. At this time, she painted a half-length portrait of herself, which she linked to other drawings in a conceptual framework designed to emphasise a person's growth to maturity from being very young to an adult. This growth is indicated by the three flowers in the rectangular panel which get stronger in colour as they move towards her. Moreover, the idea of development is accentuated by her use of colour contrasts between flowers and backgrounds, as pale pink on light blue, gives place to a stronger pink on a stronger blue, and finally a more dramatic red on green. Her portrait, in which she is dressed in white, stands out boldly against a deep blue, increasing the

contrast to dramatic effect. Moreover, alongside this, the painting also reflects her maturity as an artist. This

is brought out by the contrast between the naïve drawing of Moses and the burning bush on the rectangular panel, taken from a drawing she did when at the Infant School, which contrasts with her bold and confident self-portrait in the panel on the left. All the panels are framed in thick borders of pink and blue to emphasise their separateness, and the stages of development they portray.

Importantly, this early painting gives us an understanding of her approach to painting, in that she is laying heavy emphasis on the idea or concept behind the work. The way the painting is constructed, and the symbols she uses, are all designed to lead the viewer to the idea of a person's development to maturity, Time and again – indeed, in all the paintings illustrated in this book – it will be seen that Diana is inviting the viewer to consider the ideas that she is conveying. This is, perhaps, not always immediately obvious, because her paintings are carefully constructed and don't fit in with many people's idea of conceptual art. It is something that Diana acknowledges, as she commented to the author 'When people talk about 'modern art', or 'conceptual art, they are dismissive about it, and they look at me as if I'm going to agree with them. But you see, I think I am a conceptual artist actually. Just because my work comes out in a fairly traditional form i.e. painting, they don't see it like that but, really, I am more interested in the ideas behind it than anything else, which actually links me more with conceptual artists than it does with conventional figurative artists.' (*Diana Roberts, 2019.*)

After graduating at Birmingham, she accepted a teaching post at the Elliot School, Putney, but this was an unhappy experience. Following this, she taught art at Bromsgrove College of Education and, during this time, she held her first exhibition of work in Malvern, in 1964.

Eric Roberts, Diana's father, was a businessman who, in her words, was 'a bit of a paradox in a way, as he was a committed socialist.' (*Diana Roberts, 2019.*) He was somewhat disenchanted with the Midlands because of the materialistic character of those times, and the family decided they would like to move to Wales. Over the years, the Roberts' family made many visits to Wales, as Eric Roberts felt an affinity with the Welsh people, and especially with South Wales because of its working- class heritage, and its socialist sympathies.

In 1962, when the family was on holiday on the Gower Peninsula, they stayed in the King's Head public house in Llangennith. It was on this holiday that, one day, they met Selwyn Samuel and Harold Prescott, Llanelli's Town Clerk and Town Librarian respectively, who had come from Llanelli to have a drink. They fell into conversation, and Samuel and Prescott argued that Llanelli was an attractive place to live, and that the Roberts family should consider moving to live there. This suggestion was taken seriously by the Roberts family, and they travelled to Llanelli to view the town. It so happened that 1962 was the year in which the National Eisteddfod was being held in the town, and they were greatly impressed with what they saw as, for example, in the evenings, large numbers of people gathered around the Town Hall to sing. Diana commented that 'it gave a highly romantic impression of Llanelli'. (*Diana Roberts, 2019.*)

In 1965, the family went on an extended tour on the continent in their caravan and, when they returned, decided that they would find a place to live in Wales. Reflecting on their previous meeting with Samuel and Prescott, and their happy experience in Llanelli during the National Eisteddfod in 1962, they decided to choose Llanelli as their home. They purchased a house in Penderi Road on the Bryn, and moved to live there before the end of the year. They were able to store their large caravan in the garden. This move to Llanelli now gave Diana the opportunity to concentrate on painting. It was to prove a good decision as, over the next ten years that she lived in the town, she was to produce most of her important paintings. There can be no doubt that those years in Llanelli were her most productive as an artist.

Diana now needed to find a studio, so she went to the Council to ask if there were any local properties available for rent. To her delight she found that there was a vacant shop available in West End, and that she could rent the back room for seventy-five pence a week. She described what happened:

The shop at the front was empty, and I had this storeroom at the back which was fantastic. It was a single-storeyed building, and it had a wonderful stove right in the middle, with a pipe that went up through the roof. It had a flagstone floor, a wash basin, a toilet, and a garden out the back. So, I had it all set up. (Diana Roberts, 2019.)



Diana Roberts painting in her studio at 5 West End, Llanelli.

Eric Roberts, however, also saw that the unused front of the shop had potential, and floated the idea of opening it up as an art centre. This, he achieved, and it opened in 1967 as The Llanelli Art Centre, selling a range of artists' requirements, and materials for craft work in such activities as lampshade making, basketry, soft toys, handbags, and raffia work. However, while the shop had the advantage of being located near to the Llanelli Art and Crafts School in Pembrey Road, it had the disadvantage of being slightly away from the town's main shopping area. Eric Roberts recognised the need to advertise the shop in the *Llanelli Star*, so that people would be aware of this new shop in the town. In the advert he was able to make the important statement that it was 'the only Art and Craft specialist shop in Llanelli and district'.



Advert for The Llanelli Art Centre in the Llanelli Star, 2 December 1967.



The shop Monica Catering, 5 West End, photographed in 2019, is housed in the building that was once The Llanelli Art Centre run by Eric Roberts, Diana's father. Diana Roberts's studio was in a single-storeyed room at the rear.

In 1966, Diana decided to stage a solo exhibition of her work in the Llanelli Y.M.C.A. She planned that the exhibition would be a representative selection of thirty paintings, all of which had been completed in the previous five years. Most of the works on display were in oils, but she also displayed pencil drawings, works in gouache, and a collage.



Diana Roberts with her parents at the exhibition of her work at the Llanelli Y.M.C.A., 1966.



*Standing in front of the painting *The Gardeners* at the Y.M.C.A. exhibition is Vice-Chairman of Llanelli Art Society, Hywel Richards, the Deputy Mayor and Mayoress, Councillor and Mrs T. V. Davies, Diana Roberts, and David Mansel Lewis, President of the Llanelli Art Society*

The exhibition received a wide coverage in the local and national press, not the least reason being that a one-woman show in Llanelli was seen as something quite new. As a result, there was a great deal of interest, and *The South Wales Evening Post* reported that artists and art-lovers from all parts of West Wales were at the opening.

Mr David Mansel Lewis, High Sheriff of Carmarthenshire, and President of the Llanelli Art Society, opened the show, and was full of praise for the artist. In his address he suggested that 'some day she might be considered a very good and even a great painter and people would say: 'That, of course, is an early Diana Roberts, and was in the exhibition in 1966.'¹

In an enthusiastic review of the exhibition, Peter Jones wrote that:

One of the most striking aspects of the 30 paintings in the exhibition is Miss Roberts' enthusiasm for experiment and innovation. There is no common thread running through her style. What could be more contrasting than her 'The Gardeners,' which was bought for 50 guineas by Sir Eric and Lady Clayson, and 'Abstract of Busy Colours'? Miss Roberts is bold enough to get her ideas down on canvas as they occur to her and although in the present show she concentrates mainly on oils there are also works in pencil, pastel, and a gouache and collage.²

An important appreciation of the exhibition was made by Derrick Pratt, whose opinion, as the former

Principal of Llanelli School of Art and a founder-member of Llanelli Art Society, carried considerable weight in the art circles of the town. He stated:

On entering this exhibition, one's first impression is its great variety of subject and treatment. The development of this young artist over several years, her search for a personal means of expression through a number of striking experiments, are well illustrated.

Drawings, sketches and paintings direct from nature show sensitive observation and increasing mastery – note the drawings from life – landscapes, Self Portrait, Seated Nude and Baby.

Moods range from the happy serenity of City and Night and Spanish Village to the tragedy of Ophelia and Dying Soldier and the macabre Operation.

The Little People shows poetic imagination well expressed pictorially. Ophelia is uncompromising in conveying the tragic story through colours and particularly in the swaying rhythmic design.

¹ *Llanelli Star*, cutting, undated, in the possession of Diana Roberts.

² Cutting from an unnamed newspaper in the collection of Diana Roberts.

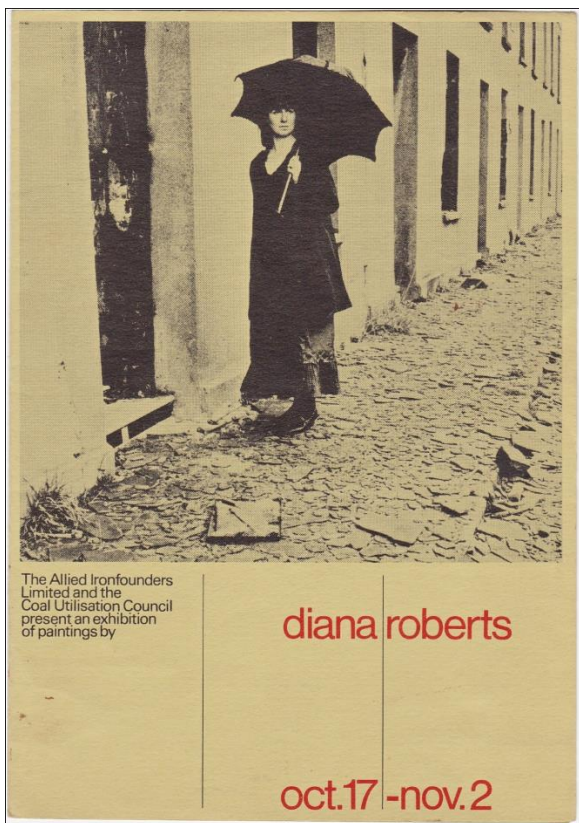
One must mention the intriguing paintings based on Victorian portrait groups, notable for their craftsmanship as well as their whimsicality. Together with an excursion into abstract composition and subsequent experiments behind her, she has reached the point where she should be able to find the field and personal style best suited to her creative imagination. Her future development will be watched with interest.³



Maliphant Row, oil on board, 80 X 93 cm. Carmarthenshire Museums Service Collection.

One of the most important paintings that Diana did in Llanelli was a painting of Maliphant Row which was bought by The Welsh Arts Council. In the painting the terrace Maliphant Row, top right, is seen with the end two houses and part of the next house. Behind it is the tin plate works of R. T. Mills, where many of the people worked. In the foreground she has painted a family, as if from a torn Victorian sepia photograph, representing those people who, many years ago, depended on the factory for their living. Explaining the conceptual basis of the painting she said that ‘There was a terrace of cottages in front of the factory. In my head the painting represented captive workers who went to the factory that almost had their lives in its hand. All the cottages were now abandoned and derelict.’ (*Diana Roberts, 2019.*)

³ Cutting from an unnamed newspaper in the collection of Diana Roberts.



A photographer friend of hers, David Morse, who worked in London, but hailed from Burry Port, liked the way that she was using old photographs, and he was greatly interested in the whole project. He persuaded Diana to dress up in Victorian clothes and stand in the derelict terrace. He photographed her, and the photograph was used in the Atticus Column of *The Sunday Times*.

In 1967, when Diana was now aged twenty-six, she held another solo exhibition of recent work in Cardiff, at the South Wales Region of the Coal Utilisation Council, in a show that was sponsored by them and also by Allied Ironfounders Limited. One of the paintings on display was a specially commissioned canvas depicting Welsh miners at work. Interestingly, David Morse's photo taken of Maliphant Row was used on the cover of the exhibition catalogue.



*Viewing the painting *The Miners*, which attracted a lot of interest in the exhibition.*

The show attracted a lot of attention, and was a success. An unnamed newspaper cutting, now in Diana's collection commented that:

She has a penchant for Victoriana, and has been fond of painting studies of the period and the royal gardeners at Windsor Castle. The whole of the 19th century interests her, and she has said that she finds herself inspired by its old photographs and intrigued by the stability of the age and its characters who lived on the edge of a precipice, seemingly unaware.⁴

⁴ Report in a newspaper cutting in the possession of Diana Roberts.



*Diana Roberts, with her painting *The Miners*, at the Utilization Board exhibition in Cardiff. With her are six prominent members of the Llanelli Art Society, who had travelled to Cardiff to support the exhibition. From Left to right are Heinz and Gila Muller, who were keen collectors of Llanelli art, Brynmor Voyle, who played a prominent role in Llanelli art circles, Rhoda Hancock, a lecturer at the Llanelli School of Art and Crafts, Vida Richards, and Graham Samuel, a ceramist and painter.*

Commenting on the exhibition, Diana said that, at that time, her body of work was dealing with memories from the past combined with things from the present. In which she used old photos, black and white, or sepia, and painted from them indicating the past, with the surrounding areas usually painted in colour indicating the present.



Women of Power, oil on board.

In this painting Diana is playing on the idea of power, with three Victorian ladies set against a twentieth century power station, which was located in the North Dock, Llanelli. She explained that it conveys the notion that, on the face of it, women in Victorian times didn't have much power as, for example, not being able to vote. In contrast to that, however, she 'was sort of playing with the idea that women are, naturally, quite powerful.' It cannot be stressed too much that to understand Diana's paintings it has to be appreciated that she is a narrative artist.

In 1972, this painting was displayed in an exhibition held at the Richard Demarco Gallery. In the exhibition catalogue Diana Roberts wrote:

From an interest in Victorian photographs came the idea to combine nineteenth-century images with those of now. My pictures reflect time influences and show ghosts of the past living with people of the present. The move to Llanelli [...] helped realise

*these ideas because the town is particularly rich in reminders of the industrial past, physical and sociological scars still remain.*⁵

⁵ Exhibition Catalogue, The Richard Demarco Gallery, Edinburgh, 1972.



Diana Roberts in a Welsh dress, with the painting Women of Power behind her.

In 1968, the Welsh Arts Council held an exhibition, designed to be the first of a series under the heading 'Recording Wales'. The exhibition was made up of historical, topographical studies from the collection of the National Museum of Wales, and included works by Richard Wilson, David Cox, and the Llanelli artist, J. D. Innes. This exhibition was followed up, in 1969, with an exhibition of works by important contemporary artists associated with Wales, all of whom were asked to produce works on a specific topographical theme, which was chapels in Wales. The catalogue for the exhibition, *Chapels*, informs us that 'The title was set up as a 'Portrait' of a chapel and it was suggested that subjects be sought among buildings which were distinguished or distinctive and that might be liable to decay or be demolished.' The details about these buildings were also to be supplied by the artists. All the artists were asked to submit three works, from which one would be chosen. Some of Wales's most outstanding artists exhibited, including Evan Charlton, Irene Bache, George Chapman, Gwilym Pritchard, John Elwyn, and Will Roberts. It is an enormous tribute to Diana Roberts that she was chosen as one of the artists to exhibit.

Initially, she painted the front elevation of Bethesda Chapel in Swansea but, in her own words, 'wasn't terribly moved by it'. It is, in fact, a fine painting of the chapel, and again illustrates her desire to seek contrasts, as she has deliberately emphasised the old and the new by painting modern high-rise buildings in the background, to emphasise the difference with the old chapel. Commenting on it she said, 'Again, I'm saying something about the old, the not so very old, and the new. The chapel had broken windows because it was already abandoned or not in use.'

The painting that she finally settled for was of a chapel that she found by chance while driving around Carmarthenshire. At the time she was teaching part-time, in Carmarthen Art School, so one day she decided to drive around the county saying, in her own words, that 'I think I was looking for something that incorporated landscape, and a feeling of space.' Eventually, she came across Bwlchnewydd Chapel, which was open to the public, and she went in and read about its history. It fascinated her, and appealed to her strong socialist views. She was particularly interested in two of the chapel's ministers - Michael D. Jones and John Thomas - and decided to incorporate portraits of the two men into her painting.



Bethesda Chapel, Swansea.



Bwlchnewydd Chapel, near Carmarthen, oil on board, 80.5 X 100.5 cm. The National Library of Wales.

It seemed to Diana that John Thomas was more of a conservative, establishment man, but Michel D. Jones, who came and preached in Welsh, was much more akin to her heart, as he ‘seemed more provocative and a rebel’. It was an accurate observation, as Michael D. Jones is regarded as a significant forerunner of Welsh nationalism who advocated a political solution to defending Welsh identity. He had been inducted as minister of Bwlchnewydd in 1850, after a time in Ohio, USA. In 1855, he succeeded his father as principal of Bala Independent College, and was closely involved with the attempt to form a Welsh settlement in Patagonia, Argentina, in the 1860s, where Welsh would be the language of religion, government, trade and education.

Describing the painting she said:

So, I painted the two men like tombstones, standing up in front of the chapel. Well, there's something about the symmetry of the chapel as you've got those two windows at the side, and by placing the two men in the foreground you can almost go back from the stand-up images. It's almost like converging parallels that go back to the windows. They are put close together, but with a tiny crack between them and that symbolises the split between the two men. I got one facing the left and one facing the right.

Her placing of the two men in the foreground, both painted in sepia, is reminiscent of the painting *Maliphant Row* that we have already considered, and the inclusion of old scripts lays emphasis on the history of these two men. The chapel stands as Diana saw it, of course, so again she relates the past with the present as seen in so many of her paintings. Interestingly, of course, she had done the same in the painting of the Swansea chapel in which the high-rise buildings represent the present, and contrast with the old chapel.



In the late 1960s, Eric Roberts decided to relocate his Art Centre business to a more central location in the town, and he rented premises at 31 Market Street. The Art Centre was now more accessible to the people of Llanelli than when it was in West End. Diana relocated her studio to an area at the back of the family home on the Bryn.

Eric and Peggy Roberts were great friends of Brynmor and Doreen Voyle, and Lisa, their daughter, recalls them with great affection.

Eric and Peggy were a great couple, and became very good friends with my parents. They had lots in common, being left-wing, though the Roberts were VERY Left, loved the arts, food and drink, and talking! They were certainly witty and full of life. Eric was the first real Midlands accent I ever heard, and was a great storyteller, and Peggy was an extrovert lady.



The Llanelli Art Centre after its move from West End to Market Street in the late 1960s



Eric Roberts with a painting at his art shop in Market Street.

Interestingly, Lisa Voyle was inspired to take up art by Diana Roberts. At that time the Voyle family lived in a flat above the Trustee Savings Bank, where Brynmor was the manager, and Lisa recalls Diana coming to the flat when Lisa was about fourteen. Lisa was very interested in design, and had a sketch book of drawings drawn from the styles of Biba in Kensington. Diana was very impressed with the drawings, and floated the idea that Lisa should go to art school. It was something that Lisa had never considered, but the idea took hold and, eventually, she did go to study at Llanelli Art School, Dyfed College of Art, and then to Harrow School of Art, before completing a post-graduate course at the Royal College of Art, and going on to a successful career in design.



Lisa Voyle and Diana Roberts at Lisa's home in Queen Victoria Road, Llanelli. This was one of Diana's visits to the town after she had left in 1975.

During her time at Llanelli, Diana supported herself with a number of part-time teaching jobs, including teaching art at Pwll Community Centre, Dyfed College of Art, Swansea College of Art, and Llanelli Technical College.

Around 1971, Diana painted one of the most intriguing of her paintings, *The Scrap Metal Men* (not *Scrap Metal Man*, as has appeared on the internet), a painting that indicates a new development in her work.

This painting stemmed from an article that Diana read in one of the Sunday supplements, relating a story about a feud

going on between gangsters, similar to the Kray twins in east London, and it was based on the funeral of one of them. The gangsters in the background are painted in monochrome, contrasting with the young couple who are painted in colour. Commenting on the painting, she said:

It's about menace, about things to get away from, they are still surrounding you. The young couple who are painted in colour in the foreground survived the threat of their connections. They appear to be happily photographed in a comfortable, easy-going situation. I've lifted them out and put them in a no man's land. If you like, it's one of the more ambiguous of some of those paintings. They weren't actually the Kray twins, but it was of the gangland genre. I was interested in the fact that people have always got something around their neck, so to speak, to do with their histories. The couple, although they are smiling, in a sort of happy-family snap, sort of thing, with a girlfriend on his lap, in the background there is this other story going on.

*They are probably trying to shake it off, but it won't be shaken off. They are still there. I'm using colour as representing 'now', the present, and monochrome represents the past. The men in the background are in monochrome, while the couple in front are in colour. I mean, in the older paintings the monochrome is done in sepia which pushes it even further back in a way – more into the nineteenth century, whereas, in *The Scrap Metal Men*, the monochrome part is done in black and white which is more twentieth century. However, it's still the same device in trying to represent time. (Diana Roberts, 2019.)*



The Scrap Metal Men, oil on canvas, 91.5 X 76 cm. Carmarthenshire Museums Service Collection.

The painting was exhibited in the South Wales Group/Welsh Arts Council exhibition 'Nawr Now', in 1971, and is now in the Carmarthenshire County Museum. In the same exhibition Diana exhibited *Self-Portrait and the Matchgirls of Bryant and May*, which we will consider later. The exhibition began at the National Museum of Wales, Cardiff, before travelling to the Great Hall Gallery, University College, Aberystwyth, the Memorial Gallery, Newtown, and finally the Glyn Vivian Art Gallery, Swansea. It gave a lot of exposure to Diana's work.

In 1974, Diana Roberts had an exhibition at the Arts Centre, Great Hall Gallery, Aberystwyth, which lasted from 12 October to 1 November. In the exhibition she showed seventeen oil paintings and seven drawings, which represented her work over the past decade. These ranged from her earlier paintings reflecting time influences in combining nineteenth-century images and modern images, with paintings that, in her own words, were 'concerned with ideas of 'pictures within pictures', obliquely seen images, ambiguities and tensions'.⁶

It would be interesting to look at and consider a number of paintings that she exhibited:

exhibition of paintings

12 october—1 november 1974

arts centre
great hall gallery
aberystwyth

canolfan gelfyddyd
oriel y neuadd fawr
coleg prifysgol cymru

*Exhibition at the Arts Centre,
Great Hall Gallery, Aberystwyth,
1974.*

Triumph Herald, oil on canvas, 122 X 137 cm. This painting was exhibited at Aberystwyth in 1974, where it was illustrated in the exhibition catalogue with the title *Sunday Afternoon*. Diana, however, stated to the author that the title *Sunday Afternoon* was not her choice, and that the proper title is *Triumph Herald*.



Triumph Herald (Number 1 in the catalogue, under the title Sunday Afternoon)

⁶ Exhibition Catalogue, Diana Roberts, Exhibition of Paintings, 12 October – 1 November 1974, Arts Centre, Great Hall Gallery, Aberystwyth.

Diana Roberts explained the painting;

It's about incompatibility, I suppose, because the fellow in the painting is a German businessman who was in Llanelli doing business. I met him in the Stepney Hotel and we had a little affair, which I knew was not going to go very far. My dad took us up to the Black Mountains, as he wanted to give him a trip around South Wales to see some of the valley towns. My father took this photograph and, when I saw it, I thought 'That kinds of sums it up', because I was already beginning to turn away.

There's a tension in the painting, as it's about something that is not quite right. He was absolutely a straightforward guy, but he was from a different world to me, I don't mean that because he was German, but that he was in the business world and I'm in the art world. I mean artists are given to peculiar flights of fancy if you like, (laughing). He wasn't like that and was puzzled by it. I knew it wasn't going to work out.

This was painted from a colour transparency of a photograph that my dad took. I projected it straight onto the canvas, though changed the composition a bit.

The door is left open that contributes to the narrative, as it's about being uncomfortable and awkward.

Also, there's something about the horizon level on the landscape, it sweeps down towards the left-hand side. Now, traditionally, in compositions we had been taught that you don't allow a picture to fall out of the frame, so you would tip that up slightly to hold it within the frame. But, because I wanted to present that feeling of things 'slipping away', and being uncomfortable, I deliberately allowed that 'bad' composition to happen. (Diana Roberts, 2019.)



Watching Television, oil on canvas, 122 X 137 cm.

This work brings us back to Llanelli, as it was painted at her house on the Bryn where, through the window, we can see the beautiful Welsh valley beyond. In it her father watches a film portraying a country scene, so Diana is deliberately contrasting the manufactured, second-hand experience with reality. We can derive great pleasure from photographs and films of the countryside, but it's no substitute for the experience of enjoying the reality that is all around us. The television represents the modern, synthetic approach to seeing whereas, all around us, is the reality itself.



*Bedroom, Nysa Poland, oil on canvas, 48 X 54 cm.
(Number 3 in the catalogue)*

This work was painted following a visit to Poland. Diana Roberts slept in what she described as ‘a really primitive room’. In the sparse room the bed had a rough wooden bedhead and, from my vantage point, the duvet cover looked like a road that ran down over the mountain of my body, so the painting is about taking the eye on a little journey across that eiderdown, to the foot.’ She was particularly struck by the minimalist quality of the room which yet still had a decorative lace curtain.

The painting *The Bear* is an enigmatic painting, and Diana says that she didn’t know what to call it. ‘An obvious title would be ‘Leaving’ but I never really thought about what title to give it as I was always a bit ambivalent about what I really meant by the painting.’ (Diana Roberts, 2019.) To the author, it resembles the concept embodied in her painting *Coming of Age* when she completed her studies at Birmingham School of Art, which we have already seen. In that painting she portrayed the development from childhood to maturity, which is also conveyed here, in *The Bear*, she is seen leaving the room which has the old bear, symbolic of her childhood. As she commented, ‘I suppose, it’s about leaving childish things behind.’, and she added the important fact that ‘the bear happens to be wearing a dress that I had when I was an infant.’ (Diana Roberts, 2019.) To add to the enigma of the painting she added, it’s important as well to see that there’s a mismatch, because the bear looks quite solemn and masculine, and here he is in a little girl’s dress. (Diana Roberts, 2019.)



*The Bear, oil on canvas, 102 X 172 cm. (Number 12
in the catalogue)*



*Package Holiday, oil on canvas, 102 x 122 cm.
(Number 14 in the catalogue)*

In *Package Holiday*, Diana paints a young woman who resembles her ('It could be me, but it wasn't, if you know what I mean') who has obviously just arrived at the hotel where she is staying. (Diana Roberts, 2019.) It's a hot day and the woman has stripped to her bikini getting ready for what is outside. She sits alone in the bedroom gazing through the large window at the bright blue sea that can be seen beyond the balcony. Roberts, herself, had never been on a package holiday, but uses this scene to great effect to convey the growing independence of women in the sixties, who could now travel freely on their own. Nevertheless, what Diana also conveys is the hesitancy, or apprehension, that the woman is experiencing. Although she has made it to this

holiday location, the painting conveys the feeling of loneliness and uncertainty she is beginning to experience, as if she is saying 'right, I've got here, but I'm not quite sure, yet'. Commenting on the painting, Diana stated that 'I'm trying to build atmosphere into it, such as the fact that the suitcase is not fully unpacked, and that it's a double room but there's only one person in it which increases the sense of loneliness. I mean, it is meant to be a lonely picture, because it's all bright and sunny, and hot looking, but the underlying mood is one of slight uncertainty, hesitancy, and 'Can I do this on my own?' sort of thing.'⁷

Mr and Mrs Simpson is a painting of Diana's friends in Llanelli, Doug and Rosemarie Simpson and, in its composition, it is clearly a play on the painting *Mr and Mrs Andrews*, by Thomas Gainsborough, in the National Gallery, London. To do this painting, she painted them in her studio, and then set them against a landscape, which was the view from her house on the Bryn.



Mr and Mrs Simpson, oil on canvas, 121.9 X 137.2 cm. (Number 16 in the catalogue)

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Diana Roberts, conversation with the author, 3 June 2019.



*The Wardrobe, oil on canvas, 122 X 102 cm.
(Number 15 in the catalogue)*

This work was painted in her house at the Bryn. It is strikingly white, and everything is minimalist. In the painting Diana Roberts portrays herself reflected in the mirror, though emphasising that ‘there’s nothing particularly psychological in this, as it’s more of a formal exercise. (Diana Roberts, 2019.) Structurally, the painting is interesting, and she commented that ‘I’ve always been interested in quite formal things in painting, such as rectangular division. (Diana Roberts, 2019.)



Diana Blatton (née Roberts) at her home in Camberwell, Tuesday, 21 May 2019.

CONCLUSION

On Tuesday, 21 May 2019, I travelled to Camberwell, South London, where I was finally able to visit Diana at her home. It was a beautiful, sunny and warm day as I got off the 36 bus from the Oval, when it stopped near to the Camberwell Art School. I walked across the road and up Bushey Hill Road until I arrived at number 44, Diana's house.

I was given a very warm welcome, and Diana talked freely about her work. It was such a pleasure being taken around her house which, in many ways, is what I expected, as I have found that artists' houses are always interesting, with paintings hanging everywhere. The entrance hall was typically decorated with numerous works of art, and this was to be seen in all the other rooms of the house. In some ways, however, it was not what I had expected, as lots of her own, superb paintings, were stored in a room upstairs.

We spent a lot of time in that room, as it was a veritable treasure house of some of her best paintings. I had a great time there, talking to Diana about the paintings when she lived in Llanelli. One of these was a painting of a Swansea scene entitled *Alexandra Road*. Basically, the painting is about the horrors of war-time bombing which Swansea had suffered so devastatingly. All the windows in the building have been smashed. She imagined what it might have been like on the night of the bombing, so she zoomed into one of the top windows to show the horror expressed in the face of a man. The disembodied arm and hand (actually painted from her own hand and arm) represents the fact that, as well as buildings, in war people are also smashed to bits by bombing. She stretched the hand from the image of the man screaming in the window to the sky over the buildings to act as a connecting device in the painting. Diana added, 'there's all sorts of symbolic bits in that painting. There's an advertising hoarding advertising for cigarettes called Conquest and, again, the symbol there is about war, and who conquers, and it's about asking the question as to what conquering really means'⁸ The broken doll with the bashed in head and the bits of waste paper in the foreground being blown about, show the reality of what war does. It's a grim picture.



Diana, in 2019, with her painting Alexandra Road, oil on board, 36 X 48 cm. This painting was exhibited at The Arts Centre, Great Hall Gallery, Aberystwyth, in 1974.



Diana, in 2019, with her painting Self-Portrait with the Matchgirls of Bryant and May. This painting was exhibited at The Arts Centre, Great Hall Gallery, Aberystwyth, in 1974.

In conclusion, I have deliberately left my favourite painting, *The Matchgirls of Bryant and May* to the last. If I could have taken one painting home with me from her house in Camberwell, this would have been my choice. I photographed Diana with the painting because it summed up for me all this remarkable artist stands for.

Diana is a committed socialist, and she includes herself in the painting, identifying herself in an act of solidarity with the matchgirls of Bryant and May who, in 1888, were the first women to come out on strike. As someone interested in left-wing, socialist politics, she had read about the matchgirls and was greatly impressed with the stand that they took. As is so typical of many of her paintings, she has painted the matchgirls in sepia, but has included herself in bright colours, representing the past and the present. This painting represents the core of what she stands for, as so much of her work has underlying tones of the socialist cause.

In 1975, Diana Roberts left Llanelli to live in London, to lecture in an art school, and she was never to return to live there, except for occasional visits to her parents. For around ten years Llanelli had had an

outstanding artist in its midst. She was never

involved with the Llanelli Art Society, and so her work was rarely seen in the town, though she was greatly appreciated by its members. However, she had made her mark on a national level, and her work is now held by the National Library of Wales, the Arts Council, and by Carmarthenshire Museum Service. She is a serious artist, painting from a committed socialist conscience, and not concerned with commercial interest. Sadly, however, her departure from Llanelli marked a significant change in the way she was able to work, as the toll of lecturing in various colleges made a great change to the freedom she had enjoyed in the Welsh town. Later, the birth of a daughter, and her marriage to another fine artist, Slawek Blatton, led to greater personal commitment. Never again, until her retirement from lecturing, was she to enjoy the freedom to paint that she had known in Llanelli, but the work that she had produced during her ten years in the town was outstanding. Indeed, as has been seen, it included paintings of national importance.



Diana Roberts with the painting Women of Power.

One day, I hope Llanelli will be able to arrange an exhibition of her work. It would be spectacular.