

Bronwyn Williams-Ellis





“Each project should be commercially viable,” insists Bronwyn Williams-Ellis, the British artist and craftswoman. “But that is not how it works. I have always been poor at maths, which makes it difficult to ensure that I charge the correct price. If I did charge more than I do, which I probably should, it could deter hard found customers, especially for tiles.” ~ Bronwyn Williams-Ellis

IT CAN TAKE BRONWYN WILLIAMS-ELLIS TWO MONTHS TO PRODUCE A SCULPTURE and while that time has to be accounted for in terms of price, she also has to be realistic. There are two sides to her business: tiles, which are produced to commission and sculpture, which is not. “With regards sculpture, I do not start a piece with a price in mind; I simply stand back and think it is worth that – given its size and quality,” she explains. “Pricing is probably easier to do on the tiles, which I have just put up to £27 each for the most complex plus postage and packing, no VAT (Value Added Tax). It is always helpful if customers come to collect. Often changes to the design or colour by the customer will result in more time spent, which is not accounted for in the original commission. While I thoroughly enjoy what I do, my passion should generate an income, which is a real challenge at times. Artists are not accountants, weighing up the profit and loss before they set to work. I am no different.”

COMMISSIONS

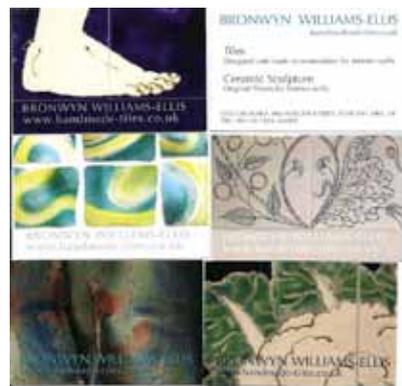
Commissions are an excellent way of generating money but in order to be successful they require a great deal of customer interaction and patience. Williams-Ellis has found that good communication, developed over many years, is the best way of securing new business. “I was dreadful at communicating when I was young and it is only something that I have grasped the older I have become. I am far more likely to clinch a deal by talking to a prospective customer and guiding them through the process, understanding their needs and trying to draw as much information from them as possible. This only works face to face or on the telephone. Email is a waste of time because we live in an age where prospects often will not reply to you if they are interested, let alone answer important questions. As the commission progresses, however, email does have its place because clients can send me photographs of the space they want the tiles to fit into. This is helpful because it saves me from spending valuable time on the road and we can discuss fine details, looking at the images together.”

Over the years commissions have been steady, helped by a frequent supply of her trademark colourful illustrated business cards, often kept by those who receive them. “In fact only the other day my insurance broker, who had received one of my trusty business cards, commissioned me to produce a salmon tile panel for his house in Wales.” Williams-Ellis’ web site has been important in generating commissions, too. “It is my online portfolio and where in the old days I would lug crates of tiles across London to secure a commission, I now rely on my web site to do the job for me. It makes life so much easier.”

Wealthy Arabs commissioned Williams-Ellis to make swimming pool surrounds for them in London. “I employed a part-time maths teacher

*Facing page: Field 1. 2004. Red earthenware clay with clay slips, hollow slabs, wall mounted. 82 x 39 cm.
Top left: Field Calendar. 2007. Red earthenware grogged clay with clay slips. 31 x 47 cm and 80 x 118 cm.
Top right: Field Calendar 1. 2007. Red earthenware grogged clay with clay slips. 31 x 47 cm and 80 x 118 cm.
Below: Business cards. 2015. 8.5 x 5.5 cm.*

Tim Saunders describes the artist’s studio practice





Above: **Frost**. 2007.

Grogged buff earthenware clay, formed from the back. Sprayed clay slips and fine spray of alkali glaze. 157 x 32cm.

Below: **Welsh mountain goat tile**. 2011.

Tile panel in Welsh and English for Nant Gwynant campsite, Snowdonia, N Wales. Cuerda seca technique with opaque and translucent glazes on standard bisque six inch tiles. 61.5 x 77 cm.

who was able to keep me in order and was ever so helpful with working out dimensions and how many tiles were required and also checking glaze calculations.

"These days, commissions are not so easy to find and it is necessary to adapt and embrace technology to try and hunt them out," she says. "In Britain it seems we are up against the problem of a younger generation that seemingly does not understand art, coupled with a culture where we only know how to buy standard items off the shelf rather than commission

something unique. This has forced me to investigate social media. Facebook is an utter waste of time for me but I have secured two small commissions from Pinterest. I do find though that social media is terribly time consuming and the reward is insufficient for the time invested to date, possibly my failure to understand it thoroughly enough."

CHORES

It is necessary for Williams-Ellis to keep on top of orders, packing work and posting in a timely fashion. This is tackled at the start of each day with a plethora of other chores, which include sorting out, cleaning and tidying, getting photocopies of drawings produced, buying anything needed. "I used to work with a particular recipe for turquoise glaze which was lovely but my supplier has stopped stocking a crucial alkali frit because he has to buy a huge amount in one order and he was not selling enough," she says. "So I am currently experimenting, trying to re-create the qualities of my recipe using different materials.

"Chores can often take several hours especially when it includes working on the computer. I try not to use the dreaded machine on days when I need to work creatively, much to some people's frustration. Paperwork and computer work is sadly increasingly necessary to run a contemporary studio. For some reason other than just taking up time it also seems to clog up the brain so that there is no room for the real creative space and thought I need to actually design and make things. This is especially true when I am producing sculpture. Real things take real materials, time and physical effort to make." Williams-Ellis' days can vary wildly.

TILES

"Tiles are more the bread and butter work where I am commissioned and each one costs up to £27 each. I design and make bespoke tiles and panels for individual customers so I frequently need to develop glazes and make lots of colour tests often to replace glazes where I can no longer buy the ingredients," she explains. "I often spend days carefully weighing out sample glazes – the raw materials in grams and milligrams, mixing, sieving and making up carefully labelled colour samples on tiles, firing them in the test kiln, often tuning and retesting based on the results."

Time is also spent on doing research, for images, in and out of the studio; drawing, study and photos. Williams-Ellis then draws up the final tile designs based on the customer's needs and site. "Then if possible I meet the customer in the studio or go over it on the telephone, to pick out the best options. This is all part of the creative process. Finally I draw out the full size design on tiles, glazing, decorating and firing the pieces. Fingers are crossed that they come out alright and I don't have to start again. Ceramics are always fickle. The job is only finally complete when the tiles are physically in the client's hands and they are happy."





The latest piece that Williams-Ellis was commissioned to make was a salmon panel for a repeat customer. "It all started out well and then he decided that he wanted the main background colour changed to mauves, which made my life difficult and I lost the will to live. In the end there were 27 glazes built up on top of each other. It took a long time to produce and was difficult to regain enthusiasm for but I have just sold it to him for £600 and he was happy. These salmon panels are fiddly and time consuming to produce and I fear that I am beginning to make a rod for my own back here."

SCULPTURE

"Sculpture allows me to try and communicate other things that are often subtle and difficult to communicate in words, things that I feel emotionally strongly about. It does not sell as quickly but when it does it can fetch £3000 a piece," reveals Williams-Ellis, who sold three pieces earlier this year.

In complete contrast to her tile making the sculptural process is much slower and more contemplative, the work changing throughout the physical making process, growing all the time. "I think round the general subject, ideas, behind the group of pieces I want to work towards, this may include, life, landscape, museum drawing, research, photos. I often draw a series of small free sketches for pieces. When ready, the studio needs to be cleared and set up with all the tools and materials and slips made up and ready for use. This is physically quite exhausting."

Then the clay process starts, a gradually growing exploration of the ideas in clay over days, smaller pieces first, building up to major pieces. "Cutting, handling and manipulating the clay is physical work. The clay is coloured with slips and oxides and dries extremely slowly. I carve away excess clay, continuing drying and working on the pieces in sequence as they are ready. Eventually these are fired in the kiln over a 48 hour period. I sometimes modify pieces by glazing areas and re-firing, and sadly abandoning pieces that are not successful." A large piece can take six to eight weeks from beginning to end.

Williams-Ellis then makes fixings to hang the completed pieces, photographing, indexing and cataloguing before delivering, hanging and finally showing them in an exhibition. Pricing needs to allow for studio costs, materials, time, delivery, gallery commission, plus of course any tax on that.

"You then have to sell the work," concludes Bronwyn Williams-Ellis.



Top: **Salmon panel.** 2015. *Cuerda seca technique using roughly 20 separate coloured translucent layered up glazes within hot wax cuerda seca outlines.*
125 x 42 cm.

Above: **Salmon sketches.**

Below: **Bronwyn Williams-Ellis.**
Bottom: **Merlin and the two dragons.** 2014. *Made for Nant Gwynant Campsite, Snowdonia, Wales. Hot wax cuerda seca technique with translucent glazes.* Top panel 46 x 153 mm. Bottom panel 46 x 30.5 cm.



Tim Saunders is a journalist who enjoys writing about a variety of subjects including art, ceramics, travel and motoring. He was the business and motoring editor at the *Bournemouth Daily Echo*. Bronwyn Williams-Ellis (www.handmade-tiles.co.uk).