

BBC Antiques Roadshow

AOTF

KATE MALONE

[Serena Fokschaner]

The ceramicist Kate Malone is poised to open the gleaming metal door of her kiln. 'I've done this so often: 1,8560 times to be exact, but I always feel that sense of anticipation mixed with a bit of dread before I look inside the kiln. There are so many variables in ceramic making: the clay, the water, the temperature of the firing can all affect the final outcome so that no two pots are ever alike. Each one is of the moment,' she says. 'But that's what I love about it. I'm like an explorer, constantly discovering new things.'

Generous and joyful, fantastical but always approachable, Kate's ceramics mirror the personality of their maker who, despite her weighty reputation as one of Britain's most collectable potters, remains engagingly down to earth about her success: 'I am a happy potter, that's all I know,' says Kate, clad in her working uniform of smock and trousers, before adding, 'I like to be both very serious and quite silly: both simple and clever. It's all about broadcasting my optimism through my work to touch the emotions.'

As we set off on a tour of the studio, you feel you are meeting a maker who is constantly enthralled by the potential of her craft. 'As an artist you're always absorbing new ideas; little things impregnate your sub-conscious and then come to the surface later.' Before returning to live full time in the UK in 2010, Kate and her husband Graham and daughter Scarlet also lived in Spain and rural France. 'When we lived in Provence it was the first time I'd lived in the country. My pots definitely took on a quieter, more rural feel. I also made pieces that were inspired by local vegetation: the succulents and walnuts that grow wild in that area of France. They're everywhere, constantly underfoot and being trampled in to the house.' The pieces echoed a fascination with nature that began when she was a student at the Royal College in the 1980s: 'My response to nature has always been instinctive, not an intellectual analysis of its form. I try to get to the root of things, to look at their essence.'

She points out shelves lined with her signature pieces: gleaming, over-scaled pumpkins, pineapples and gourds all of which belie her fascination with 'fruit at its most ripe, when it is fit to burst.' There is a timelessness to these fecund wares gleaming with copper and manganese glazes: 'I think so many people relate to my work because it is part of a long tradition: you can trace the forms and colours to ancient China or medieval pottery.' More recently she has become fascinated by the idea of 'modernity, what makes a piece of its time.' Her recent 'Atomic' pieces, which will be shown at the Pavilion of Art and Design (PAD) this September, are vessels adorned with balls of clay, 'like polka dots or bubbles'. The shapes are an intriguing combination: futuristic and otherworldly, but also familiar and accessible.

She attributes this appeal to the way she works just as much as to her subject matter. 'I'll do little sketches from time to time which I stick in to a book and I carry ideas in my head, but I don't really design things before I start making them, I prefer to let the ideas happen during the slow making process – to let instinct fly. I heard Grayson Perry talking about the way he worked and I thought his words really summed up the way I feel. He said that you had to

trust your ability and feed your idea like little pets, stroking them from time to time and trusting that they will turn in to something. Of course I work on ideas, but you also have to trust the creative process. Some of my best ideas will happen spontaneously – when I'm walking the dog, or about to get in to the shower'

But behind the spontaneity of her wares lies serious science. Look closely at a piece and you discover her lustrous crystalline glazes which sparkle with delicate mineral growths redolent of frost. Kate describes the process: 'When you fire pieces at very high temperatures it forces the glaze to run down the vessel grabbing microscopic pieces of dust. As the glaze cools, crystals form on the surface. It's a highly unpredictable medium: you never know how many crystals will form or what size they'll be. But it's the ideal way to treat the surface of my pieces: the random natural forms echo my subject matter.'

While it is almost impossible to control the behaviour of the glaze in the kiln, this does not apply to the colours and lustre. Kate has been developing glazes for over 25 years and the results are noted in over 1000 recipes. 'The process is utterly exacting; it's rather like looking after a high-maintenance lover who demands everything. Some potters are very secretive about their glaze recipes but I like to share,' says Kate whose work is now featured on the GCSE syllabus. 'I get about 15 letters a week from students with questions: some clever, some silly, but I'll always write back.'

This sense of public responsibility is reflected in larger public projects. 'It's partly to do with conscience: the role a ceramicist plays in the community. Potters traditionally made useful things like cups and saucers. My pieces are decorative so instead, I've put something back by working on schools, hospitals, libraries and parks; it is my way of serving the community by creating places which transmit my sense of optimism.' Her latest project, in collaboration with the architects EPR, is a large building in Savile Row, London which will be clad in individually-made, shimmering tiles and banded by an etched, copper base. The building is commercial rather than municipal: 'But at least everyone will be able to enjoy it as they walk past: it will be rather like putting a gorgeous brooch on public display,' says Kate.

She is quick to attribute her commercial success to her dealer, Adrian Sassoon. 'He really is a remarkable man who has elevated British craft and put it on the international stage.' The partnership has led to a constant stream of commissions alongside one off pieces for private collectors her work can be seen at over 40 museums including the V&A. 'But the partnership with Adrian not only financial, at its best it is a guiding and inspiring. Working with Adrian has given me to express myself with absolute confidence.'

It pleases her that her work is displayed in private collections alongside grand pieces by Sevres or Meissen: 'I'm every collector's bit of fun,' she jokes before continuing more seriously: 'I like to see myself part of a craft continuum stretching back thousands of years. The materials are the same but the possibilities are infinite. There as so many pots to be made. That's what makes it so addictive and that is why I love it. It's not work – it's play.'

Kate Malone at Adrian Sassoon, 0207 581 9888, adriansassoon.com.

NAMES TO WATCH

Anna Barlow

Delicious and disquieting, Anna Barlow's ceramic foodie sculptures are also feats of technical virtuosity. 'Since I left university I have been experimenting with ways to mix ceramic textures – the glossier finishes of high-fired porcelain with lower-fired biscuit surfaces to suggest different foods. I use a mixture of moulds and handwork to create my pieces,' she says. Her subject matter: biscuits, voluptuously melting ice creams and jaunty flakes exert an emotional pull on viewers; 'One lady in her 80s said it brought back memories of childhood holidays in Margate.'

Scream Gallery, 020 72689857, screamlondon.com.

Roger Law

In the 1980s Roger Law was the presiding genius behind the Spitting Image TV show. When the series ended after 12 years, Roger went to Australia started 'chasing rainbows,' and became Artist in Residence at the National Art School in Sydney while studying and painting Australian marine life. A visit to Jingdezhen, the heartland of Chinese porcelain making, inspired his latest works: overscaled celadon vessels and wares embellished with relief patterns of Australian creatures: sea dragons, crabs, turtles, all in an exquisite contrast to the overblown caricatures of his puppet-making days.

Roger Law, Sladmore Contemporary, 020 7499 0363, 29 October – 15 November, sladmore.com.

Kevin Callaghan

Like elegant, eye-teasing puzzles, Kevin's ceramics are underpinned by complex ideas about time, space and consciousness. The basis of his pieces however is simple; bold geometrical shapes such as triangles and squares in contrasting colours are combined for a bold effect that draws you to explore the shapes more closely. A graduate of the Royal College of Art, Kevin's works are held in public collections in both Ireland and China.

Bicha Gallery, (by appt), 1C3, Cooper House, 2 Michael Road, London SW6 2AD, 0 7721 4000 48, bichagallery.com.