

20th Century Ceramics

KATE MALONE

John Andrews

Last year, visiting John Makepeace to discuss the article on his furniture that eventually adorned the May pages, I was struck by the vigorous form and colour of a jug prominent on one of his tables. The fruity surface of the piece seemed somehow familiar. It was so striking that I guessed it to be the work of Kate Malone, which always makes immediate impact, and he confirmed that indeed it was. It is immensely refreshing as well as stimulating to look at modern pottery whose bright colours and clustered spiny fruits owe little to the subdued grey-green contours of the Leach and Cardew school. Not that one does not admire the work of Leach and Cardew; their forms and decoration are the essence of subtlety, sophistication and technical accomplishment. They can impress with their quiet influences. With Kate Malone, however, it is usually vivid nature and vibrant shine that strike the

eye before the technical skill is appreciated. She is not just well established and present in a galaxy of public collections, but wide ranging in terms of size, form and subject matter. The natural world, life forces and good humour permeate her work. Once seen, it is not forgotten.

Born in London in 1959, Kate Malone is associated early on with her delight in art and pottery at school, followed by study and qualifications at Bristol Polytechnic's Faculty of Art between 1978 and 1982. There she was a student of several distinguished ceramicists before obtaining her BA and going on to the Royal College of Art to take a three-year MA as a student of David Hamilton, who she describes as a remarkable teacher. Travels to Egypt, India, the USA, Thailand, Sri Lanka, Vietnam, Peru, Mexico, Australia and New Zealand added much wider perspectives and influences as well as

hard work at the technical development that characterises her approach. By 1990, when she was included in Pat Carter's *Dictionary of British Studio Potters*, she had already held exhibitions in London, Munich, Chicago, Kyoto and Manchester. Other exhibition venues followed rapidly. Going on from there, her work is included in such public collections as the Ashmolean, Oxford; The Fitzwilliam, Cambridge; Bristol Museum and Art Gallery; Los Angeles County Museum; Musée des Beaux-Arts, Montreal; Musée National de la Ceramique, Sèvres; Ulster Museum, Belfast; and the Victoria & Albert Museum, London, to name but a few of those both domestic and abroad. It is a remarkable achievement.

Her output is not confined to articles of domestic scale. She has carried out public commissions that include a courtyard fountain for the Homerton Hospital in Hackney, a bronze drinking fountain for Castle Park, Bristol, the celebrated Giant Queen Pineapple of 1995 for the Manchester City Art Galleries, a bronze millennium fountain for Greenwich Park and two giant pots for the Old Bailey Consortium. She likes making pots large enough for children to sit in, citing ones that her daughter could climb into 'with a book, torch, biscuit and blanket'. She has made single pots four foot high weighing half a tonne, which take three



Kate Malone, 'Big Naughty Boy Blackberry Jug', 2005, crystalline-glazed stoneware, 10½in. high.



Kate Malone, 'Compact Open Pine Cone Vase', 2005, green crystalline-glazed stoneware, 10in. high.



Kate Malone, 'Mother Pumpkin X', 2006, crystalline-glazed stoneware, yellow ochre, 8 $\frac{1}{2}$ in. high.

months to make, but she also produces pieces that are very small, to cup in your hand, as well as installations for parks, hospitals and hotels.

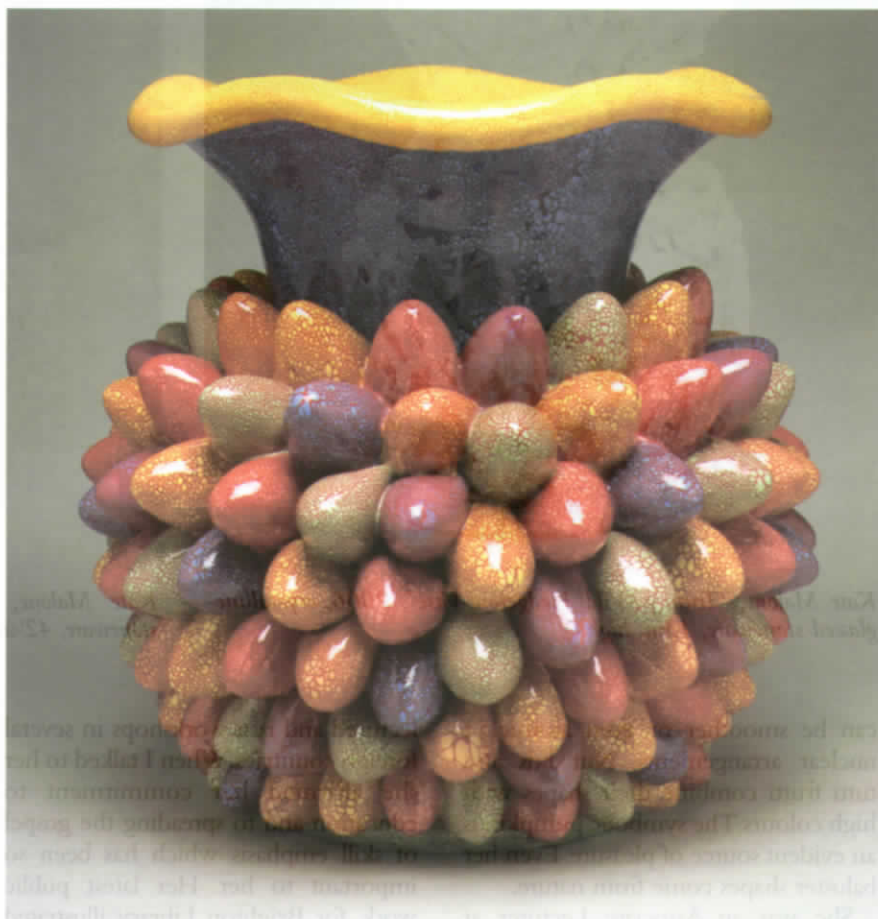
She works with T-material clay and has done so for twenty years, using it for both the glaze areas she works with, stoneware and earthenware, claiming to use her clay very soft, and finds the rolling of coils a delight as much as an essential skill. (For the uninitiated, the rolling of coils of clay provides a method of building up the body of work being turned in the hand.) Her work is distinguished by the crystalline glazes she uses to produce coruscating surfaces that are the result of multiple applications, thickly applied, in which during a controlled cooling cycle crystals grow on the surfaces in pools inside the bases. The glazes slide off humps, rims and valleys of the modelled and bulbous forms based on the natural shapes she loves. She also produces 'pebbled' earthenware in which glazes are fired over each other and split in the process. 'The natural world, fertility and the magic of growth' which she refers to as the 'life force' influence her work as much as the humour and symbolism she also uses. (A pineapple is a traditional symbol of hospitality and prosperity, a pumpkin one of fecundity and fertility.)

Apart from fruit and vegetables, the work of the more colourful fashion designers, particularly Zandra Rhodes,

is another source of inspiration. She is not in the least daunted by the threat of bad taste or kitsch, which may be the reason why her pieces are so visually arresting. The numerous firings build up a glossy depth of colour that

is vibrant. She remains a dedicated experimentalist full of energy, who has tackled tile and wall panels with as much gusto as pots. One piece may take three to six different glazes and she keeps a record of the order of application because 'the effects change if the order changes'. She maintains a library of over 1,000 glazes.

Principally Kate is based in London, where she still maintains her studio, and where Adrian Sassoon, to whom we are indebted for our illustrations, handles her work. His website provides a glorious range of coloured images of Kate Malone's output. The eye moves to blackberries, pea pods, buds and leaves across jugs, vases and teapots. It takes in a large pineapple fireplace 4ft. 6in. high made for the Geffrye Museum exhibition of 2002, and a ceiling light cum chandelier of floral form. Pumpkins, daisies, oak leaves and a baby bumper car jug catch attention. There is a consistently knobbed approach to surfaces, often worked in great detail, with pine cones or pineapples showing accurate and complex treatment. The protuberances



Kate Malone, 'A Gigantic Tutti Vase', 2005, pebble-glazed earthenware, 27 $\frac{1}{2}$ in. high.



Kate Malone, 'Atomic Twins Wearing Flares', 2006, crystalline-glazed stoneware, 14 $\frac{1}{2}$ in. high.



Kate Malone, 'Green Sprucey Nut Lidded Box', 2006, crystalline-glazed stoneware, 14 $\frac{1}{2}$ in. high.



Kate Malone, 'Trunky Wild Hedgerow Vase', 2006, crystalline-glazed stoneware, 13in. high.



Kate Malone, 'Giant Artichoke', 1999, crystalline-glazed stoneware, 42 $\frac{1}{2}$ in. high.

can be smoother or even atomic in nuclear arrangements. Nut lids and tutti frutti combine their shapes with high colours. The symbolic pumpkin is an evident source of pleasure. Even her baluster shapes come from nature.

She was an Associate Lecturer at Middlesex Polytechnic, and has

lectured and run workshops in several foreign countries. When I talked to her she affirmed her commitment to education and to spreading the gospel of skill emphasis which has been so important to her. Her latest public work, for Brighton Library, illustrated here (see opposite), won an award in

2006 for a public project in the working environment. She takes on apprentices, which must be one of the most practical applications of a demanding educational philosophy, and shares her knowledge generously. A planned second volume of *The Book of Pots*, published by A. & C. Black, which she co-authored with

Lesley Jackson, will have another technical section and come with a CD showing how to do things. Whenever she travels she gives free time to local art colleges and enjoys troubleshooting to help local students.

Recently she has set up a second studio in the South of France, where her kiln is smaller than her London one, so work is smaller or built up from sections. The practicalities of this and transport requirements mean that the current emphasis of her output is more on the smaller decorative pieces than the big public works but she still does public commissions – the one for Brighton Library was made from 100 pieces. Although used to electric kilns she has recently ordered a gas kiln for testing, research and experimentation. The deep red colour known as *sang de boeuf* needs the higher temperature and reduction firings of the gas unit. At the same time Kate Malone has found that the colour and light of the Provençal countryside have, perhaps ironically, alerted and rekindled her interest in brown glazes and monochrome pots. A local potter has encouraged her to experiment with salt glazing. It is as though the gloom of London's ambience caused the vibrant colour reaction with which she is associated but now the glare of Provence



Kate Malone, 'Tall Pineapple Vase', 2005, crystalline-glazed stoneware, 17in. high.

is sometimes having another effect. However, her French sojourn has influenced the choice of natural motifs, bringing giant walnut shell bowls, magnolia seed head vases, wild hedgerow vases, pine cone boxes and pots into the range. Since she intends to look at a move to Spain for a while in a year or two's

time, it is interesting to speculate on what effect the even more intense light and local plants will have, but the desire to explore the possibilities of clay and glazes will remain wherever the location.

It is not surprising that her work has attracted attention not just from potters and pottery enthusiasts but from the wider art world. Adrian Sassoon ensures that her work is seen internationally in the context of shows that include historical perspectives – 'the skills are timeless'. The exhibitions organised by the Haughtons in the world of ceramics gain her particular praise – the International Ceramics Fair and Seminar at the Park Lane Hotel, Piccadilly, in June will be the next one. With similar exhibitions in places as far afield as New York and other venues, public commissions, educational enthusiasm and the sheer joy of work in clay that comes across so strongly, the impact of Kate Malone's ceramic inspiration will continue to astonish.

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Below. Kate Malone, 'Story Wall', commissioned for Brighton Library, 2006.

