



The idea for this exhibition came from our having grown tired of seeing pots on plinths. We wondered if something different could be done in a museum setting, to push and play with the way ceramics are thought about and displayed. The Geffrye specialises in the living rooms of the urban middle classes, so it seemed logical to ask two respected London-based ceramicists with very different aesthetics to create their own 'ceramic rooms'. The contrasts between them help us to appreciate their skills and artistry even more.

Christine Lalumia, Geffrye Museum

The Geffrye Museum
Kingsland Road, London E2
24 September 2002
to 19 January 2003

Exhibition generously
supported by Bloomberg

below

Kate Malone in her studio

facing page

Kate Malone

'Baby Tutti Frutti' pot, 2002

Kate Malone

'The idea of creating clay rooms is obviously perfect for the Geffrye. I have always loved the thought of making a ceramic room, but when I have seen places with lots of glazed clay they seemed cold and sanitary. I hope that my room won't be like that and that the warmth of the symbols will shine through. I feel rather responsible as I am waving the flag for 'maximalism', for the decorative and the decorated. My aim is to be ebullient and joyous, to show my love for clay and glazing and for the magic of the life force. I try to do this with a sense of clarity – not too mad, but slightly mad, not tight, but contained. I rely on instinct and the subconscious while at the same time applying intuition and a vocabulary which has evolved over thirty years of working with clay and studying nature. My work is an evolution, rather than something completely planned from the start.'

Kate Malone





Kate Malone

Kate Malone's work is about harvesting the wealth of natural imagery, transforming visual ideas through a unique combination of craft skills, and expressing them in a rich harvest of ceramic produce.

The word produce is appropriate: she makes wonderful organic forms, drawing directly on the natural world for inspiration. They celebrate, unashamedly, her ability to transform clay and raw glaze materials into voluptuous objects, using skills and knowledge gained over twenty years as a practicing ceramic artist. The process of creating these objects may be compared with that of their (usually vegetal) counterparts. Recorded and collected on frequent travels around the world, her ideas become the seeds of new ceramic forms, hot-housed in her studio, produced as prize specimens for exhibition, and often christened individually with the names of new varieties.

Malone's ceramics are instantly recognisable by their extraordinary brilliance of colouring, their wildly playful ornamentation, and very often their tremendous scale (Malone is reputed to have the largest kiln of any studio potter in London). Her work includes ornamental fruit and vegetable life in all sizes – she is particularly fond of pumpkins and gourd-like forms. She makes smaller tableware pieces too, but their title of Carnival Ware suggests that these funky objects are reluctant to adopt a passive domestic role.

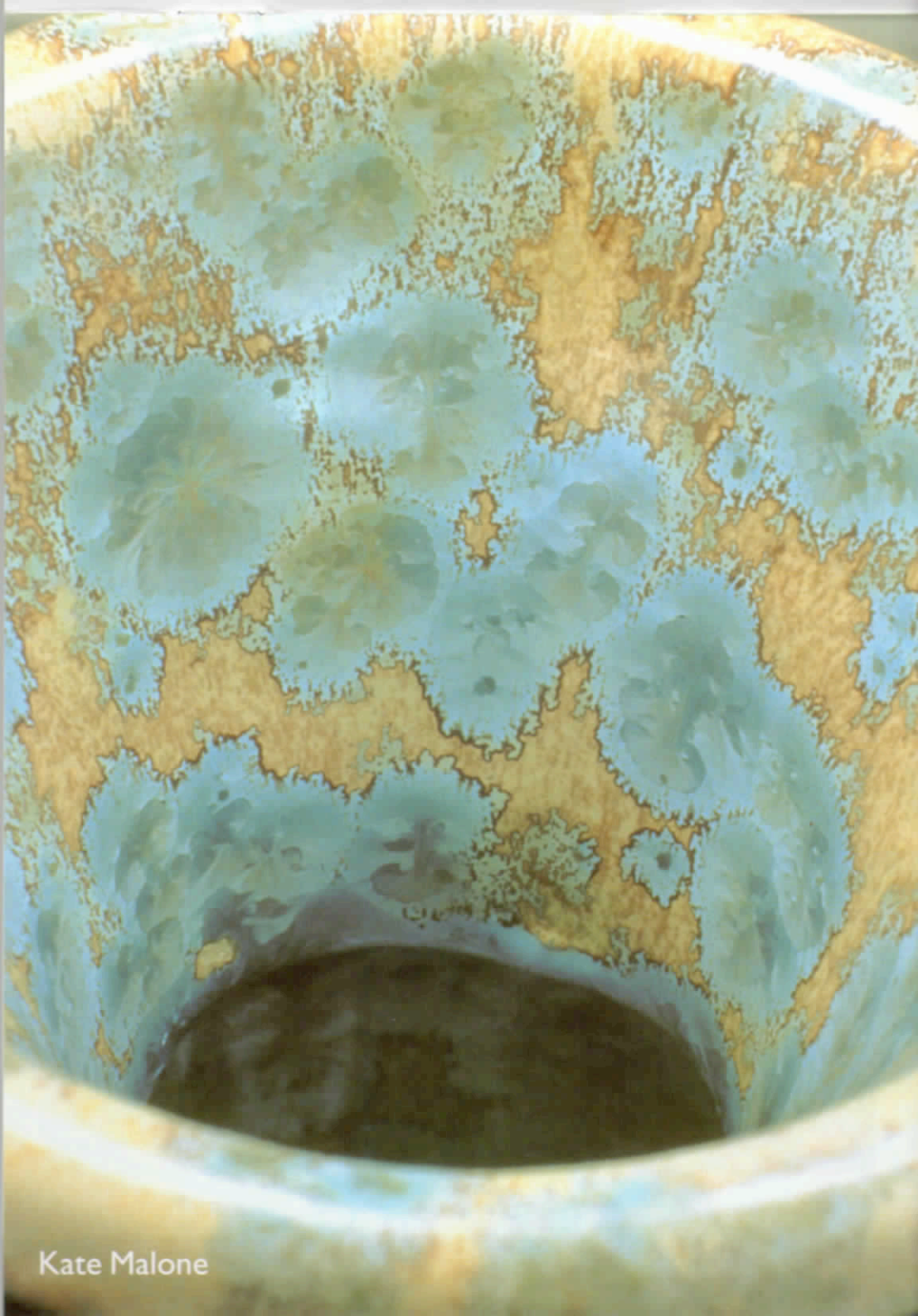
In her public commissions, she has introduced colour and fantasy into public life – a giant teapot (emitting steam on the hour) sits above a clock face at the Bental shopping centre in Croydon, a courtyard at Exeter hospital now resembles a tropical aquarium, and a circle of giant fish rise, unexplained, from a pond at Lea Valley Park in east London. A giant pineapple jug, commissioned by Manchester City Art Galleries, has become a symbol of institutional hospitality, a warming and reassuring sight for the visitor.

The term 'maximalist' has been invented to describe her work. While this neatly sums up the brimming exuberance of her work, it might also suggest a kind of conceptual opposition to the 'minimalism' of her co-exhibitor, Edmund de Waal, at this unusual exhibition. But this is not a battle of opposites, despite the obvious differences in appearance. Kate Malone's work does not arise from any pre-determined philosophical framework. If there was any conceptual element to her work, one feels this has been put aside in her enthusiasm to bring her projects to life – and the sheer pleasure taken in the process of making.

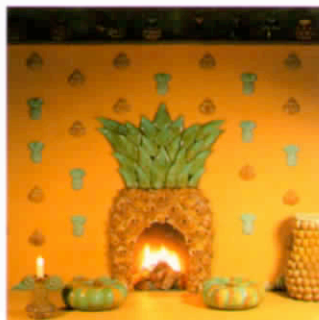
While the work of British studio potters frequently reflects our own temperate climate, our vernacular ceramic traditions, or pays homage to modernist or other ideals, Malone has always worked in a style apart from the

mainstream, using the infinite possibilities of ceramics as a practical resource, rather than espousing a set of particular craft 'values' or immersing herself in the conventions of the ceramic 'community'. She revels, instead, in the warmth of tropical destinations and imports their exotic imagery into her work with apparently irrepressible energy. Not that her own ceramic style is entirely unprecedented: she draws on the richer corners of ceramic history, such as the work of French potter Bernard Palissy whose work shares a similar love of colour and deep ornamentation. And certainly she is aware of the wealth of ceramic detailing, often using organic devices and imagery, that used to play such an important part in the design of public buildings.

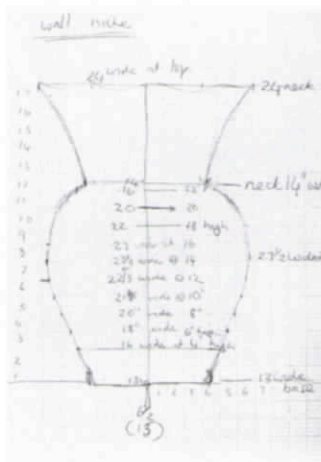
For all ceramic makers, the resolution of tension between form and surface treatment presents a similar challenge, whatever their conceptual orientation or the intended purpose of the object. There are often more similarities between apparently diverse makers, than there are obvious points of difference. Despite the 'maximalist' qualities of Kate Malone's pieces, their expression, amazingly, never feels overblown or excessive. The bold expression is achieved through quite simple visual devices, in the rhythmic application of colour and ornamentation and the uncomplicated representations of shape and organic form. No



Kate Malone



clockwise from above
Drawing of Kate's ceramic
room (2001). Symbolic
wallpaper sprigs – pumpkin
(fertility and fecundity)
and pineapple (hospitality,
fertility and prosperity).
Ceramic room showing
pineapple fire surround and
'pumpkin pouff' seats. Kate
working on the pineapple
fire surround. Drawing for
wall niche.

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Kate Malone

'Baby Atomic Sweep' pot,
detail showing interior with
crystalline glazes 2002

doubt back in her workshop there is an array of craftsman's secrets and technical subtleties, for such objects require a tremendous command of the ceramic medium, but these are not allowed to intrude on the enjoyment of the finished object. The viewer is merely invited to wonder at the scale of the operation, the sheer ebullience of these pieces, the colour and textures, and the mysterious crystalline effects on the surface.

As well as her work for gallery exhibitions, Kate Malone provides a model of good practice in her work on public or other client-led commissions. In the past, businesses such as brickworks employed their own skilled craftsmen and artists to produce bespoke architectural ceramics. Malone has benefited from a revived interest in decorative surfaces for buildings and for larger-scale installations, that create landmarks in the environment or that bring a sense of identity to public or institutional spaces. As artist, designer and craftsperson all in one, she has re-invented this role for the individual ceramic maker and built up an enviable reputation for delivering projects, from the initial proposal through to the final installation. She has demonstrated how the specialist ceramic artist can produce spectacular visual results using sculptural installations or modelled reliefs, against budgets which are often apologetically low.

For her the role of the client is an important one, on the one hand helping to create new applications and opportunities, on the other defining necessary boundaries for the work within a commercial brief. An understanding client provides the incentive and focus for work that could not otherwise have come into being. Not only is new work generated in this way, but the project enables new audiences to be reached within the public and community realm. While a pot can exist in isolation as the pure creation of the artist, environmental commissions involve two external ingredients: a site and a client, both of which create challenges and limitations for the artist. Malone's work excels in such situations. It is bold enough to hold its own against the scale of its surroundings: her organic forms and decorative fervour have enlivened many a plain or rectilinear location.

This is a commission with a difference: a challenge to transform an interior space *without* limitations imposed either by the setting or the client. It will surely be an opportunity to showcase the full range of Kate Malone's output and provide a concentration of sensory experience, an almost literal hothouse for her ideas.

For the visitor, there is also the tantalising knowledge that, with all pieces available for sale, the room and its contents could be re-assembled in a new setting,

a shrine to the fecundity of nature – and to the art of contemporary ceramics.



Kate Malone
'Baby Naughty Boy Blackberry'
pot and 'Baby Atomic Sweep'
pot, both 18cm
Photographs: Stephen Brayne

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Kate Malone
Photograph: Steve Speller
of SpellerMilner

Paul Vincent is Editor of
Ceramics in Society



Kate Malone