

Specialist profile *Kate Malone*

Jennifer Goulding meets ceramicist Kate Malone, whose large-scale pots are inspired by the natural world

PHOTOGRAPHS ANDREW MONTGOMERY



Ceramicist Kate Malone opens the door to her studio barefoot, dressed in a simple shift dress of white linen that sets off her tan – a legacy of her two-year residency in Barcelona. Despite relocating to the UK just a week before, and feeling somewhat frazzled, she is extremely welcoming. Her easy manner belies her formidable reputation. When I allude to it she is dismissive: 'I am a happy potter; that's all I know.'

Kate and her partner, Graham, have returned to the UK so that their 13-year-old daughter, Scarlet, can go to school here. Before their stint in Barcelona, they spent seven years living in a medieval village in Provence. 'It was fascinating to be immersed in French village life,' enthuses Kate. 'Critics have said my work is very English, very safe and sturdy in the Staffordshire tradition. One day, when we had been in France about a year, I walked into my studio and laughed out loud because, without noticing, I had given my pots a rather Gallic poise and flamboyance.'

Other changes were more explicit. For instance, she made pieces inspired by the walnuts that grow wild in that area of France. 'They are everywhere, constantly underfoot and being tramped into the house,' remarks Kate. She also made a series of pots decorated with stamped-clay 'buttons' that look exactly like the colourful sweets from Papabubble, a confectioner in Barcelona she would visit with Scarlet. 'We liked to watch the sugar being spun; it looked like Venetian glass,' says Kate. Yet the button jars also recall the *oeil-de-perdrix*

patterns of the Sèvres porcelain she studied at The Wallace Collection. 'When we were abroad, I still spent time in London, and I have always looked to history for inspiration,' she notes.

One of the benefits of living in London full time is being reunited with her beloved kiln, which is specially designed to accommodate large-scale pots. Her first project will be a group of metre-tall vessels, which she will show, along with other recent work, this November, at the Robilant + Voena gallery, in association with her dealer, Adrian Sassoon, who has represented her for more than 10 years. 'He is a really remarkable man,



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FROM TOP Kate works on one of her 'people' pots. The influence of nature is evident in all her creations. She makes her own glazes, as in these samples. A close-up of Kate's 'Pine Cone' pot shows the detail of colour

who has elevated British craft and put it on the international stage. When I joined him I had pieces in five museums; now I have pieces in 30, including the V&A,' she says.

'I think of my pots as people, the big ones especially.' Warming to her theme, she continues: 'All my pots are generous and friendly. Look at this characteristic roll-lip mouth – it is open to the viewer, not secretive. I think that is why I am drawn to >

symbols of optimism and welcome, such as the pumpkin and the pineapple.'

However, the primary theme of Kate's work is nature. 'Nature is at the root of everything I do. Either I am drawing directly from a natural form, which could be anything from a garlic bulb to a blackberry, or I am capturing something deeper and more essential - the force of nature, the freshness and sense of growth.' Whichever approach she chooses, Kate's pieces positively hum with energy. Their glorious, fecund forms are a wonderful contradiction - instantly recognisable and familiar, yet idiosyncratic and alien.

She attributes their success to her method of working as much as to her subject matter. 'I am a great believer in instinct and the subconscious. I create pots in my mind without knowing it. That's not to say it is mindless. Of course, I consciously work on ideas, but I also trust the creative process. My best pieces often happen spontaneously, at the most unexpected moments,' she explains.

'It's one thing to make a pot; the glazes are something else entirely - they are science,' says Kate, who uses crystalline glazes on her pots. These crystallise in the cooling phase of the firing, creating unusual and beautiful effects, reminiscent of frost. 'You cannot predict how many crystals will appear, or what size they will be. And you cannot paint the glazes on - they have to be allowed to run down the sides of the pot, to stimulate the growth of the crystals. But the movement accentuates the form of the pot. It is a beautiful and generous way to treat a surface.'

It is near impossible to control the behaviour of the glaze during the firing process, but the same does not apply to the lustre and colour. 'I have been developing glazes for more than 25 years, and have devised at least 1,000 recipes. It requires serious research and testing. Some potters are very secretive about their recipes, but I believe the more we share our knowledge, the more quickly the field will advance.'

In the past, Kate has favoured strong, vibrant colours. However, lately she has been experimenting with natural hues, in matt, as well as shiny finishes. 'Colour camouflages form. Only recently have I felt my forms have been good

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enough to be white,' she remarks. 'I am interested in making pieces in pairs that play off each other: one colourful and shiny, the other white and matt. The white one will act as a shadow of the colourful one,' she explains.

In the long term her plans are more ambitious. 'I would love to do a folly for a special natural place, in a forest or by the coast - a story-telling room, or a dining room, where everything, inside and out, is ceramic,' says Kate. To me, that sounds absolutely wonderful.
 Kate's work costs from £3,000 (around £25,000 for a large pot)
 Adrian Sassoon: 020-7581 9888; www.adriansassoon.com
 'Kate Malone: New Work', Robilant + Voena (020-7409 1540; www.robilantvoena.com), November 3-19

ANTICLOCKWISE FROM TOP Kate stands by her 'Pine Cone' pot. A 'Fennel' vase is ready to be painted. Kate's glazes give a lustrous finish. The variety of colour testifies to years of research. Kate builds up a pot. Her dog, Boeba, never leaves her side

