

Story for M Shed ICT kiosk – People gallery

Lee Hutchinson revised 05.11.2013

Kate Malone – a (very) brief biography

“If there had not been a little pottery department under the concrete E Block stairs of the large Henbury Comprehensive School...with a handsome dusty pottery teacher...I might never have looked through that clay-smearred window at the age of twelve and felt that immediate magnetic interest in the mysterious jars of powders on the shelves”

(Kate Malone, quoted in Ceramics Review 234, November/December 2008)

Kate Malone attended Henbury Comprehensive School, Bristol. After embarking on an art foundation course, she studied ceramics as a stand-alone subject at Bristol Polytechnic and achieved a first-class honours degree in Ceramics in 1982. She went on to complete an MA at the Royal College of Art, London, before setting up a studio in Hackney.

Kate has been producing ceramics for over 25 years, working in four areas: public sculpture; one-off studio pieces; chemistry-glaze research; and short-run affordable pieces. Her pots have been inspired by natural forms and textures, including sea creatures, fruit, and vegetables – all of which can be interpreted as celebrations of fecundity and fruitfulness, or as Kate has described them, “symbols of optimism and welcome.”

Kate is primarily interested in form rather than function, describing herself first and foremost as a “maker of decorative objects”. The forms and forces of nature are evident in all of her work, and many of her most striking pots have been characterized by a bold style, strong, vibrant colours and an ingenious use of crystalline glazes, which have ultimately become her trademark. These glazes sparkle with intricate patterns of crystals, reminiscent of starburst galaxies, frozen mist and glittering gemstones.

Very few potters in the world are capable of working in the way that Kate Malone does – and even fewer can make a living at it. Crystalline glazing is a highly specialized, exacting and laborious technique. As Kate has said, while her approach to designing a pot is artistic and instinctive, arising from the mystery of the creative process, her approach to developing glazes is carefully calculated, requiring scientific experimentation, control and method. The crystals are held in the glaze in suspension. The rising and lowering of temperatures in the kiln causes the crystals to grow in much the same way as they do in nature. Despite being notoriously unpredictable, these glazes have a unique and unfettered beauty as they flow and collect, resulting in an organic and lustrous finish.

Kate’s pots are hand-built by press-moulding and coiling. The decoration too she adds by hand, often with a large paintbrush. She prefers to work with T-material clay, a clay body more often associated with industrial ceramics, but

which she chooses to use on account of its whiteness, its strength and resistance to warping and cracking. It has the effect of making the glazes she uses appear very bright. To date, Kate has devised over 1000 glaze recipes, and, rather than being secretive and protective about them, she prefers to be open and transparent, believing that openness will lead to a greater sharing of knowledge, which, in turn, will result in considerable advances in the field.

Several books have been published about Kate's work and she continues to exhibit all over the world. In 1999, one of her exhibitions, 'The Allotment', was shown at Bristol's City Museum & Art Gallery, in which a rich harvest of her ceramics was displayed in the form of exotic fruit and vegetables: the likes of a giant pumpkin, a bulbous pineapple and a radiant strawberry, masquerading as a pot, a jug and box. 95% of Kate's work takes on this type of 'implied' (as opposed to actual) function, Kate explaining that she is intuitively drawn to the vessel shape, possibly because pots as vessels are most commonly found in the home and therefore more instantly identifiable to the majority of people. The vessel form has a universal and domestic association, which, in Kate's words, makes the "pot connect with the heart."

Kate Malone currently has studios in London, where she has her largest kiln, and Provence and Barcelona, where she has smaller kilns. She divides her time between these studios and undertakes commissions for installations and exhibitions, as well as public spaces. A recent example of her public art includes an art wall in Carlton Hill, Brighton, 2010-2012, entitled Crystal Story Walls, which involved the children of Carlton Hill Primary School and hundreds of people from the local community.

Kate has 46 pieces in museums across the world and several in outstanding private collections, including two little pots in Number 10, Downing Street.

A bronze drinking fountain by the artist can be seen in Castle Park, Bristol, and the original full-size ceramic model for the fountain is displayed in the front hall of Bristol's City Museum & Art Gallery.

Without a doubt, Kate Malone is one of the most acclaimed and engaging ceramic artists of current times.