

From the manor drawn



John Millar

Kate Malone is known for her ceramic art, large-scale public projects and innovative glaze research – but what has she got planned next? *Isabel Andrews* meets the artist to learn about her new body of work, inspired by Waddesdon Manor and its grounds

Since bursting onto the ceramics scene some 30 years ago, Kate Malone has become one of Britain's leading – and most popular – studio potters. She is known not just for her seductively plump, glossily glazed ceramic fruits and vegetables, but also for her large-scale public commissions, her generous approach to sharing and promoting ceramics, and for being a judge on *The Great Pottery Throw Down*, which has been recommissioned for this year. She is a potter at the very top of her game and her latest project – a solo exhibition of new work responding to Waddesdon Manor in Buckinghamshire, mounted in partnership with the art dealer Adrian Sassoon – has seen her thrive on taking risks for her art. The commission, part of Waddesdon's outreach to contemporary artists, builds on Kate's sense of connectedness to makers of the past. Much of her vocabulary is rooted in snippets of historical references – a medieval tile here, a swatch of William Morris pattern there – which, magpie-like, she keeps in bulging scrapbooks or on her studio walls. Nor is it the first time she has responded to historic houses: in 2005 she produced pared-back, cream-coloured ceramics for Blackwell, one of Britain's finest Arts and Crafts houses, and in 2007 she made work inspired by Welbeck Estate in Nottinghamshire.

Waddesdon, a 19th-century Renaissance-style château built from scratch for Baron Ferdinand de Rothschild, is known for its opulent aestheticism (not often a fit with today's tastes) and pervading sense of vitality and innovation. Kate was initially daunted: 'It felt so big and stuffed full and over the top,' she

says. But, working closely with archivists and curators to study the house and gardens, she soon became hooked on its depth and detail: 'It's full of the most extraordinary excellence, and I'm always striving for excellence in my work.' Kate knew that a small grant would be essential for her to break new ground – 'we get into our practice and the demands of making within our field can narrow us down', she says – and this Waddesdon duly bestowed, with the encouragement to 'make mistakes with this money'. At the heart of the exhibition are major pieces made with a combination of press-moulded, hand-thrown and coiling processes (Kate enlisted a former assistant to throw for her). Elsewhere, she has bravely ditched the T-material clay she has relied upon for 25 years in favour of red clay, a material she loves and collects in the form of antique French and English domestic ware. 'For 30 years I've developed all this skill and I think I'm clever – then I touch red clay and realise I'm not,' she says, adding: 'it's a challenge of materials.' Other explorations included working with porcelain, slip-casting, and researching digital transfers onto tiles. Not all of this work has made the cut, but the exhibition includes information about materials and tests, as well as a film about her making processes.

While Kate's technical research is boundless – she has compiled the UK's largest studio archive of stoneware crystalline glazes, numbering around 1,500 – her approach to making is intuitive: 'my ideas are a product of instinct, not intellect. That doesn't demean my work; it's more a trust of my subconscious, which I think is very important.' Waddesdon's

THIS PAGE: *Praise to the Beech Tree*, H44cm (foreground); *Praise to the Oak Tree*, H42cm; both crystalline-glazed stoneware



FROM LEFT: *Baron Ferdinand Lidded Vase*, H73cm; *Miss Alice Lidded Vase*, H57cm; *Young Ferdinand Vase*, H43cm; all crystalline-glazed stoneware

decorative details caught her eye, ranging from twists in the tassels and braiding on furnishings, to stonework ornamented with vermiculé, a worm-like pattern popular in the 18th century, which she loves for being 'very Zandra Rhodes' (the fashion designer is both a heroine of Kate's and a collector of her work). Other pots are a narrative of land use, decorated with avenues of trees and inscribed with the names of fields swallowed up by the estate. The pastoral subject matter, she explains, indulged 'a whimsical dream of being in the country. But I'm a city potter – I love the city and its layers.'

Central pots in the show relate to Baron Rothschild and his spinster sister, 'Miss Alice'. She was a passionate gardener whose legacy at Waddesdon is Eythrope, a walled garden legendary for its excellence. Kate's pot, four months in the making, is obsessively decorated with daisies, topiary and

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parterre and is fittingly formidable: Miss Alice once reprimanded Queen Victoria for stepping over her flowerbeds. Elsewhere, a pot for Ferdinand has captured the tragic air of his life. The widower's letters complain of a 'seediness', including chronically bad digestion – while his guests enjoyed lavish meals, he dined on cold toast and water. 'My pots are usually about fullness, plenty and generosity,' Kate says, 'so to make a pot that has a loneliness and a solitude has been interesting.' Another vessel is adorned with cubes around its

neck, symbolising Ferdinand's collection of snuff boxes. These shapes allowed Kate to play with the movement of crystalline glazes on flat planes and sharp angles, rather than the typically curved surfaces of her work.

Kate's Waddesdon output is also about those who toiled behind the scenes. She has made jugs for the cooks, water jugs for the plumbers and vegetables (moulded from fresh produce from Eythrope) for the once 60-odd gardeners. Visitors will find her pumpkins and gourds displayed in an auricula theatre- inspired display. Pippa Shirley, Head of Collections at Waddesdon, says, 'Kate's work reflects the personality of Baron Rothschild and the people who worked at Waddesdon in very real and fundamental ways.' The same egalitarian spirit is evident in Kate's exhibition. Staged in the Coach House, it is freely accessible for all visitors (some 385,000 each year). Work for sale is priced at a range to accommodate those with more modest means. She balks at what she considers the vast sums charged by some contemporary ceramists, although fully understands the need for recompense for pieces that are a long time in the making.

The riot of shape and colour made for Waddesdon is in marked contrast to Kate's award-winning project of 2015: a sleek façade of 10,000 tiles for a new building by EPR Architects on London's Savile Row. Each tile is unique, due to the hand-applied crystalline glaze, which subtly refracts and reflects light as the weather changes. Few studio potters are able to work at this scale, and the project is the latest in a string of public commissions that demonstrate Kate's passion for reintroducing clay to the built environment and society. Practical considerations ranged from buying all the raw materials upfront (checking every bag for integrity) and finding dry storage space, to the precision work of preparing and testing each batch of glaze. 'We hand-sieved every litre and handled every single kilo of raw material,' she recalls. Such was the accountability required by EPR that Kate, refusing to hand over her glaze recipes, logged instructions in triple-sealed envelopes with a lawyer in case she died mid-project.



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: *Eythrope Artichoke Vase*, H28cm; *Craft and Creativity, Tattooed Pumpkin*, H24cm; *Pumpkin Merry-Go-Round*, H32cm; detail of *Baron Ferdinand Lidded Vase*, H73cm (foreground) and detail of *Miss Alice Lidded Vase*, H57cm (background), all crystalline-glazed stoneware





FRUITFUL PROGRESS

- 1959: Kate Malone was born in London; she took up pottery at school, aged fourteen
- 1979–82: she studied for her BA (Hons) at what was then Bristol Polytechnic Faculty of Art, where she was taught by Walter Keeler and Mo Jupp, among others
- 1983–86: she attended the Royal College of Art, London for a three-year MA in Ceramics
- 1986 to date: Kate's work is held in 29 public collections around the world, including the Victoria & Albert Museum, London, the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford, and Los Angeles County Museum of Art. She has completed 21 public commissions, most recently for 24 Savile Row, London, with EPR Architects
- 2015: appeared on screen as a judge, along with Keith Brymer Jones, on the BBC's *The Great Pottery Throw Down*, which returns to our screens later this year



ABOVE: pair of *Waddesdon Estate Vases*, H70cm;
RIGHT: *Carved Green Pumpkin*, H28cm; **BELOW:** left to right: *Small Lidded Oak Jar*, H18cm; *Small Lidded Oak Jar, Fallen Acorn*, H17.5cm; *Small Lidded Oak Jar*, H17cm

It is of course her love of clay – ‘the physics of soft to hard to dry to shiny... even now, I find it magical’ – that drives Kate to promote ceramics. She admits to having cried at the prospect of mothers no longer having pots made by their children to put on shelves. ‘It is so important,’ she says. ‘It captures a time and it captures a forever.’ She credits Love Productions, makers of *The Great Pottery Throw Down*, for their motivation ‘to get people off sofas and making,’ an attitude she feels is largely missing in schools, where she had her own eureka moment with clay aged fourteen. She estimates that, since setting up in north London in 1986, around 100 apprentices and interns, some of whom became assistants, have passed through her studio. Today she has a team of five, and runs a second studio nearby, partly to facilitate their solo work. ‘It’s absolutely essential they do their own work, because they’re very skilled.’ Notwithstanding the pressure this generates to guarantee a baseline of income, Kate feels her nurturing role is ‘almost as important to me as my own work. To see them succeed just gives me great pleasure.’ She keenly supports potter Lisa Hammond’s plans to establish a national ceramics school to train ten or so young ceramists each year: ‘All the big potters need to put our skills in for free. We need to teach them and it’s not happening.’

The tension between helping the industry and striving to get her own ideas made – ‘an idea has a moment’ – is at the heart of Kate’s practice, and it is not always easy to negotiate

for a self-confessed workaholic. But it is also the key to her success, for in her determined attitude lies the robustness, originality and spirit of adventure that her ceramics exude. ‘It’s not just about the things that I make; it’s about sharing life. Everything’s about sharing, isn’t it? So that’s what I do, through the thing I love.’

Kate Malone: Inspired by Waddesdon, *mounted in collaboration with Adrian Sassoon (adriansassoon.com) will be at Waddesdon Manor until 23 October. Kate will be doing a talk and tour on 28 Sept and 5 Oct; 10.30–4.15pm; £40. For more go to waddesdon.org.uk and katemaloneceramics.com*



THIS PAGE: a selection of Kate’s crystalline-glazed stoneware pumpkins and gourds