

## KATE MALONE – INSTINCT AND ANARCHY

Kate Malone tells me at the end of our interview, as I direct another question at her, that really she is more interested in finding out what I have to say about her work than in telling me about it. Quite a challenge, given that I have a pile of catalogues and past articles describing and documenting her ideas, work and motivation and that she already has running a successful small-scale factory of ideas, interpretation, technology development, manufacturing, commerce and marketing.

Malone has been producing ceramics for almost 20 years since her graduation from the Royal College of Art in 1986. Although her work is still characterised by the distinctive bold style shown in earlier and often-used forms such as her pineapples and gourds, her recent works have a shiny confidence and quirky finesse where the 'pot' format seems to become more and more disguised, or more subtly blended with the adopted imagery. As she comments to me in relation to this shift of style, she feels that the pots she is making now can be interpreted as that of a 40-year-old's, as opposed to a 30-something's or 20-something's pots.

Throughout her career she has used T-material clay with multiple-fired earthenware glazes and stoneware crystalline glazes, the latter an unmistakable Malone trademark. Her use of crystalline, an unpredictable glaze that is incredibly difficult to control, has developed, quite literally, into a fine art. She explained to me that stoneware crystalline is perfect for her work when a piece has very fine detail as the clarity of the glaze enhances every detail, whereas earthenware is better for less intricate details. Despite the size and/or boldness of her pieces, they are in perfect artistic balance, with the often anarchic surface decoration always meticulously weighed, modelled and applied. Her work is time-intensive and she openly recognises the contribution and importance of her two part-time assistants, without whom the time scale of her projects would become unfeasible.

The pieces are hand-formed by press-moulding and coiling, with surface detail invariably hand-modelled with fingers rather than tools. This means that the finished pieces do not attribute their making origins in the same way as many thrown pots, for example, use the throwing marks as a definition of form. These modern, spirited shapes are multi-layered, using artifice and disguise, assisted by the shiny and crystallised surfaces, creating a new form where the spirit rises out of the clay. Kate mentions the influence of the fashion designers Zandra Rhodes and the late Jean Muir and how she sees her pots as being 'dressed up' in the same way as their own creations. She explains that despite her fascination with natural forms and textures she is essentially an urban person who 'clothes' her pots with flamboyant shapes, colours and glazed textures.

A body of her work is still blatantly provocative, such as her Garlic Bud forms with breast-shaped (or garlic-shaped) additions; her Tutti Frutti range with a mass of armour-like pink and yellow pebble-glazed protrusions; and her Bubble and Atomic pots, including strong simple vase forms with oversized globes added to the surface. Refreshingly, the provocation has always exploded with fun and been full of humour, rather than being raw and angst-ridden.

Malone works both from her London studio and home in Hackney and from her French home in Provence, a 500-year old house and pottery in the heart of a medieval village. Sheltered by a calcined cliff riddled with tunnels and troglodyte caves, the house is built at the top of a steep hill. The bottom floor of the house, one of seven floors, is a series of caves with raw-cut stone walls that keep a cool temperature in the intense Provencal summer heat, making it possible for Malone to work for weeks on a piece, uninterrupted by the outside heat. The current phase of her work attributes much to the natural discoveries she has made in Provence: natural hedgerows, pine cones (found in proliferation and used as kindling), magnolia seeds (used to inspire pots whose decoration she describes as 'chaotic pairs of ears') and bubble shapes observed in the river where she swims (that have given birth to her Bubble range). Dream Hedgerow, using her familiar vase form with a substantial and wavy sausage-like rim, carries immaculate detail in the hedge visualisation that encloses the pot's body, with leaves and berries and flower heads melding into a mass of fine textures which clothe the pot but also grow naturally from it.

Dream Hedgerow is one of a new phase of pieces that edges away from colourful flamboyance towards dreamy, sober contemplation. This may not sound very Kate Malone, but their strength, substance, forms and flourishes are unmistakably hers. A new form is the Pine Cone series of lidded pots often with zig-zag lid openings, in response to shape of the cone, subtly hidden from obvious view. Another pine-cone vase form in green stoneware crystalline shows the opening out of the cones, sensitively exploring the elastic growth movements of a living form. Courtesy of French ceramist Michele Muraour, who lives just 10 minutes away in a nearby village, she has been invited to share space in his gas, wood and salt kiln and has started to experiment, to date with five pieces. Produced in the sober brown of a salt-glaze firing, Malone is fascinated by the change of surface colour in these new pieces caused by the balance of ash and salt in the kiln, discovering to her own amazement that they describe the form as effectively as a dazzling range of multi-coloured glaze effects. After over 20 years using electricity as a power source, she describes her alliance with gas, wood and salt as offering a 'whole new world of surfaces to discover'.

Public commissions have always been integral to Malone's ceramic philosophy and over the past two years she has been working on a large-scale public work at the New Brighton and Hove Library. Opened in April 2005 and called 'The Wall of a Thousand Stories', this interactive piece has been produced by Malone for the children's library, designed to be used by storytellers and school groups to develop children's interest in reading and improvised storytelling. An enormous expanse of wall has been painted blue and decorating it is a sweeping wave of visual symbols, what Malone refers to as 'giant sprigs', in stoneware crystalline glaze, with images from 30 general subject areas such as food, tools, clothes, technology, sport, music, homes, space, toys, theatre, the elements and magic. An adept storyteller herself, her stories are given life by visual spurs and are cherished and extracted by her daughter Scarlett who asks her expectantly, 'have you got a story in your throat?'

Malone is especially appreciative of the role of her art dealer Adrian Sassoon, and his contemporary ceramics specialist Clare Beck, who has represented her work for over 10 years. She explains that Sassoon has introduced her to a new, more traditional, international ceramics audience with a focus on specialist collecting, and, in close consultation with her, constantly ferrets out new opportunities for her work, both creative and commercial. Their alliance has ensured a secure financial base from which she has been able to create a stream of work. Malone's current show at the newly restored Blackwell House in Bowness-on-Windermere in Cumbria, initiated by Sassoon, shows another 'branching out' of her work. Entitled Next to Nature the show has inspired the creation of three new stoneware pieces, exhibited here along with a selection of her other work borrowed from UK collections. The Arts and Crafts style and sense of proportion has always fascinated Malone and here was a perfect opportunity to produce contemporary pieces in response to the style. The elaborate plasterwork frieze on the walls above the picture rail in the White Drawing Room, designed by architect Baillie Scott, was the starting point for one of the new pieces. Blackwell White Room Vase uses the repeating natural forms of the plasterwork to hug and weave their way up her classic vase shape, finished in a plain cream stoneware glaze. Another of her new pieces, Blackwell Firedogs Vase uses the metal fire dogs in the fireplace of the same room as inspiration for its surface, decorated with rowan berries and leaves. Both of these do appropriate natural homage to the Arts and Crafts style. Rather more sober and traditional than a Zandra Rhodes, but still enveloping, and celebrating, the energy of Kate Malone.

Who would have thought it? From anarchic plastic fluorescence and dazzling crystalline to muted natural forms in salt-glaze and creamy glazes in a traditional setting. But this has always been the magic of Malone's technique, an ability to embrace the ancient, the natural and the intuitive with the direct, the artificial and the exaggerated.