

KATE MALONE

THE SHAPE OF THINGS TO COME

Ceramist Kate Malone's practice has been fundamentally changed by a major project to create the façade of a new building on London's Savile Row, explains Grant Gibson. Portrait by Steve Speller



Left: Helter Skelter Atomic Vase, crystalline-glazed stoneware, 39 x 24 cm, 2014
Right: Kate Malone in her London studio

'So there's my bipolar character.' Kate Malone has just pulled open the door of her huge kiln to reveal her latest batch of work. A couple of the stoneware pieces are instantly familiar: the pumpkins and gourds which have made her reputation. Elsewhere though, something strange and rather fantastic has happened. Malone has come over a bit Russian Constructivist. A large piece at the front, for instance, consists of a jumble of geometric shapes bursting out of an egg.

It's an exhilarating moment, witnessing an artist genuinely making a step-change in her practice. 'I'm very excited,' she confesses, possibly taken aback by my reaction. 'At the beginning of this year I'd never have dreamt I'd be making anything with a corner or a straight line, because I haven't for 30 years.' The pieces are created by adding the shapes, which are made from moulds found from kids' toys and purchased over the internet, onto a base. 'So they do have a toy feeling,' Mal-

one concludes. The process started with her *Atomic* series, which manipulated spheres, and appeared to attract attention from a new and – in Malone's view – younger audience. 'I came away thinking that if balls are modern, then maybe squares could be modern. It was literally that simple a thought.'

Malone would be the first to confess that she's more of a do-er than a thinker. At one point during our conversation she mentions the 2002-03 double-headed exhibition *Ceramic Rooms: At Home with Kate Malone and Edmund de Waal* at the Geffrye Museum, noting the differences in their practice. 'I feel he thinks so much, and I do the opposite and try not to think and not to know.' Instead she relies on intuition and her subconscious.

As if to prove the point, she tells me that it was only after she created the first *Magma* pieces that she realised where her initial inspiration had come from: the new 45,000 sq ft retail and office development by EPR Architects on London's Savile Row,

for which she's creating the façade. The project has taken four gruelling years, and when it opens will be using an astonishing 10,000 tiles. 'I suddenly thought: "Oh my God! It's because I'm looking at the building. The tiles are square,"' she says. 'I'm now newly aware of the built environment.'

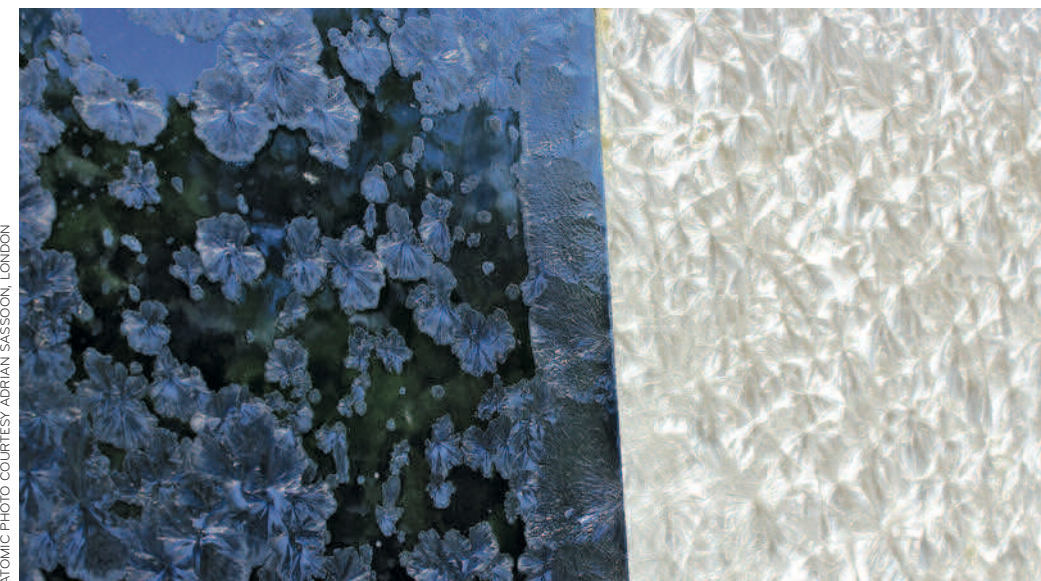
The Savile Row scheme hasn't just changed what she makes but also how she makes it. We start our conversation at the home-cum-studio she shares with her husband Graham and their daughter Scarlett. While most homeworkers make some attempt to keep their work and domestic life separate, in Malone's house they appear indivisible. As I arrive she's using an Andrew Logan-designed tape dispenser to wrap up bronze tiles created by Michael Eden for the base of the building, ready to be couriered over to the site. 'This was our dining room last night,' she explains, 'and then it becomes an office table.' Saunter through the kitchen and you're in the studio proper – though a rumbling

ATOMIC PHOTO COURTESY ADRIAN SASSOON, LONDON





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Opposite: *Atomic Pyramid Magma Vase*, crystalline-glazed stoneware, 29 x 29 cm, 2014

Below: Savile Row, London, EPR Architects, 2015
Below left: tile samples for Savile Row building



washing machine reminds you that even this space has more than one use. At the far end is the kiln, and on a workbench opposite are piles of little pots full of different coloured powders labelled with black marker pen. ‘This is where I work at night. It seems to have taken second place now, which is rather nice.’ I’m even shown into the couple’s bedroom upstairs, where a display shelf contains a potted history of the artist’s career.

Malone has a team of seven or eight nowadays, and space was becoming an increasingly limited resource. ‘I was probably going to give Graham and Scarlett a nervous breakdown, if I didn’t have one first,’ she laughs. So instead the bulk of the studio moved a year ago into a dedicated space a few minutes down the road. Meanwhile Graham is building a new house three doors up.

The relationship with EPR started when she arrived back in England after a seven-year sojourn in France and Barcelona, and landed a public art project for a wall of American Express’s new Brighton offices, designed by the architect. ‘I’ve always balanced doing studio ceramics with public art in hospitals, libraries, parks and schools,’ she says. ‘I’ve always wanted to be a potter and I always wanted to serve the community. That’s why the public art has been so important.’ While she’s happy to admit that ‘community projects and sexy architecture don’t necessarily marry’, the scheme was a success, and the architect asked if she’d do a façade for its latest seven-storey development in the capital. ‘I’ve always wanted to do a façade, because I have this vision of pumpkins and pineap-

ples.’ But the architect was rather more keen on the idea of crystal glazed tiles in white and black, a notion that presented a slew of technical and organisational issues.

Malone could only find one person prepared to take the risk of firing the bought-in tiles at the required temperature, Rich Miller of Froyle Tiles. Exactly the same amount of glaze had to be applied on each, which was achieved by putting the tile on a set of scales and brushing the liquid on by hand. ‘We didn’t realise we were working on slightly different calibrated scales at the beginning,’ she remembers, ‘so we had to compensate all the recipes.’ Likewise every shelf in the kiln had to be spirit-levelled, because any run-off from the fluid would have ruined it. Where the tile was placed in the kiln, how much the glaze had been shaken in the van ride over – the margin for variation was huge. To describe it as a daunting prospect is an understatement.

According to project architect Stephen Pey, the scheme has been designed to blend in with the history of the street. ‘Savile Row has a big history in terms of arts and crafts and hand-made tailoring,’ he explains over the phone. ‘So we know it had to be something similar to a Savile Row suit – to be a simple cut but with fine materials. That art and craft narrative drove quite a few of the design decisions.’ The relationship with Malone has worked because, he says, ‘She was always very open to listening to our ideas. She didn’t try to impress. A problem with a lot of public art on buildings is that the artist tries to make their own impression

without understanding the local context or the actual architecture itself... The level of dialogue and narrative that went on between the architect and artist doesn’t always happen. Although they might seem relatively similar, there’s quite a vast difference between the two disciplines.’

By her own admission Malone has donned a number of hats during the project. ‘I’m the glaze designer and researcher. Then I’m the glaze producer, so we made 1,450 litres of hand-sieved glazes in five- and six-litre batches. We didn’t want to scale up from the sampling, it was too dangerous. Then I’ve been a consultant and overseer and quality assessor. And now I’m designer and consultant of public art.’

All of which is a very long way from her beginnings at Henbury Comprehensive school outside Bristol. It was here she first experienced clay. ‘It had a very nice little pottery department under the stairs of E Block. Aged 11, I remember poking my nose over the ledge of the window, seeing the kiln room and thinking: “What is that? And what are all those things in jars.”’ It helped too that the pottery teacher was easy on the eye, seemingly.

While her grandfather could paint and her mother used to make clothes, the rest of the family had very different interests. ‘My dad was a sports journalist, and my brothers are in media and journalism. They used to ask me when I was going to get a proper job.’ Likewise her profound interest in nature was evident at an early age too: ‘My dad said as a little girl I’d sit alone and just look at a plant very closely. I’ve always just adored it.’ Bringing

‘We know it had to be something similar to a Savile Row suit – to be a simple cut but with fine materials’

STEPHEN PEY, EPR ARCHITECTS

Detail of *Magma Series*,
crystalline-glazed
stoneware, 2014





'I realised quite recently that I can visualise. If I have an idea, I form this deep vision in my brain that I can follow without drawing'

KATE MALONE

PHOTOS COURTESY ADRIAN SASSOON, LONDON | PREVIOUS SPREAD PHOTO: REBECCA CHATTERTON

these two passions together made perfect sense, as she points out: 'There's a great parity between a pineapple holding juice, and a pot holding liquid.'

After studying at Bristol, where she was influenced by Mo Jupp ('Even on the giant projects now where I'm frightened to death, I think what he'd have said'), she enrolled at the RCA, beginning her professional career in 1986. And for the past 17 years she has been represented by Adrian Sassoon. It's a partnership she clearly treasures. 'He's given me confidence,' she says. 'We have a great trust in each other really.' And it's through showing on Sassoon's stand at various exhibitions around the world that she met Michael Eden, who she commissioned to take a selection of the crystal patterns made from her tiles, enhance them through Rhino and have them sand-cast into the bronze plates which will clad the building's base. Initially the pair had looked at doing something with oversized buttons, before deciding it was too obvious. The idea

is that over time the plates will wear, bringing an added depth and richness.

There are a string of fascinating contradictions about Malone's practice. Here is an artist obsessed with the power and form of nature, who chooses to keep a studio in a gritty, if up-and-coming, area of London. She claims to eschew the cerebral, refraining from expending too much of her energy thinking about what she's doing and she's quite capable of sounding a little bit ethereal. While her process often begins with drawing (she was one of the exhibitors in the Kyra Cane-curated exhibition *Out of Sight* last year at Contemporary Applied Arts) she explains: 'I realised quite recently that I can visualise. If I have an idea I sort of form this quite deep vision in my brain that I can then follow without drawing... I never know what it's going to look like, and I always let the making process take it.'

Yet while an element of her process is based on intuition, there is obviously huge rigour and

Above, left: *Green Diamond Magma*, crystalline-glazed stoneware, 17 x 19 cm, 2014
Above, right: *Purple Diamond Magma*,

crystalline-glazed stoneware, 19.5 x 18 cm, 2014
Opposite: *White Cube Magma*, crystalline-glazed stoneware, 22 x 26 cm, 2014

organisation in her studio. At one stage during our chat I found myself idly flicking through her extraordinary manual of glaze recipes, with its countless grids of figures and formulae as well as images of experiments, which represents a 30 year labour of love.

Perhaps most importantly, though, there is a sense of generosity permeating our entire conversation, which is utterly beguiling. At different junctures she tells me how she couldn't have got where she is without her husband, without Adrian Sassoon, without Helen Evans who worked on the glaze for the building in the studio, without everybody involved with the scheme. It has obviously been an immense project but has it, I wonder, been career-changing? 'Yes, I sense it is, but I don't want to analyse it. I just want it to happen. I feel quite scared.' If the results coming out of that kiln are typical, then it looks as though scared is good.
www.katemaloneceramics.com