

Visual language



Kate Haywood moved from making jewellery to creating visually striking and ambiguous ceramic compositions. *Alex McErlain* met Kate to discover her journey and the inspiration behind her work



When Kate Haywood moves studio, the first thing she does is paint the walls an intense colour – sometimes saffron yellow, often indigo blue. She paints the walls in order to provide the ideal backdrop to observe the development of her work with clarity. She is concerned with how objects are understood and interpreted and believes the vibrancy of the colour encourages detailed scrutiny of her white porcelain. ‘The colour relates to how my work is read culturally,’ she explains, ‘referencing aspects of ritual, ceremony and viewing environments.’ It would appear that Kate views the background colour as a central part of the work that contributes to its success.

I ask Kate about this need for scrutiny. She explains by describing a piece of research she did on her first degree: ‘My thesis at that time was titled *Hitchcock the Surrealist?* I was looking at his films in relation to the objects within them. You could classify his work as being surrealist so it was to do with the power of the objects, the viewer, controlling the setting, and how objects are used.’

Her answer reveals the roots of the work she now makes: pieces that have ambiguity, that catch attention through hazy recognition of form and then draw the viewer in, by trying to grasp the meaning of what lies before them. Her work, in the modern idiom, often incorporates materials other than clay. Her investigations, producing objects of an ambiguous nature, have much in common with one of the pioneers of this genre, Gillian Lowndes (1936–2010).

Having completed two undergraduate degrees, Kate has an unusual background for a ceramic artist. The first was in

jewellery at London’s Central St Martins, the second in ceramics at Camberwell College of Arts. She had initially opted for jewellery as it suited the scale of the work she was making at that time, and it was at St Martins that she became interested in ambiguous sculptural forms. After graduating she took a studio space in Greenwich and began making jewellery to sell through galleries. Working in a nearby studio was a ceramic artist and Kate found herself exploring clay, a material she had not yet tried. She fell in love with it and enrolled in an evening class to learn more. She was soon hooked enough to ask to work with Lisa Hammond, becoming her assistant. Time spent with Shozo Michikawa, including assisting with wood firings, broadened her material understanding and convinced her that she should undertake a degree in ceramics.

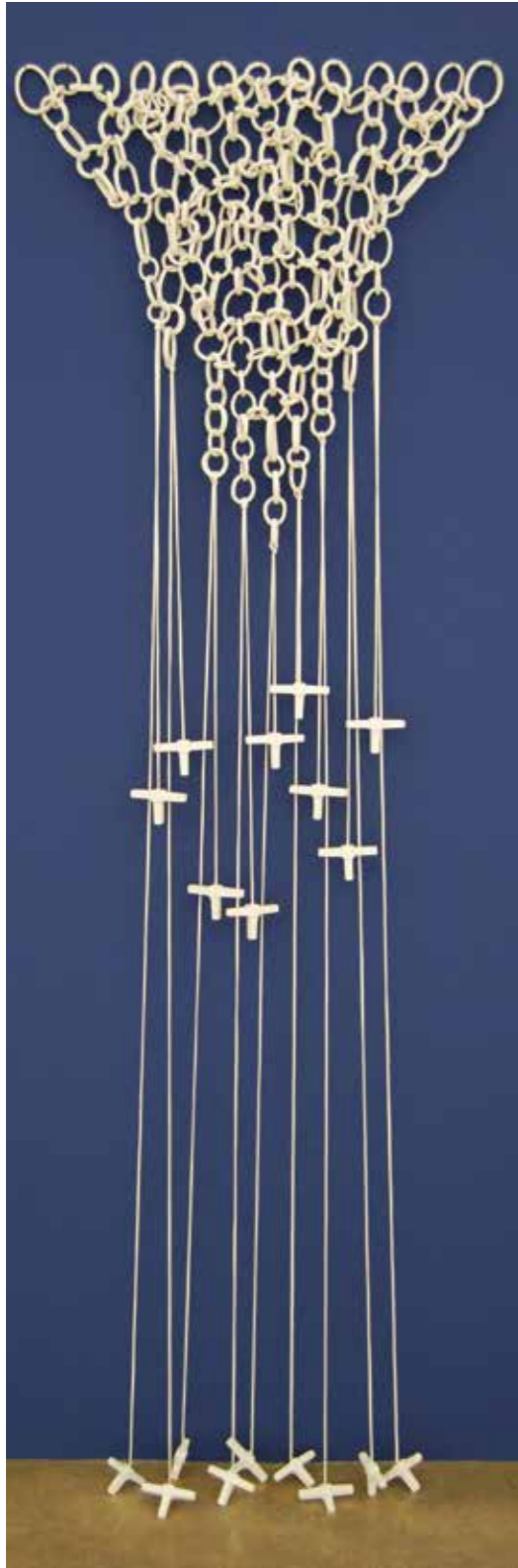
CERAMIC CHALLENGE

At Camberwell, Kate explored every process available and her work began to move in many directions. On graduation she set up a ceramic studio, undertook residencies, worked as a technician and showed her work in a remarkable series of international exhibitions. A selection of her degree show work was purchased by the Picasso Museum following an exhibition in Vallauris. Kate was awarded a gold medal in the *Faenza International Ceramic Competition* and also showed work in Spain, Austria and Germany. ‘I don’t think my work really fitted into UK exhibitions at that time,’ she explains. ‘But I had some success in Europe.’



PREVIOUS PAGE: *Amulet*, 2016, porcelain, silk, steel and gold leaf
OPPOSITE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: *Calla*, 2016, porcelain and gold leather; *Jetty*, 2016, porcelain and cotton; *Ore*, 2016, porcelain and cotton; *Beam*, 2016, porcelain and linen
THIS PAGE: *Bine*, 2016, porcelain and cotton
OVERLEAF LEFT: *Kolo*, 2014, porcelain and cotton
OVERLEAF RIGHT: *Pace*, 2016, porcelain and cotton

Images: Christopher Stock (Amulet); Ole Akhøj (Pace, Pinch, Calla); David Manton (portrait)



However, the pull of the learning environment was still strong, and in 2013 she took a place at Cardiff University to study for an MA in ceramics. 'I got to a stage where I wanted to challenge myself,' says Kate. 'I had become too comfortable with what I was making and loved the art school environment.'

INTRIGUING STRUCTURES

During her MA, Kate's work changed considerably. This was partially driven by her desire to challenge herself, but also due to physical changes following a period of serious illness that left her unable to undertake the work she used to make. The solution was to place greater emphasis on what she describes as a 'thinking through making' approach, which marked the beginning of the visual language she uses today. 'On the MA I was trying to think about how visually poetic forms can function,' she explains. 'I was trying to break that down and understand how it worked.'

'I work in porcelain because of the material connotations of its history and its whiteness – it is so loaded with associations, but is also open to interpretation because it's visually unassuming'

This endeavour resulted in the mysterious compositions she produces today, which often reference ceremonies, adornments and rituals. She uses the wheel to make many aspects of her work, throwing delicate rings in porcelain that she manipulates through cutting, stretching and joining, sometimes with threads, to compose the intriguing structures that interplay space, light and form. 'I work in porcelain because of the material connotations of its history and its whiteness – it is so loaded with associations because it's visually unassuming. In a practical sense, it also captures fine detail well,' she explains.

VISUALISING IDEAS

Kate gives her artworks titles that are often imaginatively suggestive, perhaps to encourage questions and interpretations from the viewer. A work in porcelain and cotton entitled *Jetty* (see image top right, page 52) is about how objects are read and controlled within a space. She describes how 'an outer hoop controls the composition. It's a three-dimensional framing device with a textured surface that alters the way you read the work. The form changes so you become aware of this quality and how each surface is read, encouraging your eye to be drawn between the objects. The slight change in scale, the repetition of the looped form within the different objects, a slight suggestion of function within a few of the forms, all slow down the viewing process. The viewer is wondering, "What is that a

part of? Why are they separate?'" Eventually, there is a realisation that the elements are meant to be together, and that there is pleasure in scrutinising her poetic compositions. The openness of meaning is central to Kate's making. She believes that a good piece of work always generates more questions than answers, which in turn drives her forward.

Kate's work evolves through a continuum of drawing, modelling, assemblage and reflection, which she calls a kind of 'ping pong' of ideas moving back and forth until something begins to emerge that she can bring into existence as an ambiguous object. A recent piece called *Amulet* (see page 51) illustrates this way of working well. There are a series of associated drawings for the work in which three-dimensional form is suggested through delicate touches with the tip of a brush. In her drawing the structure evolves without plan – she responds to the way marks sit alongside each other to suggest constructions in space. The drawings are not blueprints for making, but rather a way to visualise her ideas and provide a route into working with clay.

Amulet is a construction of thrown porcelain rods, cut and stretched to suggest both strength and vulnerability. 'From a distance it has a hardness to the edge, but when you look closely there's a delicacy of the thrown profile,' says Kate. 'Each section is bound together with coloured silk, exploring the contrasting strengths of the material and seeing how far you can push them. From a distance it looks like a solid structure, but when you are up close you see it's held together by something that is very fragile.'

The scaffold-like structure both supports and protects a small gilded shape that hangs in the centre of the piece. It is a work that makes good use of the shadows that are created when it is illuminated, be it in sunlight, twilight or under a spotlight. The dictionary tells us that 'an amulet is an object whose most important characteristic is the power ascribed to it to protect its owner from danger or harm.' In this piece it is the amulet itself that is protected; we cannot reach it and yet may, perhaps, desire its protection.

FUTURE COLLABORATIONS

The opportunity for Kate to work more closely with objects from museum collections has recently been presented by York Art Gallery, alongside collaborations with glassmakers at the National Glass Centre in Sunderland. We can look forward to seeing the results of these explorations during 2017. In the future, Kate would like to experiment with differing ways of how she might show an object and subsequently explore how it is read, citing challenges of scale and the potential of collaboration – perhaps with a dancer and with adornments, which in some ways would take her back to her beginnings as a jeweller. There is much more to come from this young artist, and it is pleasing to see that she is now being recognised as one of the most intriguing artists working in clay today. ■

Find out more about Kate's work at katehaywood.co.uk



KATE'S PATH OF DISCOVERY

- 1998–2001: BA Hons, Jewellery Design, Central Saint Martins College of Art and Design, London
- 2001–2003: works as a studio jeweller in London
- 2004–2007: BA Hons, Ceramics, Camberwell College of Arts, London
- 2008: *International Biennale of Contemporary Ceramics*, Magnelli Museum, Vallauris, France
- 2009: *Gold Medal at the 56th Premio Faenza, International Competition of Contemporary Ceramic Art*, Italy
- 2009–2010: work purchased for museum collections: Magnelli Museum, France; International Ceramics Museum, Faenza Italy; University of the Arts, London
- 2010: *ICMEA conference, Emerging Artists Competition*, Fuping, China
- 2012: *International Ceramic Triennial*, Unicum, Slovenia
- 2013–2014: MA Ceramics, Cardiff School of Art
- 2015: *British Ceramics Biennial Fresh Award*, Stoke-on-Trent, England
- 2016: Project Network Residency, Guldagergaard, Denmark; Future Lights Residency, Staffordshire University
- 2017: National Glass Centre Residency, University of Sunderland
- 2017: Crafts Council Hothouse Programme
- 2017: *Hoard*, solo show at York Art Gallery