

THE WALLED GARDEN

Photographs: Carolyn Quartermaine Words: Victoria Gaiger

Ceramic artist **Kaori Tatebayashi** captures flowers in time. These ghosts of the past reflect the fragility and beauty of the botanical world but also convey a strength of form and the spirit of nature



Opposite page: Chantre hand-smocked tulle dress by Molly Goddard. Overleaf: dress as above; white shirt and skirt, photographer's own

THE JAPANESE HAVE A SPECIFIC WORD for negative space – *ma*. In this concept, the space around an object is just as important as the physical form. *Ma* has been described as ‘the emptiness full of possibilities’, like a promise waiting to be fulfilled.

In Kaori Tatebayashi’s hand-formed ceramics, *ma* provides the tension to her work, the gaps between each of her designs as significant as the sculptures. Her fired pieces capture the fragility of nature’s cycle while preserving the fleeting moment. The pure, unglazed clay lends a ghostly quality, which becomes a metaphor for memory, traces of the past and a connection to the present.

Tatebayashi comes from a family of ceramics traders. She studied design and later specialised in ceramics at Kyoto City University of Art in Japan. While she was doing her Masters, she received a scholarship to study at London’s Royal College of Art as an exchange student.

A keen gardener, Tatebayashi models directly from fresh flowers and plants. She also includes figures of insects in her compositions, emphasising the precise snapshot of a moment in time. These organic forms are often mounted vertically, seeming to crawl over the walls. Her recent exhibition, *The Walled Garden*, featured among its works a series of iris flowers arranged across a wall like musical notes. The violinist Isaac Stern once described music as ‘that little bit between each note – silences which give the form’. This incredible piece became exactly that, the gaps between the perfectly formed iris petals as resonant as the composition itself.

Growing up, were you surrounded by ceramics at home?

My family were merchants of Arita-ware [also known as Imari porcelain]. We took orders from hotels and restaurants from all over Japan and shipped them out once they were made in the various potteries in the village of Arita. We had a large warehouse to store pots where my cousins and I were allowed to play. We used to collect old Imari porcelain fragments in the river that ran through the middle of the village. I have great memories of the annual pottery festival which happened there each spring. As children, we were given a small table next to the adults’ tableware stall, and we sold animal figurines. I also have strong memories of visiting a pottery factory in Kyoto. My family moved to Kyoto when I was young and we lived near the Kiyomizu-ware factory. I was allowed to sit beside the craftsmen, mesmerised, watching them throwing hundreds of pots from a lump of clay. It was like magic; I often forgot when it was time to go home.

How important was nature to you as a child?

Although we moved to Kyoto, I still spent most of my summer holidays in Arita at my grandparents’ place. I grew up without many toys or computer games, learning everything from nature

and by playing in the wild with my cousins. The landscape of Arita is unique, which I only appreciated after leaving Japan. The mountains around Arita are not very high but they are rocky and evergreen and covered by coniferous trees – very different from the Kyoto mountains. My grandfather was also a passionate gardener and had a conservatory full of plants.

To what extent do you draw upon your heritage in your designs? What do traditional Japanese crafts mean to you?

I never intentionally tried to bring ‘Japaneseness’ to my work; it’s something I was born with rather than something I actively try to incorporate. Although, since I started making the botanical wall pieces, I’ve noticed the similarities between my compositions and Japanese painted screens from the 16th to the 19th century. Traditional Japanese craftsmanship was part of my training, and it requires certain disciplines. These fundamental skills enable me to do what I do today.

Your colour palette is very restrained. Do you choose to avoid colour or have you always been drawn to muted tones?

When I studied ceramics at university, the most natural thing for me would have been to make tableware in porcelain, but I was curious to find out what else this familiar medium could do. I liked clay’s unique character of simultaneously having permanence and fragility, and I was fascinated by its ghost-like appearance after the firing. To begin with, I used glazes and colours, and always applied some kind of ‘finish’ to my work. I was traditionally trained in Japan, so glazing was an unquestionable process to me back then. About 20 years ago, I made the decision to skip this process and started to leave my work unglazed, keeping the natural colour of the clay. It was a big decision as I hadn’t come across anyone else doing it at that point.

What influence did your studies in Kyoto and at London’s Royal College of Art have on your work?

Without my three years of training in design and six years in ceramics in Kyoto, my current work couldn’t have been born. Studying at the Royal College of Art was also an eye-opener. But going back even further, the exhibition *The Raw & The Cooked: New Work in Clay in Britain*, which toured Japan in 1993, was a turning point for me and completely changed my view of ceramics. It was jaw-dropping. I discovered that ceramics didn’t have to be functional, that they could be sculptural.

How would you describe your work and creative process?

I’m trying to preserve time by stopping the clock on flora and fauna. In my work, the space around the objects is as important as the objects themselves – we call this *ma* in Japanese. *Ma* is not visible, and so you can only feel it when you have objects. What surrounds the objects is *ma*. So I’m capturing both time and *ma* by fixing plants and flowers in a moment.



‘Whatever you make in clay, the time in which the object lived stops with the firing in the kiln. What’s left after the firing is the lifeless ‘shell’ which can be destroyed at once if dropped or remain permanently if kept intact’





I don't work from photographs or memory – I hand-sculpt plants from scratch, with no casting or moulding involved. I put a real plant in front of me and model it by observation, and I always work with seasonal plants. When I make a large wall piece, I have a rough idea in mind, but I don't make drawings or plan a final composition. I like spontaneity. I enjoy the moment of excitement when the pieces come out from the kiln. Making a composition is just like doing Ikebana.

What do you like about working with clay?

Clay is the medium in my blood. I have been working with it for the last 30 years. I have almost forgotten what I like about clay as it's so natural for me to be in contact with it every day; it's like breathing. I understand its strengths and weaknesses, and I can manipulate it as if it's part of my own body. Although, even now, it surprises me sometimes and it can betray me badly. That's clay. I also like its impermanence. Whatever you make in clay, the time in which the object lived stops with the firing in the kiln. What's left

after the firing is the lifeless 'shell' which can be destroyed at once if dropped or remain permanently if kept intact.

How important is it for you to have access to a garden?

It's so important to me. I can't imagine not having a garden or living somewhere without being in close contact with nature. I feel so lucky to live in London yet to be surrounded by nature. There's a park right next door to where I live and a wood at the back. I often have bats flying into my flat and witness stag beetles metamorphosing from larva to adult in my garden. The local park also provides a foraging ground for ice-cream ingredients, my new passion.

Your recent exhibition was called The Walled Garden.

Were you trying to create a garden refuge for yourself?

The Walled Garden was created with the intention of bringing the garden indoors. For my work, I try to grow as many plants as I possibly can myself. Bought plants are not quite the same –



they tend to be too perfect for my liking. I model from real plants because I'm in search of imperfection, which is crucial for my work but hard to make up. The quietness of The Walled Garden may have come from my somewhat restrained palette. I think my work is soundless. For me, fired clay resembles ghosts, which are naturally quiet.

What do you mean when you describe ceramics as 'ghosts'?

Clay is an organic, malleable material full of living bacteria, but once it's been fired it becomes lifeless. In a way, my ceramics are trapped in time, so the object becomes a shell of life, like a fossil – once a living plant or creature but now no longer.

Who or what has had the biggest influence on your work?

I can't think of anyone in particular. The material itself is the motive for my work. •



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