

ceramics

M O N T H L Y



Cover: Kaori Tatebayashi

Studio Visit: Catie Miller

Feature: The Cookout

Spotlight: World-Fire



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Kaori Tatebayashi's Observation of Nature

by Tim Saunders

Botanical sculptures based on seasonal plants and flowers are the specialism of Japanese ceramic artist Kaori Tatebayashi, who lives in London, England. She made her first flower, a single rose stem, forgotten and dying in a vase, for Ceramic Art London in 2005, and this subject matter still engages her today.

Tatebayashi, who makes both sculpture and tableware, finds that each plant has its charm, and it's her passion for gardening that is the main influence in her ceramics. She credits this passion to her talented grandfather, a gardener who bred and named wild orchids from the mountain in the little village of Arita, Japan. For over 400 years, this village was renowned for producing porcelain, and this is where Tatebayashi happened to be born. Her rock-climbing

grandfather, who also played violin, was an Arita-ware merchant, taking orders from hotels and restaurants in Japan. Tatebayashi fondly remembers her family gathering together to pack tableware.

Every May, there was a pottery festival in Arita where Tatebayashi and her cousins sold little porcelain figures. Sales resulted in ice creams from visiting relatives. Although Tatebayashi does not work in porcelain, this experience certainly fostered a desire to work in clay. She counts herself as being extremely fortunate to be surrounded by other creative relatives, too. Her mother, a china painter; her father, an architect; her grandmother, a cook and kimono maker; her uncles, fishing experts; and her cousins, musicians. During the school holidays in Arita, Tatebayashi would

be at her grandmother's, playing in the wild with her cousins. She doesn't remember having any toys; her playground was nature, the woods, the streams, the sea, and the porcelain quarry. So it is not surprising to learn that ever since Tatebayashi was old enough to talk, she said that she would become an artist.

Hours, Minutes, and Seconds

Time also plays a critical part in her work. Preserving the forms of plants, with their short lives, by recreating them in clay creates a sense of time being frozen. Adding insects and other creatures such as snails, which by nature are very slow, helps to enhance this feeling of time being stopped. "By sculpting, I am keeping a diary of objects I am fascinated by, capturing the time the object once lived in and preserving it in clay instead of my memory," Tatebayashi explains, adding that fired clay has qualities of both permanence and fragility because it can remain unchanged until broken when it disappears within seconds. The permanence appeals to her. She observed that when the object was malleable, unfired clay, it was alive, an organic material, and the firing created a different state, a transition from a living thing to a dead one, almost ghost-like.

Process

Tatebayashi always works from life, not photographs or memory. She brings plants into her studio (some that she has grown) and observes them on her table before grabbing a piece of white stoneware clay to start modeling, as if she is doing a life drawing. She might use a simple modeling tool, such as a knife that she has made herself. Tatebayashi calculates which part she should make first, the drying time, and which is the best forming technique to use. It is the imperfection of reality that sparks her interest and helps her to create a believable likeness. The pieces must be dried slowly, then they are fired once, to 2282°F (1250°C). Since pieces are not bisque fired, no glazes are applied. When a different color is called for to evoke a certain mood or ambiance, Tatebayashi uses black clay.

The whole process is challenging for Tatebayashi because not only does she have to extract the very essence of each flower, but the pieces must be strong enough to withstand the firing process, the packaging, the delivery, and the all-important final installation. With this in mind, the pieces are constructed directly on a kiln shelf. Tatebayashi must work fast to prevent the clay from drying out and usually makes her botanical sculptures in segments so that they can be assembled on the wall. It is therefore important for her to visit the intended exhibition space to familiarize herself with it. For her, the space around her sculptures is just as important as the work itself. One of the largest installations she has produced is *The Banquet*, which was developed from a small still-life series. She wanted to create a large, flamboyant scene based on the feel of the paintings from the old Dutch masters like Rembrandt and Van Gogh.



Opposite: *Spring Flower Specimen Series* (detail), 2022. **1** *Spring Flower Specimen Series* (detail), stoneware in linen-backed oak frame, 2022. **2** Above: *Magnolia III*, 2022. Below: *Spring Flower Specimen Series*, stoneware in linen-backed oak frame, 2022.

Education

When Tatebayashi studied ceramics, the *Sōdeisha* movement, led by Japanese potter Kazuo Yagi (1918 to 1979), was popular. *Sōdeisha*, which literally means “Crawling through Mud Association,” was formed in opposition to the *Mingei* or folk-craft movement. It ran from 1948 to 1998 when it was disbanded. *Sōdeisha* made ceramics that resembled sculpture but were not—something in between—which appealed to her. Then when Tatebayashi attended a sculptural ceramics exhibition organized by the Crafts Council, which toured from London to Japan, she was overcome by a revolutionary feeling. It was the muted finishes, as opposed to shiny or heavily glazed, that inspired her to pursue a similar idea, and, as a result, Tatebayashi’s work is left unglazed.

Japan to England

In Japan, she had learned the skills required to run her own ceramics workshop, such as traditional spiral wedging, which takes three years to master, throwing, and handbuilding techniques through firing electric, oil, gas, and wood-fired kilns. Her bachelor’s degree in ceramics from Kyoto City University of Art was all about skill-based making. After graduating, Tatebayashi arrived in London

in 1996 as an exchange student to study at the Royal College of Art (RCA). It was there she started making sculptures. This was the very reason she had chosen to study at the RCA because ceramic sculpture didn’t have a place in the world of traditional Japanese ceramics, which concentrated on conventional vessels and functional pieces. During her exchange at the RCA and a short residency in Denmark, she felt entirely liberated from the rules, restrictions, and traditional approaches toward clay and glazes that she had been brought up on in Japan. As a consequence, her work changed dramatically, especially the finish.

Returning to Kyoto to finish her master of arts degree, she focused on how to express herself in clay with a range of ceramic materials. After obtaining her degree, Tatebayashi lived in Tokyo for four years, teaching full time. Short periods of free time only allowed her to make small, repetitive pieces and she found it most suitable for making tableware, which also came naturally to her due to her family background. But, she didn’t enjoy life in Tokyo and missed being close to nature. Tatebayashi found life in Japan to be too fast paced, and she also felt that there was no sense of the seasons. So in 2001, she moved back to England, firstly renting in St John’s Wood. Her studio is in Camberwell. She has stayed





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3 *German Iris*, at Tristan Hoare Gallery, London, 2020. Photo: Betty Jaresova. 4 Kaori Tatebayashi assembling *Hellebore I*, 2020. Photo: Betty Jaresova. 5 Installation of a ceramic flower at Tristan Hoare Gallery, London, 2020. 6 *Tulip 3*, 22½ in. (57 cm) in height, stoneware, 2020. 7 Tatebayashi installing *Melianthus Major (Honeybush)* at Tristan Hoare Gallery, London, 2020. 8 *Bramble I*, at Tristan Hoare Gallery, London, 2020.

here ever since, finding that London is greener and offers a much calmer way of life than in Tokyo. According to Tatebayashi, who is represented by Tristan Hoare Gallery, where she had a solo exhibition in 2021, her sculptural work is also better received in England than in Japan, which is still stuck in tradition.

Site-Specific Installation

Her first site-specific installation at Forde Abbey Historic House and Gardens at Thorncombe in Somerset, England, was created in her studio after a week's residency there. She created dahlias, which were scattered down the central table; pumpkins (the originals of which had been grown in the abbey's kitchen garden) arranged so they seemed to be sprouting from between the old books; and swallows nesting in front of the bookshelves. The installed pieces celebrated the surrounding gardens and nature and the feeling of the 900-year-old library. In pursuit of accessibility, a fairy-tale aspect, and a little spookiness, Tatebayashi kept conceptualism to a minimum.

Making a Living

Tatebayashi, a member of the Craft Potters Association, whose work varies from £1000 to £8500 (\$1209 to \$10,273) in price, now works mainly by commission. She also teaches at West Dean College of Arts and Conservation near Chichester in West Sussex, and has taught pottery in Japan and with Westminster Adult Education Service in London to different age groups from children to people of retirement age. She has a Japanese teaching style, emphasizing the importance of mastering the fundamental skills to be developed into an individual style later. Tatebayashi exhibits widely in the UK and at international fairs including Collect, Ceramic Art London, SOFA Chicago, and Highlights.

See www.kaoricamics.com for more.

the author *British journalist Tim Saunders writes about art and ceramics. When he has time, he enjoys painting and making.*