

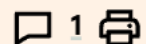
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Kaori Tatebayashi photographed at her London studio by Charlotte Hadden © Charlotte Hadden

Jennifer Lucy Allan

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Laid out on straw matting like the pale ghosts of this summer's blooms are ceramicist Kaori Tatebayashi's most recent works: life-sized bearded iris, foxglove and tendrils of bindweed in pale clay like colourless Dutch masters made real. Silken iris petals billow on skeletal stems framed by sword-shaped leaves; foxglove flowers cluster in bud and bloom, leaning as if growing towards the light in her airy industrial studio on the edge of the Thames. If it wasn't for the hard white stoneware they are made from, there would be nothing to distinguish them from real plants.

This is the next piece Tatebayashi will exhibit, at Tristan Hoare Gallery's booth at the PAD design fair in London in October. Here on the floor of her studio they are waiting to be arranged into a final composition. It is a quiet dream of a place: dried teasels and poppy seed heads hang on whitewashed walls; books are stacked up a staircase to a mezzanine storing antique wooden vitrines. A glass-fronted cabinet holds treasured pottery next to an enormous bleached palm leaf and a dried flower arrangement. Under the stairs I am surprised by a ceramic dandelion that appears to have sprouted from the rug.



Kaori Tatebayashi arranges ceramic flower models on the floor of her south London studio © Charlotte Hadden

Under the floor-to-ceiling windows Tatebayashi, who turns 53 this year, has laid out a collection of her botanical ceramics, each one an example of how she hits pause on plants mid-bloom. “My aim is to freeze time within the ceramic,” she says. Dressed in muted loose linens that harmonise with the studio’s palette, she shows me a hyacinth with bulb and roots, as if just pulled from the ground; a peony whose bloom is just about to go over; a lily with furred stamen that might dust you with white pollen. Once fired, she arranges the components to dance over walls or around architectural features of a room. “I never plan the final composition,” she says. “Only once they’re fired do I start assembling — a bit like doing a flower arrangement.”

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Kaori Tatebayashi

me snails and a butterfly she sometimes adds to give a composition a sense of movement.

Unlike flower arranging, though, Tatebayashi does not look to sanitise or idealise these forms. “I like to capture nature as it is, and nature has imperfections and unexpected shapes — weeds as well as cultivated plants,” she says, pointing to brambles and bindweed as examples of her preference towards wildflowers over florist’s blooms, showing



Plant pots, flower arrangements... © Charlotte Hadden



... and ceramic casts in Tatebayashi's south London studio © Charlotte Hadden

Before she moved her focus to botanical subjects, Tatebayashi made captivating still lifes from clay: a loaf of bread, a napkin posed as if dropped from a diner's hand; a candle just extinguished. "In university I started making clothes, shoes, hats, everyday objects like keys — a shirt hung from a hook so that it was draping. [My idea was that] these fired ceramics would evoke or bring personal memories back . . . but then I moved towards something alive, to project a stronger sense of time being captured."

Tatebayashi was born in 1972 in the porcelain city of Arita in Japan and grew up in Kyoto. Her grandparents were traders of Arita's famous Imari porcelain, and she remembers watching pots come into the warehouse coddled in straw, where their bases would be sanded down of any debris left from the firing. Her mother also painted porcelain — she shows me a tiny teapot and cup with classic peony and chrysanthemum designs in cobalt and persimmon red. But while her family's history is tied up with ceramics, it wasn't expected she would become a ceramicist herself.



Ceramic flowers and stems laid out on a worktop in Tatebayashi's studio © Charlotte Hadden

She studied at Kyoto City University of Art. Her tutors were aligned to the postwar “Sodeisha” movement, a group of Japanese artists who had reacted against functional folk art ceramics by making bold, avant-garde sculptural pieces.

A revelation came in the 1990s when she saw a touring exhibition from the UK, *The Raw and the Cooked* (curated by Alison Britton and Martina Margetts) which showcased a moment in British ceramics that collapsed distinctions between fine art and craft. “It was jaw dropping,” she says. “It changed my perspective. I remember seeing Susan Halls, Rosa Nguyen, Martin Smith,” and was particularly struck by the extremely matte surfaces on works by Elizabeth Fritsch and Gordon Baldwin. “They had a lighter finish,” she explains, “they didn’t have this heavy glossy glaze. I was totally fascinated — it was something I was looking for but couldn’t find in Japan.”

She applied for an exchange programme at the Royal College of Art in London, returning to Kyoto to complete her studies before settling in the UK for good in 2001. “In Japan I just couldn’t place my work,” she says, as the strong association with functional pottery meant ceramics was not often seen as an art form. In the UK she continued to develop her fine art work, supplementing it with pottery teaching and a line of subtly irregular minimalist tableware in muted greys and blacks, which were installed in the British Museum’s Grenville Room in 2009.



In her London garden © Kaori Tatebayashi

Moving to botanical subjects imbued her work with a stronger sense of a moment paused, rather than nostalgia — even now she never makes roses, as they feel loaded with too much symbolism. Many of the plants she grows herself, working against the clock as petals begin to fall, sculpting directly from life. Bringing real plants into the studio makes her work as seasonal as gardening: May and June are peak, with January and February relatively fallow.

In private commissions she often begins by looking at what is in a client's garden, or uses plants that have significance to them. One client sent her tulip bulbs, a variety created in memory of a brother who had died, which Tatebayashi grew over winter and picked in spring. "It's a long process, you have to really think in advance," she says, as well as needing to be green fingered enough to grow plants from seeds when commissions specify particular cultivars.



Tatebayashi completes one flower head a day, so an arrangement of flowers, leaves and stems can take weeks to make © Charlotte Hadden



Arranging work on the floor of her studio © Charlotte Hadden

If in pictures her pieces sometimes look pretty, up close they are miraculous — stems bend just so, leaves curl at the edges, flower heads nod. These observational details make the work feel like black-and-white photographs, but they also hide her skill as an engineer. She is humble about her making and has no secret techniques to reveal. In fact it's quite the opposite — she uses little else other than her hands and a single slender metal tool with a tip that swells and curves back into a point. She completes a single flower-head each day, so a composition like the iris and foxgloves can take months.

The clay Tatebayashi uses has a fine grain that gives strength but not too much texture, but she needs such a specific balance of qualities that she can't make work overseas without taking kilos of clay with her. It's also risky shipping work internationally, which is why she has been exploring ways to work in bronze, a project which will come into fruition for exhibition alongside her ceramics in early 2027. "The organic life of clay stops at the firing," she says. "People say my work is so lifelike, but to me they are frozen in time . . . I'm really trying to capture a moment. I feel ceramics can do this in ways other mediums can't. Time stops: they never age."

October 14-19, padesignart.com, tristanhoaregallery.co.uk