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Studio Visit

Artist Visit: Kaori Tatebayashi's Ceramic Garden

by Margot Guralnick | Published: January 19, 2022

Last spring, in a show called The Walled Garden, London's Tristan Hoare Gallery was given over to Kaori Tatebayashi's ceramic plants and flowers plus a re-creation of her workspace. Filled with Kaori's fragile white stems and cabinets of curiosities, the gallery's Georgian rooms became magical, ethereal spaces entirely removed from the here and now. In recent months, I've found myself happily escaping into images of the exhibit so often that it seemed high time we shared Kaori's work here.

Born into a family of tableware merchants in Arita, Japan, the country's longstanding hub of porcelain production, she's an artist who grew up surrounded by ceramics. Kaori began working in clay herself at Kyoto City University of Art, where she specialized in making functional wares, such as teapots. When her interests expanded into sculpture, Kaori moved to England to study at the Royal College of Art. She ended up staying in London and becoming a passionate gardener like her grandfather. Now, nearly 20 years after arriving, Kaori is one of the UK's most interesting botanical artists. She works in unglazed white stoneware and has begun creating her increasingly intricate plant studies as ghostly bas reliefs. Join us for a look at her first one-person show.

Photography by Alzbeta Jaresova, unless noted, courtesy of Kaori Tatebayashi.

Above: The Tristan Hoare Gallery is set in a well-preserved 1780s building on London's historic Fitzroy Square, where costume dramas are often filmed. Shown here, Kaori Tatebayashi's Cardoon, a spiny, artichoke-like thistle that she cultivates in her South East London garden. Like all of her current work, it's made by hand of white stoneware that she sources from Stoke on Trent and fires unglazed.

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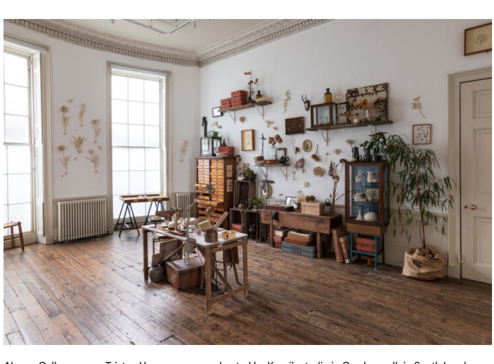

Above: Gallery owner Tristan Hoare was so enchanted by Kaori's studio in Camberwell, in South London, that he asked her to temporarily move it into his space and to work from there.

Above: Kaori makes her ceramics by hand and by close observation of her "models." She uses only a single tool, a metal knife that she made in art school: "in our ceramics course, we had to learn to make our tools ourselves." Photograph by Sophie Davidson.

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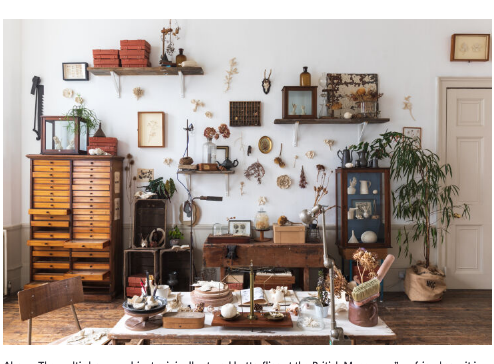

Above: The multi-drawer cabinet originally stored butterflies at the British Museum—"my friend saw it in an antiques shop and told me I had better go have a look. It had belonged to a gentleman who worked in the museum's Middle East department," says Kaori. "Old things with stories give me inspiration; I like making my studio feel a bit like a botanical laboratory."

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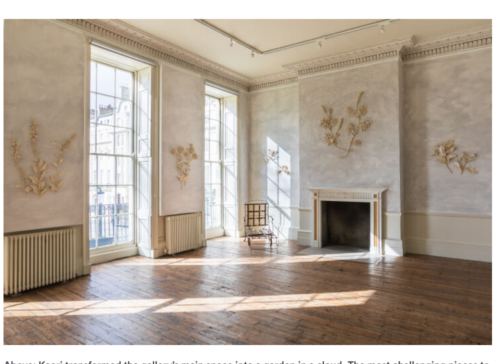
Above: The back wall is Kaori's "mood board." Photograph by Sophie Davidson.



Above: Kaori transformed the gallery's main space into a garden in a cloud. The most challenging pieces to create, she says, were the jagged leaves of the honeybush stems over the fireplace.

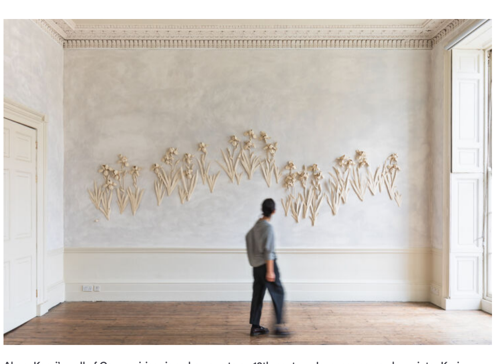
The walls were painted to Kaori's specs with a coat of Bauwerk Limewash in a pale, soft gray called Mallorca:"I used the same limewash at home, so I knew exactly what I was aiming for. If there had been time, we would have added a second layer." (They used the brushes Bauwerk recommends and followed the company's instructional videos.)

Above: Large work, such as this Bramble, is made in pieces and assembled on the wall: Kaori mounts her sculptures with small nails and wires hidden behind leaves. Once in place, she says, they're "as strong as normal tableware—especially if hung high enough that kids and dogs can't reach." She ships pieces cradled in handmade foam cutouts.

Above: "Kaori produces portraits of flowers and plants with amazing precision, not only describing how they look, but also how they feel," writes Tristan Hoare."I'm trying to convey a sense of time and of life being captured and preserved," adds Kaori.

Above: A pair of hyacinth and vase ensembles. Kaori says her training as a studio potter comes in handy in the making of her botanicals. "When I'm creating plant stems, for instance, I often use the method for making cup handles." Photograph by Kaori Tatebayashi.

Above: She also makes ceramic still lifes: see photos of a 2020 show of Kaori's work at March in San Francisco.



Aboe: Kaori's wall of German irises is an homage to an 18th-century Japanese screen by painter Korin Ogata. "Once all the segments are fired in the kiln, I start composing them. At this stage it's like doing Japanese flower arrangement. I like working spontaneously."

Kaori is represented by Tristan Hoare Gallery. She accepts commissions—The Secret Garden, her latest private installation, is on view on her website—but says she's fully booked until the end of 2023, when her next solo show goes up in the gallery.

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