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# CREATURE COMFORTS

**JO KNOWSLEY GETS A PEEK AT THE WILD AND WONDERFUL CHELSEA HOME OF CERAMICIST KATE BRAINE**

**T**HERE'S a lion in ceramicist Kate Braine's 18th-century living room in Cheyne Row - though it has long ceased to roar. But the plethora of other 'creatures' inhabiting shelves, tables and mantelpieces throughout this glorious four-storey Queen Anne home in Chelsea look as if they have freshly crawled in from the lush garden, or perhaps from even further afield, the sea.

'I think my pieces feel very alive,' says Kate, a ceramacist of two decades who also designs exotic jewellery and has created sculptures for the likes of David Bowie and Sam Wanamaker, founder of Shakespeare's Globe theatre. 'I like to think they have crept in from the garden, or the sea, and found a place to settle down in this house.'

'I'm very inspired by the notion of linking land and sea - and overcoming my fears. I'm frightened of forests, in darkest night, and the monsters that may live in the depth of the sea.'

'When I was 11 some other children tried to drown me. Then, in 2004, I survived the tsunami in Thailand. But my fears inspire some of the things I create - which then take on a life of their own.'

More than 300 of these fabulous and fantastical pieces - in glazes of vibrant red, green, coral and azure - are now comfortably ensconced in the house for Kate's first exhibition, *Tendrils Is The Night*, curated by London-based art consultant Fru Tholstrup, and held at Kate's own



PHOTOS: OSCAR KORPEI

home. The creations appear to swirl and crawl across the surfaces, their cracked and glazed tendrils full of movement. It feels as if you turned away they might disappear.

But the house itself is a constantly evolving work of art, too. When Kate, who grew up on nearby Cheyne Walk, found it 20 years ago it was tired. She refurbished and restored all the original wooden floors, among other things. But there was a legacy of enormous creativity, too.

From her roof terrace, with its soft, candy-coloured Bert & May floor tiles, Kate can see where William De Morgan, the 19th-century potter renowned for wares adorned with fantastical beasts, had his workshop

on the corner. Other artists, such as Dante Gabriel Rossetti and James Abbott McNeill Whistler, lured by De Morgan's studio, helped transform the area into an artistic bohemia.

The houses' previous Italian owner had created painted flower motives on the wood skirtings (from the old Chelsea and Kensington library) and the floorboards, while in the 19th century an artist who lived here built the double-height studio (now the vast drawing room) with its French doors to the leafy garden.

Here, there's a salvaged William III marble fireplace (the house has 11 grates) and an elegant marble-topped side table, supported by two gentle, kneeling women, cast in bronze. The

room has an Italianate palazzo plaster hue on the walls, which are adorned with hanging Berber wedding bands from Morocco. Antique lamps from Venice, which would once have illuminated ancient courtyards, now throw their warm light on the floors and the vintage rug.

This room is also the heart of the exhibition. On the large windowsill there are a group of 'Teal Glazed Walking Creatures' while on a nearby table 20 'Rusty Orange Scorched Lava Alien Flowers' with droplets of glass beads in their leaves, adorn the dark marble top. On the mantelpiece, a series of 'Dark Forest Green Lagoon Beings' cluster together - a harmony of peaceful monsters. 'I like to keep all

creatures of the same colour together, as if they're a sort of family,' Kate explains. There are ghosts in this house, Kate tells us - an old gentleman who glides through the walls at night, and a little boy she sometimes hears on the stairs. But 'from the beginning I felt it was a place where I belonged. A place I was meant to be.'

Her most dramatic transformation has been in the rooms adjacent to the grand drawing room which are now papered in thrillingly rich green malachite wallpaper, dominated by a large, powerful painting in red and black, by artist Suzy Murphy.

Here, in one corner, is her collection of dynamic sculptural glass creations by Venetian artist Napoleone

**Roarsome:** A stuffed lion dominates the room, above, which Kate is using as a display area for her *Tendrils Is The Night* exhibition, featuring creatures of land and sea

**Potting shed:** Kate works on her pieces in this former bathhouse located in the garden



Martinuzzi, whose red tones inspired Kate's 'Shiny Poppy Red Glazed Triffid' works and 'Red Poppy Glazed Flower Pots' with melted Murano glass, on shelves nearby.

In her pine-panelled dining room there are more 'creatures', while resting along the top of the bookcase are a series of expressive plaster hands and feet.

Up the stairs (covered in a threadbare 1930s vintage carpet runner), there's a curtain of beaded crystals on the path to the roof terrace; in the bathroom an armoire from France inspired the decorative

cupboards, and Kate designed the round window that brings light to the top floors. There are walls covered in bamboo; tranquil bedrooms with fabric-covered walls and floors painted ivory. In the kitchen, red walls were inspired by a fake Matisse she brought home from Thailand. And in the garden are two large, stone monkeys, their faces now shrouded in moss, which she shipped from Bali.

It is here, in the garden, in a former domed Turkish bath-house (redesigned, like much of the house, by Kate's friend, designer Christophe Gollut) that Kate creates her fantastical creatures on a Staffordshire wheel before submitting them to their final firing in a kiln. Outside, there's a pottery 'graveyard', where 500 slivers of ceramic tentacles and tendrils sprout from the soil like anxious baby Triffids.

Kate has enjoyed using this remarkable house as inspiration for her unique work. 'It's clever because you can evoke different feelings in different rooms,' she says. 'The browns in the dining room are more mellow, for example - they make you think of eating chocolate. And in the green room, it all comes down to surgery: the green of the surgeon's cloak and red of blood. I love the juxtaposition of these primary colours. I feel the creatures are happy here, too. A union of land and sea.'



**Eclectic display:** Surviving the 2004 tsunami partly inspired Kate's pots with sea-like fronds, above and left



**Home from home gallery:** Pots are displayed on a bed; Kate's alien flowers stand on a marble-topped table supported by kneeling women cast in bronze



**Kate Braine, *Tendrils Is The Night* at Cheyne Row is open, by appointment only, throughout the remainder of July, via Alice at KTW London: [alice@ktwlondon.com](mailto:alice@ktwlondon.com). Kate's jewellery: [leggeandbraine.com](http://leggeandbraine.com)**