

A sanctuary of colour

During the past year ceramic artist Sandy Brown has been working on an exceptional project – a ceramic temple, created for *Beyond Limits*, one of the key events in the art world calendar. *Andy Christian* has been following her progress





Last year Sandy Brown received an invitation. Issued by ceramics expert and dealer Joanna Bird, along with Simon Stock of Sotheby's, curator of this year's *Beyond Limits*, it was to visit Chatsworth House. They wanted to know if she would create a major work for the landscape there, to

feature in the international show. 'I did a quick sketch there and then, in thirty seconds,' Sandy recalls, 'and told them I would build a ceramic temple.' It would be a place for reflection. Somewhere, she says, 'non-denominational, but spiritually uplifting'. This commission has seen her become the first female ceramic artist to be included in the show – and it is the biggest piece Sandy has ever made. She set about organising a small team of makers and builders to plan and build, and made a massive commitment of her resources to achieve it. The *Temple* is covered in tiles, each one made to specific size, then slip-decorated in panels and groups. There is one opening, in a circular serpent form (see above), and eight round windows in the roof, with coloured glass made by Simon Moore, through which sunlight streams. The low arched doorway demands a compulsory bowing of the head as you enter.

'This commission has seen her become the first female ceramic artist to be included in the show – and it is the biggest piece Sandy has ever made'

In Appledore on the north Devon coast, Sandy's studio and showroom are housed in an old glove factory near the quay. The large first-floor windows overlook the Torridge estuary; on bright days the reflection from the water dramatically increases the light. On this first floor the temple has taken shape. I made two visits to see the work in progress. The first time I entered the showroom, workmen were cutting out the framework for the dome. Trial panels of tiles had been glazed and among the maquettes of the whole building were models of possible formats. One of Sandy's previous exhibitions had included a tea house, but this is a project on a far more ambitious scale. On my second visit, the pace of making was being led by Sandy in a completely focused way. The deadline loomed. Each tile was being screwed into the framework with the knowledge that each would shortly have to be

unfastened, packed, shipped and then reassembled on site at Chatsworth after the frame was fixed in place.

Not only is this the first work made entirely by hand in ceramic that Sotheby's have included in their Chatsworth sculpture exhibitions, it is also one of the biggest single pieces of which I am aware. Anthony Gormley's multiples in *Field for the British Isles* (1993), which had many more makers involved, and the river of red poppies at the Tower of London by Tom Piper and Paul Cummins in 2014, relied on the accumulations of individual pieces to attain their drama. *Temple* reminds me of Niki de Saint Phalle's *Giardino dei Tarocchi* ('The Tarot Garden') in Garavicchio, Tuscany, which contains many little buildings and hollow figures, and includes a cave-like apartment in which Saint Phalle lived during a long construction period. The 'garden' is covered inside and out with ceramic mosaic and mirrors. But Saint Phalle's primary intent seems to have been to invoke a decorative, surreal world. Matisse's chapel at Vence, built for the Dominican sisters, with its large black and white ceramic panels in a spare interior, lit by exuberant stained glass, is ultimately a Christian building. Houston's Rothko Chapel is more in accord with Sandy's secular optimism.

From the outside, the temple's architecture is on a friendly, human scale. The colour invites us, and the tile panels harbour Sandy's well appreciated, free, gestural swirls of colour. In that sense it is welcoming and celebratory. Inside, the tiles are treated in a similar way, but they make their way into the cupola, diminishing in size as they reach the centre, which is appropriately called the origin. Ceramic stools within the building enable visitors to sit and contemplate. People will bring their personal concerns and worries to this space and their thoughts and considerations will drift along with the abstract patterns. The temple offers people asylum in a world that rarely proffers quietude. If visitors take their time inside and outside it may well be seen to achieve the mission of Houston's Rothko Chapel, which is to '...inspire people into action through art and contemplation, to nurture reverence for the highest aspirations of humanity...'

Sandy's celebration of earthly goddesses in her earlier work seems to presage the temple – but there is no figurative goddess in this building. Generously and open-heartedly, we are offered a space within which to bring our own faith, or lack of faith, or indeed to leave any doctrine that has a hold on us well outside. In the vast grounds of Chatsworth House, the *Temple* may seem of a modest size (though its height could barely be contained in the high-ceilinged former glove factory). Wherever it finds an eventual home, it will need space around it. Sandy's work needs room for its gestural marks to fly off into the landscape. ☞

For more on Sandy's work: sandybrownarts.com

How to build a temple

Sandy Brown reveals the details behind her project



The brief was clear: 'be ambitious!' I heard myself say: 'I will build a ceramic temple.' 'Yes!' they said. 'Full of colour,' I replied. 'Yes! Yes,' they said. 'Oh crikey,' I thought, 'now what do I do?' I made a maquette. A doodle. Then came ten months of excitement and creative energy. It's only now, looking back, that I can see how strongly the original maquette provided the spiritual guide to the full-sized version that now exists. The size was one challenge. In my studio I laid out masking tape on the floor to the size I saw the *Temple* to be. I then needed expert help. Craftsman builder Richard Mounce built the timber infrastructure, starting with the dome. He was to ensure that the *Temple* is a 'real' building, structurally sound and watertight. I also engaged an architect and structural engineer – whose first method of checking was to climb onto the roof and jump up and down to see if it could take the strain. The next job was the production of the columns, finials and arches. Here, I must thank the local angels of Appledore, who came in to help to roll slabs, build forms and make tiles.

I did not have time to make all the 2,183 tiles myself. Tudor Tiles supplied beautiful rich, red clay grogged roof and hip examples. I painted them with white slip, fired that on, then painted them with coloured glazes. Each one is different. I painted every day for ten months, first on testing tiles and trying out new glazes. The infrastructure

was clad in handmade tiles, which I glaze painted. Each of the outside walls was to be a separate painting – but how do you paint the middle of a surface of 7x4 metres, made up of 100 large tiles? The solution was a series of trestle tables that I could walk between. Then came the 4x4 metre floor. Two long sticks with brushes attached enabled me to swish and swoosh in a rhythmic modern jive. For the firing, I have three kilns; one large gas one, which can fire tall sculptures up to two metres high. We used that for the columns, arches and big finials. I also have two electric Cromartie top loaders, which were going virtually 24/7. I haven't had my electricity bill yet, and am dreading it.

I didn't plan the paintings. I never do. The process starts a few days beforehand when I mentally retreat inwards. I lay out the buckets of glazes ritually, then the slip trailers and brushes, right to left so I know exactly where they are. I then enter the zone of the permanent now. My mind becomes joyful, powerful, courageous, and creative energy is liberated. All the way through this process I was concerned that, as I was painting so much of *Temple*, it would be too much. Would it look overdone? Restraint is not my middle name, nor is minimalism. It was only when we arrived at Chatsworth that I could look at the whole of *Temple* in situ for the first time and see the majesty of its form. It brought a tear to my eye.