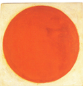
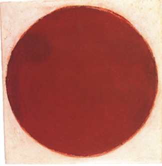
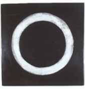
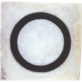
Araash DECISION

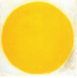
For over a decade, London artist Kate Dineen regularly visited India to learn the ancient technique of *araash*. It now forms the basis of her work, 'an interface between painting and sculpture'. Text: Bridget Bodoano











ROBERT SANDELSON

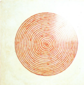
At the age of 17 Kate Dineen planned a trip to India on her own, but her father forbade her to go. She went, of course, and was enchanted by its ever-changing gallery of visual delights formed by the serendipiditous juxtaposition of landscape, buildings, people and colour. She loves the 'wonderful contrast of natural and synthetic colours that is constantly present in everyday life in India', citing as an example a background of rich red earth across which a woman walks, dressed in a lime-green sari and carrying a pink plastic bucket. Refreshingly she eschews the 'spiritual' aspects of India, and as for 'finding herself' is happy to postpone that indefinitely. Kate's involvement with the country is much more physical and down-to-earth – indeed, it is the earth itself which supplies inspiration and the raw materials for her art.

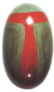
She applies colour to simple shapes using the ancient art of *araash*, a technique involving the application of several layers of ground-up marble, slaked lime and raw pigments to produce a finish that is distinctive for its depth and intensity of colour. 'It is like building your own stone and it suits perfectly my need for solidity and weight in my work,' says Kate, 'and it allows me to achieve a built-in colour that is not just a surface but goes much deeper'. The whiteness of the lime makes colours pastel, so for deep hues many layers must be applied. The initial layers are granular for strength and applied generously, 'but the last six are applied very thinly and the final three are just lime and pigment – more and more colour and less and less anything else'. It is hard and heavy work but she revels in the physicality of the process.

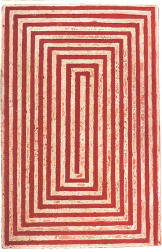
Examples of Kate Dineen's work, plaster slabs slowly and laboriously burnished and decorated with simple shapes using the traditional *araash* technique

She first became aware of the technique, although she didn't know what it was called or how it was produced, on visits to Rajasthan while doing an MA at the RCA. Anxious to discover how to to do it herself she eventually tracked down, with help from the British Council, one of the few remaining practitioners of this ancient and dying craft. Gyarsilal Varma, a master craftsman, belonged to a small caste whose skills are traditionally passed from father to son, and although initially shocked and bemused by Kate's wish to learn, he was eventually persuaded to allow her to become his apprentice. For the next 13 years she spent two to three months of every year with him 'learning the craft in a pukka way, with no compromises.'

She describes her work as an interface between painting and sculpture, and a 21st-century London-living version of an ancient traditional method used in an untraditional way. In her London flat, panels in muted pinks and ecru stand beside large slabs and egg shapes in exuberant lime green, deep pink and orange, demonstrating not only Kate's love of contrast but also a recent conflict which has arisen in her work. She has become fascinated by the architecture of the Yemen, 'where you will find a wall from nowhere to nowhere, behind nothing and in front of nothing,' and 'Tower Hamlets in mud' – groups of buildings which appear to grow out of the barren landscape in ghostly pastiches of high-rise cities. Hundreds of years old, these packed-earth sculptural edifices have no use for colour, preferring to revel in their disciplined organic shapes, the natural colours of the building material and the subtle patterns created by the perforations cut into the mud for light and ventilation. Seduced this time by the *lack* of bright colour, Kate admits her work has become schizophrenic, 'veering between the contrasting and conflicting styles of the two countries, with some pieces obeying the Yemeni discipline, others satisfying the Indian hunger – and need – for intense, saturated colour.'







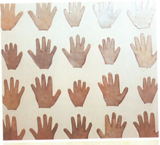
Top right: one of Kate's egg-shaped pieces: they range in size from goose- to dinosaur-egg. Top left and main picture: slabs decorated with Indian motifs

Several pieces of work, in various stages of completion, are arranged throughout her ex-council flat in London which she cheerfully declares to be a 'joss-stick and sari-free zone'. Her fascination with the more contemporary aspects of India are evident in the mix of bright orange and green leather cushions, neon lighting, coloured glass doorknobs on bare metal doors, traditional Indian furniture, slabs of marble, bare plaster, distressed paintwork and raw oak. In the workroom, fossils, shells and pebbles share their glass shelf with a row of delightfully tacky lamps made from illuminated plastic figures of Ganesha (the elephant god). Her glass table is underlit with a variety of neon lamps made up for her in India. A traditional decorated wooden panel becomes a bizarre wall lamp with the addition of a diagonal strip of green neon, while another strip, plugged lengthwise into the ceiling light fitting, resembles a rechargeable light-sabre awaiting its next combat with Darth Vader.

Kate's spring show 'is about womb-like shapes and interiors, circles, spirals, cycles, re-birth and colour'. She refers to the circle she has now completed by taking her mastery of *araash* back to its country of origin. Last summer she was commissioned by an architect to create deep, vibrantly coloured walls using the technique, for a restaurant in Bombay. For this she had the assistance of 12 men who, not having had her rigorous training, practised a somewhat diluted form of the craft. 'Delicate discussions' were necessary to persuade them to do it the pukka way! Kate hopes that taking the method back to India to use in a modern way can be seen as a token – a way of giving something back 'working within an architectural context where it all began'. And here in London she has been appointed 'artist in collaboration' to work with Alsop Architects Limited on an inner-city refurbishment project. She wants people to engage with the work and is hoping to do seats so people can feel and touch the surfaces. There are also plans for workshops with local children.

Gyarsilal Varma died last summer. 'He was my window in,' says Kate ■

Kate Dineen's work is at Robert Sandelson, 5a Cork St, London W1 (020 7439 1001), 14 March-27 April, Mon-Fri 10-6, Sat 10-4



Top: detail of a slab inset with silver hand shapes. Bottom: Kate Dineen, at home, holding one of her egg-shaped pieces