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CONVERSATIONS



SHOULDER TO THE WHEEL

Anjani Khanna pays tribute to Ray Meeker and Deborah Smith's Golden Bridge Pottery.



Every day, for the first five years that the artist architect Ray Meeker spent in India, he thought of returning to the USA. The unaccustomed heat and humidity of Pondicherry were a challenge. But equally challenging was Deborah Smith's project to launch a small pottery. Together and with perseverance they worked to build Golden Bridge Pottery, literally from scratch.

Had Ray returned to the US, the flowering of ceramic art practice in India would have been nipped in the bud. Recently, in Delhi, his solo coincided with *Bridges – Contemporary Ceramics and the Golden Bridge Pottery* – a grand show of works by 49 artists who have spent time at the Golden Bridge Pottery (GBP) over the last 40 years. *Bridges* was installed at The Stainless from the 20th to the 28th of September. Ray's show – *71 Running* on view at the Nature Morte Gallery received considerable critical acclaim. As gallery owner Peter Nagy said, "It is fantastic to see the influence of his work on so many artists in India, and the range of expression it has spawned."

When they began, Ray and Deborah concentrated on making functional stoneware pottery themselves. They trained apprentices who later set up potteries of their own and eventually educated others to make pots for sale in exclusive boutiques across the country. The pottery made by Golden Bridge became a benchmark unsurpassed in India – Deborah still runs it. This pottery, seen in Mumbai and Delhi, was an introduction to stoneware ceramics for many aspiring potters and Golden Bridge was inundated with requests to teach.

In 1983, Ray started teaching small groups of students in a comprehensive course, which introduced them not only to

Amrita Dhawan. *The Night Sea Journey*.
Installation of three whale vertebrae, stoneware. 2014.
Photograph by Joginder Singh. Image courtesy the artist.

techniques of working with clay and firing, but also to the work of ceramic artists and potters from around the world. Much as Walter Langhammer's open studio at Nepean Sea Road in Bombay in the 1940s and the '50s, educated, inspired and promoted the painters of the Progressive Artists Group, Ray and Deborah have encouraged and nurtured a slew of ceramic artists who are breaking new ground in India.

As a student at the Golden Bridge Pottery in the 1980s, I remember evenings spent at their home, watching slides of work shot by Ray on visits to ceramic studios in the US, Europe and Japan. Washing up after dinner was a treat, as one would not only handle the pottery used but would exclaim on seeing pots made by artists from around the world – stacked up on their old kitchen utensil rack! Susan Peterson, Betty Woodman, Jim Danisch, Mike Dodd, Sandy Brown, Jeff Shapiro, Jack Troy and Jane Perryman – guest artists that have shared their clay work and experience at GBP workshops. From those early days, Ray and Deborah have trained well over a hundred students. Says Ray, "We don't consider ourselves an art school. We are a place to acquaint people with materials and processes. If they go on and become artists – that's wonderful."

Ray's own work – which proceeded from functional stoneware to bold experimentation in fire stabilized mud housing and subsequently to high fired sculptural ceramics at an architectural scale – has been an inspiration to artists working in clay across the



Vineet Kacker. *Urban Temple IV: Honda Puja*. High-fired ceramic work with video. 2012.
Photograph by the artist. Image courtesy the artist.

country. His first solo was held in New Delhi in 1996, twenty-five years after he came to India. He did the show of distinctive stoneware pottery to demonstrate to his students (and himself) what he would do for an exhibition. His students had never seen a solo by their teacher! Since then his own work has changed dramatically. An invitation by Nagy to show with *Nature Morte*, in the dome at Hauz Khas village, in 2001, saw Ray returning to work he had been doing in the US 30 years before. Large excavator buckets – a symbol

of the rapacious human assault on the environment – became the leitmotif that has run through his work since.

In the last 20 years, ceramic art in India has seen some kind of an explosion. The concerns of artists are as varied as the environment in which they find themselves. Some work with functional pottery; others explore the sculptural and the formal registers. References to the personal, architectural, traditional votive practices and



contemporary social and political issues engage artists working in clay in much the same way as practitioners in other media.

Bridges was a comprehensive showcase of the diversity of practices energizing ceramics in India today. It included impressive works by Michel Hutin, an early apprentice at Golden Bridge, who went on to set up his own pottery in Auroville over 30 years ago. P.R. Daroz was already a well-established artist when he spent three months at Golden Bridge experimenting with wood firing. Amrita Dhawan, who convinced Ray and Deborah to open their doors, now makes sculptural work influenced by the nature of time. Her work in this show was a tribute to her teachers – three elegant large whalebone vertebrae – referencing the Golden Bridge Pottery as a backbone supporting practitioners struggling to enter the art world.

Ray's architectural work in the early 1980s through the mid 1990s attracted young architects and designers. Kristine Michael, who trained in ceramic design at the National Institute of Design in Ahmedabad and came to Golden Bridge Pottery to help design products for the fired housing projects, went on to work sculpturally and conceptually with clay. Vineet Kacker, an architect by training also joined Ray on the fired housing projects. Today, twenty-five years later, he works in his Gurgaon studio inspired by the landscape, art, architecture and iconography of the Himalayas. Adil Writer, formerly a Mumbai-based architect, is a prolific ceramist and painter based in Auroville, where he is a partner in a successful pottery. His work in *Bridges* pays tribute to the man and the moment that changed his life's direction from "clay-bricks to clay-pots".

Anamika from Auroville, Delhi-based Manisha Bhattacharya and Aditi Saraogi from Calcutta have explored porcelain fired in

In the front: K. Gukan Raj.
Right to left on the wall: P.R. Daroz, Nehal Rachh, Kristine Michael, Reyaz Badaruddin, Supriya Menon Meneghetti, Anamika.
Pedestals: Anamika, Dipti Gupta, Julietta Kuehle, Smita Anand.
Photograph by Joginder Singh.

gas kilns, creating delicate pristine forms. Auroville-based Ange Peter skilfully combines a wood-fired aesthetic with porcelain. Hyderabad-based Aarti Vir and Rakhee Kane from Auroville studied painting at the MS University in Baroda and their approach is often painterly. Nidhi Jalan, Sharbani Das Gupta and Madhvi Subrahmanian have all spent considerable lengths of time abroad and they speak through their work of negotiating multiple worlds.

Younger artists Antra Sinha, Reyaz Badaruddin, Ashwini Bhat, Neha Kudchadkar, Neha Pullarwar, Rashi Jain and Veena Chandran are unconstrained by the rigorous training in throwing on the wheel that is part of Golden Bridge pedagogy and have found their voice expressing themselves in clay. Abhay Pandit and Vinod Daroz come from a lineage of art/craft practice and have built on that with their exposure to Golden Bridge. The hybrid figurative sculpture I make is a departure from my training at Golden Bridge, but I continue to explore much-loved wood firing in a very different form and context.

Despite the art world's hesitant acceptance, artists working in clay have continued to follow their star, inspired by the stalwarts who have come before. Increasingly, their voice is being heard and the universal language of art and clay is finding new modes of engagement. *Bridges* is a testament to the possibilities seeded by Ray and Deborah. As Antra Sinha put it, after seeing the show mounted and the reception it received, "How beautifully the baton has passed on."