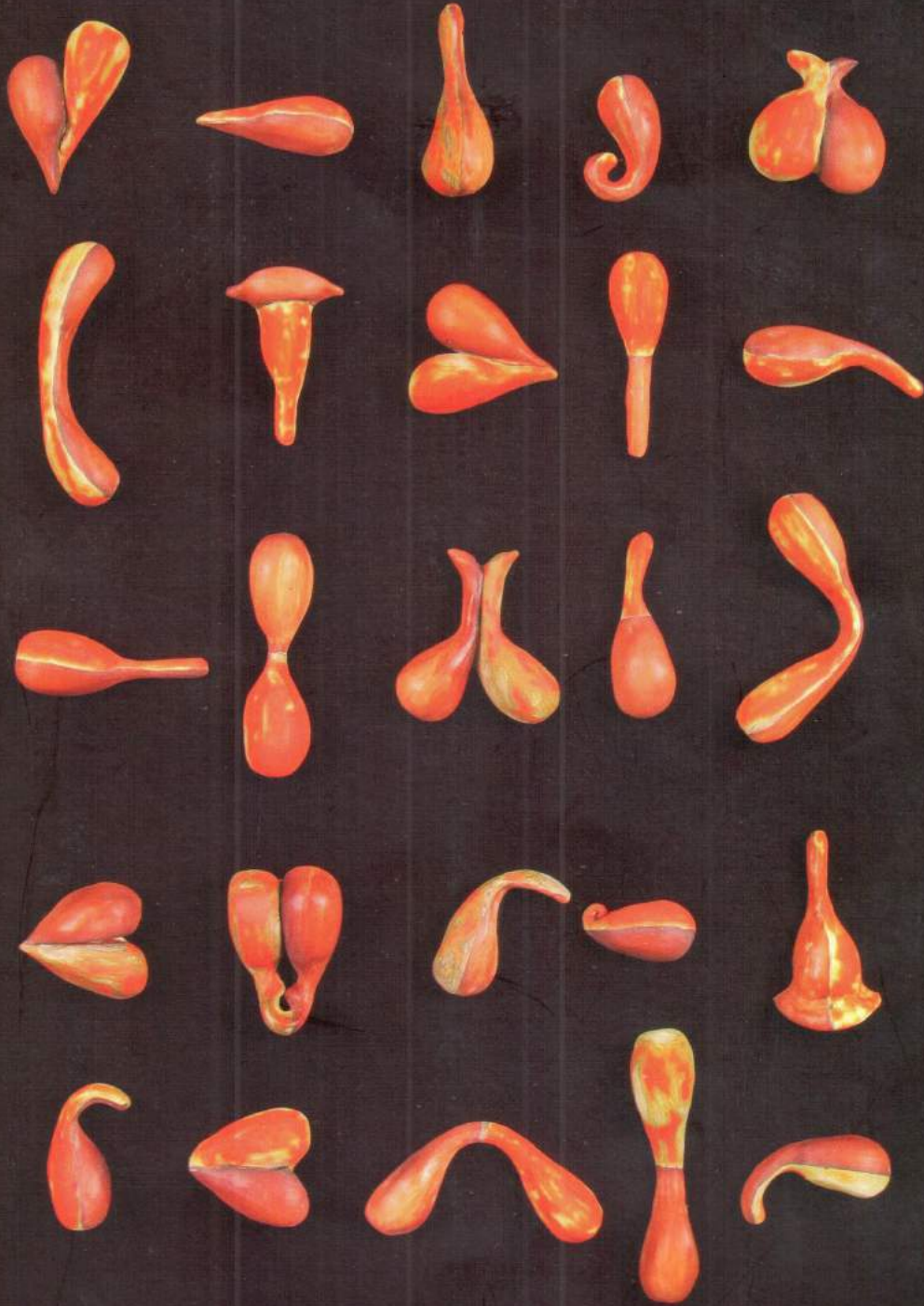


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CERAMICS

CLAY PEOPLE OF THE COROMANDEL COAST

Individual and community initiatives in Chennai and Puducherry are pushing the ceramic arts in new directions, observes **Sujatha Shankar Kumar**.



Ashwini Bhat. *Caracole Series*. Stoneware fired in Ray Meeker's Anagama kiln/Tim Rowan's workshop, Golden Bridge Pottery, Puducherry. 15" deep. 2015. Photograph by the artist.

Ashwini Bhat recalls Nick Schwartz's studio in Comptche, California. "I took a piece of feldspar that Nick gave me and smashed it into the damp clay. When I fired it, it cracked as I had hoped, but did not fall apart. It held the rock at the centre. There is always that element of luck!" That's the thing about ceramic art. It constantly oscillates between preparedness and chance, fragility and firmness, uncertainty and realization, action and surrender.

A circle of committed institutions and individuals have taken ceramics forward as an art form in South India – as a field, it has yet to achieve the prominence of painting and sculpture. Artistic objects for utility continue to dominate the perception about ceramics in the mainstream. In 1971, Ray Meeker and Deborah

Smith founded Golden Bridge Pottery in Puducherry, introducing a raw and unconventional aesthetic in tableware and pottery. Over 40 years, ceramic enthusiasts have been drawn here to learn from their expertise. In Chennai, Rathi Jafer, Director at InKo Centre, found that many practitioners of the arts suffered because of a lack of institutional infrastructure. Encountering the well-established ceramic scene of Korea, she visited the Biennale in Gwangju and Incheon in 2006 and found India was highly under-represented. Jafer felt the need to create spaces to practice, share, experiment and grow, allowing for the exchange of processes and techniques. Beginning with *Earth Synergy* in 2007-08 with 67 Korean and Indian artists, InKo Centre has cemented relationships with Arts Council Korea, Dakshinachitra, Lalit Kala Akademi and



potraran. *Inspiration of the structure II*. Wood-fired ceramic. 36" x 48" x 60". 2014.

etra for numerous workshops, residencies and exhibitions. *latters* in 2012 brought together 6 Indian and 6 Korean artists. Chennai ceramicist Gukanraj was the coordinator ishetra, which provided a wood-firing kiln and space. Lalit ademi took charge of selecting artists. At the end rst residency, Korean artist Jae Joon Lee contributed a wood-firing kiln at Dakshinachitra, now managed trarasan. *Earth Matters 2* and *Ceramic Connect* in 2015 ed with this mandate.

: artists often work with established practitioners and with peers. Rm Palaniappan, Regional Secretary, Lalit ademi and Deborah Thiagarajan of Dakshinachitra have ed critical encounters for practitioners in Chennai. In Ko Centre organized a residency for Indian ceramicists at a Gimhae Museum in Korea, which has been a destination y including Potraran; Auroville-based artist Priya ivalli went independently to Gimhae in 2014. Gukanraj a Charles Wallace scholarship in 2013 to work with Sandy n Appledore, UK, and says, "I did large-scale sculptures s energetic artist and also salt glaze firing with Micki singk in Wales."

ct-turned ceramicist Adil Writer loves travelling and in the of being in China, Korea and Australia, has absorbed from cultures. *Sangha of Shy Monks* followed his 6-week residency "Everywhere I went on the streets of Bali, I saw this ng figure in stone, metal, bronze and bone. I called it the Shy l made a mould from a wooden piece I had and multiplied it i times." In shiny olive greens and nut browns, the figures of in a foetal position, head buried between his knees, emerges r's interpretations. Antra Sinha, who apprenticed with

Meeker for 5 months in 2002-03 says, "I've found amazing mentors at different stages of my life." At Shigaraki Ceramic Cultural Park Residency in 2008, her Japanese teacher in the glazing class taught with anecdotes and aphorisms. His words, "Make friends with materials" have constantly inspired Sinha, melding into her practice.

For reasons of collective work, shipping and economics of firing, artists journey to various pottery guilds. "Ceramic art is hard to ship for a show. You're on the edge of your seat till it's up," says Jafer. In 2014, Bhat went to Chris Gustin's studio to produce work she would show locally. Currently in Las Cruces, New Mexico, working at Glenn Schwaiger's Agave Arts which she found through the potter's guild, Bhat says, "It's easier to come together as firing is a labour-intensive process and needs many people to split wood, stack and load the kiln." Bhat, who is based in Puducherry, delights in moving from one residency to another, seeking the energy of new spaces and circumstances. Her *Love Seat* versions made in Fuping, China, were fired to smooth finishes in reds, browns and blacks in a tunnel kiln. Compared to sculpture, the flexibility of clay allows for a very tactile rendering. Consequently, what the object signifies depends on the various associations with ritual, culture, place and function. Forms often relinquish function, holding only latent meanings by association. Bhat's *Love Seat* sags at the centre with legs splayed, reminding us about how lovers do not mind inconveniences, perhaps, even delighting in them.

As viewers we interact with the ceramic object within the context of the landscape in which it is placed. This elicits a very different response than a painting, which draws you to view within a frame. "I want people to come around and examine my objects", says Gukanraj. In one of his works, Potraran depicts the burgeoning sprawl of the city and the crisis of adaptation by creating a ceramic

LEAD FEATURE

scaffolding, pigeons and sparrows. Sundaravalli says, "Ideally, my 'seashells' should be displayed underwater". She recently made over 350 of them for display under a glass walkway for Rajeev Sethi's project at the Mumbai International Airport.

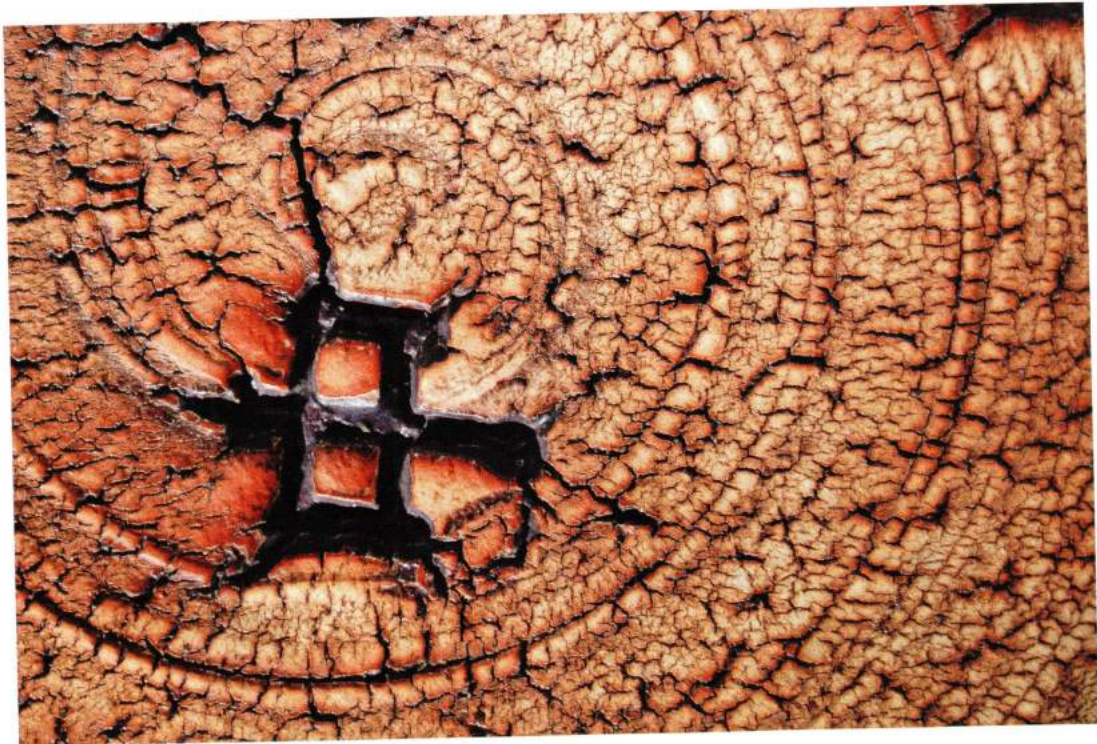
The ceramic form holds layered impressions and collective memories. Gukanraj discovers 'depths' within the rotund shapes he fashions. Interpreting topographies and terrain, he desires to bring the thrill of natural encounters to stir our residual emotions. Antra Sinha engraves Japanese kanji characters to resonate with her name Antra, which means a stanza in Hindustani music. Potrarasan has used motifs like woodblock carvers, making deep impressions into the surface of the clay in his mural at Dakshinachitra.

The process of every artist ensues from her intrinsic beliefs. In fact, Bhat's forms are closely derived from the process itself. Certain raw textures are obtained by serrating the clay with a hacksaw blade and cracks on the surface create variations in how the slips and glazes get absorbed. An avid blogger, Bhat methodically records the intricacies of her practice. Her literary background induces idiomatic wordplay, which throws up forms in her mind as she encounters characters and events in her travels. In her *Caracole* series, the clay twists and turns like a snake and one can imagine

Bhat stretching and pulling it. "I am like a Sumo wrestler", she says, "tussling with my medium".

Almost all ceramicists accept a degree of uncertainty in their work "I do not have complete control over the environment or over how the flames flow", says Sundaravalli whose approach privileges responding to the deep primal instinct within. A prolific worker, she works fast using any sharp tool she can find – a needle, a scalpel or a porcupine quill. She lets her speed erase any trace of the human hand at work. Her output 'bursts' yield 90 'flowers' and 77 'corals' in a couple of days. Sundaravalli believes in finding a space for all the pieces she makes and rarely scraps any. Contrarily, Sinha works by carefully editing her suite. In 2005, out of the 72 discs she made for a show at the Jehangir Art Gallery, 50 were approved by her and only 39 were on display at any given time. "I throw the slab; once dried, I stretch it and it cracks in different places as it is dry on top but still wet inside", says Sinha who wields her discs in different ways. Her *Tetrarc* evolved from a search for stability and she combined the circle, square and triangle in a three-dimension equation to get a shape like a whale's fin.

For 14 to 16 months, from 2009 to 2011, artists at Golden Bridge worked on the project for Hyatt Chennai commissioned by curat



Antra Sinha. *Churning 12* (Detail). Wood-fired stoneware. Diameter 17". 2005. Photograph by Joginder Singh.



Adil Writer. *Sangha of Shy Monks*. Stoneware. 36" x 24" x 6". 2015. Photograph by Ireno Guercci.

Rajeev Sethi. *Passage*, Meeker's work stands at the entrance of the building. Sinha's *Tetrarc* and Bhat's *Queen* are amongst nine other ceramic projects on display. At 21 feet, *Passage*, which used 17 tons of plastic clay, is a culmination of various concerns ceramic artists deal with: fragility, size and installation. Meeker built a 140 cubic foot kiln and this allowed him to make large modules, which were assembled carefully at site. *Passage* appears like an ancient arch in sharp contrast to the steel and glass façade of the hotel. It kindles notions of history, time and the journey from the past to the present. Going closer, you find its surface inscribed with text and phrases, reminding you of vandalized heritage structures. Memories and commentaries seem moulded within the object's fabric. Meeker's baked scrawl in clay "All the king's horses..." from *Humpty Dumpty* is a reminder of how fragile the environment is for human habitation. This is true of ceramic art as well. Meeker notes that even if one of the pieces had broken, he would not have been able to "put it together again." The 'temple gateway' structure of *Passage* emblematises the transformation materials undergo on entering a kiln, getting cracked, baked and glazed before they exit.

The clay artist is a nomad in search of kilns, new processes, inspiring cultures and the generosity of communes. The fertile enclaves along the coast from Pondicherry to Chennai have attracted clay people from the world over, like bees to honey, to practice at wood-fire and cave-like anagama kilns. At times, ceramic art appears to be like a performance, played out solo or in a group – from preparing the clay, shaping it, throwing it, applying a slip or glaze and then firing it. All the while, as in a performance, there is every possibility of failure. You might not like what comes out. The wheel turns, shaping people and patterns like many balls of clay flying away and coming together to confirm a community engaged in a vibrant local-global dialogue.