

REVIEW: *Rhode Island*

ASHWINI BHAT: EARTH TOOK OF EARTH

Newport Art Museum • Newport, RI • newportartmuseum.org • Through May 10, 2015

A look at ceramicist Ashwini Bhat's work since 2008 reveals considerable maturation. She seems restless, quickly discarding old motifs for new ones. The Pondicherry, India, artist began with bottles and teapots, yet the energies she now harvests are wild and raw. In *Earth Took of Earth*, Bhat shifts her focus to mythic sculptures animated with terrestrial life force. She respectfully excavates the earth, revealing the roguishness that dwells beneath its surface.

Bhat says it's "poignant" that shaped, fired clay retains the marks and imprints of its mold-er. The crafter's hands swiftly change the clay's cosmetic destiny, as temporary forms harden into permanence. Past ventures with dance encouraged Bhat to eschew the potting wheel for hand sculpting. It was a wise choice, evidenced by large works like *Compass Rose*. Bhat successfully conveys movement, time, emotion and space through the careful arrangement of handmade ceramic squares.

Her exploration of form is experimental, welcoming questions and stares. Bhat writes that "engagement" is crucial to her work. A human body must respond to the sculptural bodies on display. In *the Realm of the Hungry Ghosts* wails for attention and reflection. It features a trio of slender, blackened minerals, punched and dented by negative space. Circular openings at the top resemble strange mouths opening for a snack. Distorted lines curve and form limbs, lending a dancelike rhythm. Other pieces appear as species from alternate timelines of natural history.

Across the room, the exhibit's eponymous sculpture takes the offensive. The family of five clay towers looks impatient with the staid surroundings of the gallery, seeming to rise higher and higher out of the ground. They threaten to break free, reflecting their creator's impatience with forms unwilling to mutate and evolve. Bhat sometimes makes several sculptures in one day before trashing the majority and recy-



Ashwini Bhat, *Earth Took of Earth*, 2014, stoneware, fired to cone 12 in an Anagama kiln with Chris Gustin, South Dartmouth, MA, dimensions variable.

cling the clay. She is a hunter of forms. But, dazzled by her prey, Bhat brings no harm to her specimens. She presents them unrefined, fished straight from the center of the earth, steaming and molten, pulsating and powerful.

—Alexander Castro