

# Ceramics

Art and Perception

2015  
ISSUE 100

INTERNATIONAL  
US\$20







# Ashwini Bhat

*You could not step twice into the same river. ~ Heraclitus*

*Article by Anthony Merino*







**E**XPERIENCE IS KINETIC. UNDERSTANDING EXPERIENCE is static. This creates a paradox. By the time we digest and understand reality, it no longer exists. An example of this might occur in a crowded public space, such as a train station. In the crowd, you glance and see a beautiful person. In the moment it took your eyes to snag that image and register it as attractive, the person melds back into the crowd. In a sense, we are always playing catch-up. The process of making objects out of clay layers moments of freezing the fluid. Arguably the most essential skill for an artist working directly with clay is balancing stiffness and fluidity. Indian artist Ashwini Bhat brilliantly achieves this balance with her woodfired ceramics. Each element of her work – its form, finish and subject expressed – illustrates a paradox of stillness representing motion.

This ability to master movement may stem from Bhat's experience as a dancer. She cites this experience as informing her work. "I gather shapes from the world around me, from my travels and journeys through books. I also look inside me for forms that arise from my experience as a dancer, seeking to rephrase that understanding of the body through a new medium of expression, the body of the clay I work with."

Movement is essential to dance and to Bhat's ceramics. The artist incorporates movement into many aspects of her work.

The first characteristic of any ceramic object is form. Bhat uses asymmetrical balance to create forms that illustrate motion. There is a close link between symmetry and stillness. Conversely, an



Facing page, top: *Cat's Cradle 2*. 2012. 9 x 16 in.

Facing page, below: *Cambrian Explosion Series*. 2012. 4 x 10 in.

Above works are stoneware, fired to cone 10 in Josh Copus' three chamber kiln, Asheville, North Carolina, US.

Top left: *Rings of Saturn 1*. 2012. 13.5 x 15 in.

Below left: *Cat's Cradle 1*. 2012. 11.5 x 16 in.

Above works are stoneware, fired to cone 10 in Josh Copus's anagama kiln.

All above photos by Tim Barnwell.

Top right: *One Over Two/Two Over One*. 2013. Stoneware with a feldspar chunk, fired to cone 12 in Nick Schwartz's anagama kiln, Comptche, California, US. 12 x 13 in. Photo by Ashwini Bhat.

Below right: *LoveSeat 2*. 2013. Stoneware, fired to cone 12 in Chris Gustin's anagama kiln, South Dartmouth, Massachusetts, US. 15 x 24 in. Photo by Ashwini Bhat.

equally strong link exists between asymmetry and movement. Consider a ballerina. Stilled, she must ensure that her body is completely balanced. If her left leg is set back, she needs to arch her back and hold her arms so that all of her weight is evenly distributed on one pivot point. In motion, she is free to be far more asymmetric. This linking of symmetry and stillness and asymmetry and motion informs how we look at art. Artists such as Sol LeWitt, Josef Albers or Hans Coper create(d) the illusion of stillness through symmetry. Artists such as Robert Motherwell, Claes Oldenburg and Wouter Dam use(d) asymmetry to depict movement. Bhat's works clearly develop out of the latter group of artists.

In *One Over Two/Two Over One*, a tilted ceramic block of clay built around a chunk of white clay, the artist choreographs a ballet of visual offsets. In some cases, Bhat uses like elements to balance each other. The top of the piece has negative space that turns into a wedge shape. The artist uses an elongated wisp of







Above: **Rings of Saturn 2 and 3.** 2012. 11.5 x 16 and 15 x 12 in. Stoneware, fired to cone 10 in Josh Copus' anagama kiln. 2012. Photo by Tim Barnwell.

Below: **Love Seat 1.** 2013. Stoneware, fired in a tunnel kiln at the Fuping Pottery Art Village, FLICAM project, Fuping, China. 14 x 26 in. Photo by Ashwini Bhat.

brown to offset a slight blot of brown on the other side of the piece. Most impressive is Bhat's ability to orchestrate how the viewer reads the piece. The lower part of the work looks as if it is about to fall

over to the left, creating a visual tension that draws the viewer to the left side of the sculpture. Bhat's placement of a crack down the centre of the piece creates an assumed axis and a strong vertical element. This in turn, countered by the inclusion of a central added element, produces a radial design. The viewer reads it as the object's hub. All of these movements are set off by the addition of a top piece, which does two things. It creates a visual cap to the work. It also reinforces the innate movement of the piece through





alluding to a fulcrum. All of these ways to read the piece cause the viewer's eye to spin around the work. By balancing not just the form but the way the form is read, Bhat constructs a piece that looks remarkably stable.

In addition to asymmetry, irregularity creates motion. This is most evident in her *Rings of Saturn* series where pieces comprised of a single ring of clay are mounted on two bulky feet. The rings are neither perfect circles nor uniformly thick. Looking at these pieces, the viewer expects a well-formed, even circle. Each detail that violates this expectation draws the viewer's eyes to it. Bhat uses these imperfections to control the movement of the viewer's gaze around her work even though the work is still. Additionally, Bhat creates a closed loop. She includes no beginning or end in these works – just perpetuity.

Stillness and motion align with two of the three states of matter. Everything can exist in one of four phases: plasma, gases, liquids and solids. The first three are fluid – and are associated with movement. The last is static and stays still. When ceramic is fired to vitrification, it becomes gelatinous. It is solid, but it has fluid properties. Depending upon the composition of the clay, pieces can sag or even crack in the firing. In many of her pieces, Bhat creates forms that are either determined or referenced by this process. The artist sculpts many pieces so they look as if they slumped or even cracked in the firing. Bhat uses this dynamic to generate visual interest in her *Cat's Cradle* series. These are elongated baskets set on four feet with looping handles. The viewer imagines either the basket was weighted causing it to bend in the firing or the clay just softened and slumped in the firing process. Either connotation is the residue of moment. Even when the work is completely static, Bhat gets the viewer to imagine it moving.

Additionally, Bhat uses the woodfiring process to add additional nuanced motion to her work. The atmosphere of a woodfire kiln is constant motion. The draft of the kiln creates heat and distributes the flame and ash, which glazes the work during the firing and leaves the work scarred. In some ways this process accents the already fluid element of the artist's work. In her *Cambrian Explosion* series, the firing covers most of the pieces' surfaces with a rough matte surface. There is a line along the edge of the work where the heavy reduction left a satin graphite-like surface. This effect creates the illusion of the work being pulled and polished as it was being made. In other pieces, the



effects of the firing are far less subtle. In a piece such as *Loveseat*, Bhat leaves spots of bare clay that quickly turn to warm browns and greys from the ash and firing effects. The pattern resulting from this process mimics the vibrancy of a flame. In either case, Bhat directs the viewer's eyes around the piece.

The law of inertia is that an object in motion stays in motion and an object at rest stays at rest. Conceptually, Bhat's work contradicts this axiom. Every aspect of her work echoes the movements that made them. While her work is clearly static, Bhat creates the illusion of movement.



*Top: Cambrian Explosion.*  
2012. Porcelain mixed with stoneware, fired to cone 10 in Josh Copus' anagama kiln. 12 x 13 in. Photo by Tim Barnwell.  
*Centre: Ashwini Bhat's Signature.*  
*Above: Working on Cat's Cradle at Josh Copus' Clayspace.* 2012. Photo by Forrest Gander.

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