



'The Cat's Cradle', 2010, stoneware, woodfired to cone 10, ht 30 cm



'Cambrian Explosion Series', 2011, stoneware, woodfired, ht 29.5 cm

SCULPTING THE PRIMORDIAL

Each piece in Ashwini Bhat's expressive new ceramic series represents an intriguing alterity, a signification to which our evolutionary origin is somehow attached. Profile by Forrest Gander.

ASHWINI Bhat's ceramic *Queen* is both tectonic and iconic. Technically, it was a difficult challenge; the points of the axe-like head not match exactly or the piece would appear off-kilter. In order to emphasize poise and power, Bhat needed strong, clear lines. She built the shape from clay coils, smoothing the walls as they rose, and finally poured bolts of glaze over the head and torso. During the firing, that glaze flared into an earthy richness along the upper midsection. Meanwhile, the *Queen's* back was speckled with white inclusions and burnt sand. We can just detect vertical brushstrokes on the torso and a faint

trace of the artist's hand on this totemic authority that seems to be erupting from the earth. The piece embodies power, genesis and ruin all at once. Graceful and potent, Bhat's *Queen* is a breaching force.

Her *Cat's Cradle*, on the other hand, is an affecting measure of memory, sentiment, and invitation. The shape began for Bhat as a conceptual exercise. Disinterested in iterating her earlier successes, she challenged herself to veer away from the clean lines of the *Queen* and to take on a formal restriction. She would use one lump of clay and only two tools – a trimmer and a twisted wire. With a third



'The Cat's Cradle', 2009, stoneware, anagama fired, ht 30.5 cm

PHOTO: JOGINDER SINGH



'Queen Series', 2011, stoneware, coil-built, woodfired, glaze, ht 40.6 cm



'Cambrian Explosion Series', 2011, stoneware, woodfired, width 27.9 cm



'Cambrian Explosion Series', 2011, stoneware, woodfired, width 22.8 cm



'Queen Series', 2011, stoneware, coil-built, woodfired, glaze, ht 122 cm



PHOTO: JOHN MANDEEN

Ashwini Bhat firing the anagama kiln, Golden Bridge Pottery, 2012

tool, she might have been tempted to polish or smudge the surface which she wanted to keep shambolic, grainy, and raw. Bhat used the trimmer like an ice-cream scoop, hollowing out the lump of clay. With the twisted wire, she cut and carved it. (The wire's spiral pattern can still be seen on the feet of the cradle). What appeared to her at first was a tub with handles; a shape that held little interest for her. She lowered herself and stared at the clay from its own level, focusing on the lip and the visible dip into the tub's negative space. Then she began to imagine creating another negative space underneath the form as a kind of architectural rhyme. At that moment, the shape became nakedly expressive of its potential.

Bhat's art is always about the recognition of an arousal – an arousal in form. She fashioned four feet, which gave the mass of the *Cat's Cradle* its lift. Then she used her wire to cut a strip of clay that she wrapped around the handles like a stole, impressing the strip with her thumb and fingers and leaving the indentations visible on the handles.

The new work of the *Cambrian Explosion* series, subtler and even more sensitised by touch, becomes exceptionally responsive to our attention. Bhat wanted to return to the spontaneity of the *Cat's Cradle*, to limit herself again to a minimum of tools and movements, in order to see how far she could stretch the clay. The directionality of the new forms, suggested by their flowlines and upthrust edges, guides our gaze. We recognise that each of the pieces in this series represents an alterity, a signification to which our life is somehow attached. And seeing them together, we enter the domain of belonging, feeling connected to the pieces through their articulate expressions of struggle and definition.

The *Cambrian Explosion* series makes contact with the primordially imaginative, formally nascent, sexually suggestive, and visionary compulsions in us. The singular works draw us into their lifts and falls, their sinuosities. And through the shapeliness of their gestures, we come to have the sensation that we are miraculously related to them. Bhat has found in shifting plates of "Cambrian" mud, presentiments of swimming, walking and flight, of thought and language ... even intimations of all the life forms yet to manifest.

She subverts the elegance of the clay forms into something more strange and less determined than anything she has

Ashwini Bhat firing the anagama kiln, Golden Bridge Pottery, 2012

made previously. Bhat distrusts the simply beautiful, the "perfect" shape, and any other preconceived notion of form that would displace the actuality of feeling with conditioned responses. Hence she adds to the tradition of contemporary innovation in ceramics her own very particular conviction.

When we register her work without preconceptions, it reveals itself in an intimacy that is resistant to definition. The sculptural objects of the *Cambrian Explosion* series embody meanings yet to come. Bewitchingly expressive, they retain a strong sense of enigma. At the same time, this new work has an endlessly surprising intensity. From the aquiline rise of the corners (a head, a fin!), from roiling patterns of cracks and glaze, fracture and gleam, and from the fissured, shell-impressed, eruptive textures, we are struck by the presentiment that we are witnessing slabs of mud charged with life. Here before us is the origin of the sensate world – and suddenly the title of the series makes sense – the Cambrian Explosion. The dawn of life, the enactment of an unaccountable phenomenon. Separately and in the harmony of their one-off shapes, they evoke an incessant coming-into-being.

Ashwini Bhat's *Queen*, her *Cat's Cradle*, and her *Cambrian Explosion* series represent three distinct phases in a career of unremitting change. In fact, Ashwini Bhat started her artistic life as a dancer. She became close friends with Chandralekha, the choreographer and dancer widely considered to have had the most significant influence on contemporary dance in India. For 10 years of training and four years of international performances, Bhat danced with the Padmini Chettur company.

But she had always been drawn to clay. When injuries began to slow her down, Bhat turned to another art, studying with Ray Meeker and Deborah Smith at the Golden Bridge Pottery in Pondicherry and later employed as an artist-in-residence there. Now she is establishing her own studio and woodfire kiln.

When I visited Ashwini Bhat at Golden Bridge Pottery she was engaged on the *Cambrian Explosions* series. She told me that she didn't want to explain her work and that I would probably get a better feel for it by witnessing the process rather than hearing about it. Then she said that she was going to forget that I was there and that I could leave if I got bored.

As I watched her in action I had no idea that working with



Ashwini Bhat making the 'Cat's Cradle' at Clayspace in Asheville, North Carolina, US, 2012. Photo: Forrest Gander

clay was such a strenuous athletic activity. Then I saw the connection with her dance background. She was focused and intense with every movement in her small studio. There were two doorways but no doors. A stool for me, an L-shaped bench with a potter's wheel, a rack of shelves full of ceramics, a scattering of tools and that was it. Other potters were working in connected studios or in other parts of the warehouse.

I enquired if she had planned the shapes beforehand. She told me that it was impossible. She had developed a new shape – the *Cambrian Explosion* – that she wanted to work with it for a while. But the shape turns out different every time. She might make seven or eight pieces in an afternoon but keep only one of them. The others she would pound back into formless clay and re-bag.

I knew I had come into contact with something exceedingly rare, an art that was going beyond the experience of intensification. An art that is less a statement of personal accomplishment than a record of what we are.

Forrest Gander

Forrest Gander's most recent book, *Core Samples From the World*, was a Pulitzer Prize finalist in 2012. His website is at forrestgander.com