

Traditions Evolving: Golden Bridge Pottery and Contemporary Ceramics in India

Drawing assumptions about the national aesthetics of a country based on a group exhibition is a tricky proposition. Two factors drive this result. First—it is nearly impossible for a group exhibition to capture the complexity, diversity and nuance of a single nation. Curating is editing. Even a large exhibition excludes far more than it includes. Second—the audience brings expectations and assumptions to the viewing. Separating the innate national identity, the curator’s preferences and the viewer’s prejudices renders difficult. These thoughts occurred to me walking through *Traditions Evolving: Golden Bridge Pottery and Contemporary Ceramics in India*.

Several artists share a distinctive narrative structure—duality of consciousness. Consider the world we know—a world of food, roads, houses, people, sex and knowledge. This is reality. There is also the world we do not know—the subconscious and the mythical. The more certain we become of the former, the more the latter becomes a world of illusion. Using surreal images of chimeras, Nidhi Jalan puts into question, which world is the illusion. The artist states that she is illustrating a magical world in which “the subjective and objective are indistinguishable.” *Untitled*, an image of a bent woman merged with a jaguar unsettles. Rendered with no decoration and with only minimal anatomical restraint, Jalan creates an icon showing how close reality and imagined are.

Much like Jalan, Madhvi Subrahmanian deals with the tension between real and imagined worlds. The artist creates forms appropriated from Indian street signs and building markers. These get altered to

become more primitive. The work suggests that we navigate through two worlds, reality and a kind of cosmic world of superstition, community and morality. The act of mapping and marking asserts human domination on the physical world. It is an act of cataloging and ordering in geometric space. It creates a grid on which we can always know exactly our place in the world. Subrahmanian's work suggests another world exists. Further—the more we are sure of our place in the physical world—the less sure we can be of our place in the other world. These images provoke a secondary question. Ultimately, the grid on which we map the world is an abstraction. It is a human construction and in its essence is as imagined as any other world we come up with.

One of the tightest groupings of artists in the exhibition includes Vineet Kacker, Rakhee Kane and Aarti Vir who depict architectonic images in their work. All three question the notion of a house as just a dwelling. Each creates images in which houses become far more than just occupied spaces. Kacker creates a sense of architecture growing out of living body in *Time-Timeless Tableau A*. Kane's *House Form Tall* conceptualizes houses as kind of books—in which the inhabitant's lives are written. Vir provokes of the house becoming an extension of its occupants in *Secure Insecure*. Vir's combining layers of ornate glaze and ash effects on highly austere forms bridges the exhibition's two predominate motifs.

*Traditions Evolving* includes three artists who create visually complex and arresting objects that are also austere. There are subtle differences in each artist's work but they all share a genius for restraint.

Ashwini Bhat contributed several small simple pieces that grab the viewer and insist on their time and attention. The artist contributed two *Rings of Saturn* pieces—large loops set on two feet. In these forms, Bhat transcends by balancing two opposites—stillness and movement, to mutual magnification of

each element. The utter stillness of the work makes its movement appear faster. The innate kinetic quality of the work increases its stillness. The artist also included three *One Over Two* pieces. In these breathtaking works—Bhat pares away all from the clay except its own unique and transcendent beauty. Antra Sinha uses very simple forms—which look like two ax heads placed at 90° angles—to create engaging forms titled *Tectrarc*. Six curved planes make up the forms. Wood-fired, the ash and reduction patterns sing. Adil Writer contributed *Navagraha-nine treasure boxes*, a set of nine small cubes of clay set up in a grid of three rows and columns. Bhat, Sinha and Writer generate visual interest exponential to the amount of detail they put in their work.

Two idiosyncratic themes divulge themselves in the *Traditions Evolving*—an interest in duality of consciousness and a formal embrace of economy of form. While the specific details of each may be categorical to India—they are both universal concerns that all artists face.