



Indian Ceramics Triennale: Breaking Ground

by Romain Maitra

JAWAHAR KALA KENDRA | AUGUST 31 – NOVEMBER 18, 2018

Although lacking the transparency of a blown glass or the tensile strength of a metal, clay has many unique qualities of its own—for example, a pliability that makes it responsive to a maneuvering touch that can render its texture both rough and smooth. Quite often, however, clay is allowed to take control of the maker and becomes a free vehicle for intuitive expression. But in ceramics, when this clay is fired, a mutual transmission of energy and interaction between the thinking hand and the pliable material takes place—a process that, though in existence since the dawn of human civilization, has been enjoying a global revival of late. This revival has led to the mushrooming of international ceramics biennials, and there is an enormous variety and range in the ceramics being created.



P.R. Daroz, *Weathered Rock After The Rain*, 2018. Photo by the author.

India is joining this global movement with the first edition of the Indian Ceramics Triennale, *Breaking Ground*, at the Charles Correa-designed wonder Jawahar Kala Kendra (JKK) premises in Jaipur. An artist-led initiative curated by a six-member team of mid-career Indian ceramicists, *Breaking Ground* responded to the expansion and evolution in ceramic art practice in India and abroad by presenting forty-seven artistic projects of raw and fired clay, including multimedia items, sculptures, ephemeral works, performative pieces, and paintings rendered by Indian folk artists on clay. JKK also hosted a tightly curated simultaneous retrospective of the Rajasthani painter, muralist, and craftsman Kripal Singh Shekhawat, who not only assimilated traditional Rajasthani miniature and fresco art, and the Nihonga style of Japanese art in his own paintings, but also revived the famed Jaipur Blue Pottery (known thus for its use of cobalt blue dye). With impeccable artisanship, he broke away from traditional floral and geometric patterns to introduce new designs to contemporary pottery-making based on his painting style, giving dignity and new direction to the form. Further, thirteen noted international practitioners—including Barney Hare Duke, Ingrid Murphy, Jane Perryman, Jessika Edgar, Kate Malone, and living institutions like Ray Meeker, who founded Golden Bridge Pottery in Pondicherry—took part in exhibitions, workshops, and seminars.

Outside the main entrance of the JKK, a smiling Jacques Kaufmann was shoving thin slices of wood into a burning hearth at the base of his piece *Mud Fired Space* (2018), a 10-foot hollow mound of bricks covered with a mixed layer of clay, hay, and cow dung. “When speaking about space,” he explained, “I don’t think solely about the ‘physical space.’ I include other aspects to it like social, cultural, spiritual, economical, and so on. So my concern includes these different aspects, the pre-eminent one among these, the kind of emotions and feelings rooted into it, and lastly, whether there is any problem with this space.” This noted Swiss ceramist undertook a two-and-a-half-year project in Rwanda in the 1980s—a country host to several kinds of ceramic activity—that changed his creative conception and *élan*. Later on, he was deeply inspired by Nader Khalili’s revolutionary techniques of ‘earth architecture’ that offered a step-by-step guide to create “ceramic houses” by using clay-earth to build adobe houses and fire the structures with potters’ glaze. However, this hollow, temple-like brick-mound was Kaufmann’s simple tribute to the space of the Triennale: as he broke down its outer layer on the third day, a passage into the hollow mound opened—an inner space, purified, to him.

In the undated film loop *Matter Is A Center of Dreaming*, Ester Beck almost buried herself into a massive mound of clay that she sliced like a cake with wire and a few other sharp instruments to deconstruct it. In a written statement displayed with the piece she expressed, “We all dream sometimes about doing a totally outrageous thing... out of our comfort zone. In my case, it was the dream of seeing what would happen if I massively blew up my way of working in the studio, if I worked with an immense block of clay that would demand inventiveness in terms of tools and would also turn my whole body into a tool. I wanted to know what a big mass of clay feels like, what it allows me to do, and where the limits would be.” For Beck, it was her act itself that bore the real meaning and not the net result: her live performance, on the inaugural day, of directly hammering a chunky clod of malleable clay into an irregularly shaped vessel drove her point home. Beauty reigned when she daubed the vessel with powdered red color.

Next to Beck’s video, was Juree Kim’s time-based installation *Evanescent Landscape—Svarglok*, Jaipur (2018) (raw clay, water, and video), a long Rajasthani palatial building made with dry, unfired, red clay on the basis of her research on several traditional regal architectures buildings in Jaipur. Throughout the exhibition, Kim’s use of water—an important element in her works—activated and destroyed her construction at the same time. On the opening day, she poured pitchers of water at the base of this building that very slowly softened from the bottom and collapsed it into a heap on the third day. Her ephemeral art, destroyed by water, was a reflection of her ongoing concern about the demolition of old architecture and urban features, building upon earlier pieces that consider South Korean gentrification projects of the 1970s and ’80s. In the work, as she conveyed to me, “I have resigned from any control during the process of the encounter between earth and water, as the two interactive matters become a single entity in the completion of self-denial.”

Water was also an activating agent in the stone-ware mural wall-relief *Weathered Rock After The Rain* (2018), by P. R. Daroz, one of the most prominent muralists in India today. Taking cues from the dents made by falling water on rock surfaces— and the sparkling water within the dents reflecting the sky above—Daroz created negative spaces on solid square forms through slip casting process and applied multi-hued glazes. It is through the ceramics of Daroz—known for their unadorned contours of fired clay, or dramatic effects of color and glaze—that the passage of India’s clay art form is reflected: from functional pottery, to sculpture, to wall mural relief and architectural installation.

Satoru Hoshino's remarkable installation in earthenware *Beginning form Spiral '18* (2018) was an outstretched spiral formation on an entire wall, along with an elongated urn placed in the foreground. The spell of this dotted spiral was in its concentric movement as its center dropped into a deep bottom within its interior. Hoshino's primary tools were his finger tips that left their impressions on the work—a reminder of the fact that the first form of earthenware was the footprint left on the muddy ground. His own words are poignant in this regard:

After suffering a natural disaster, a landslide in 1986, my attitude towards my ideas into form. After the landslide, the clay was not only a material to make a work, but also like nature itself lying down in front of me... The substance of clay is a gate where I make contact with the world, a field where the body which is not yet reduced to a sign operates in a primal state, and a field where a new order arises in chaos.



Satoru Hoshino, *Beginning form Spiral '18*, 2018. Photo by the author.

An evocative ceramic installation on three interconnecting walls was Madhvi Subrahmanian's *Forest Of Shadows* (2018), created out of stoneware and light projection with multiple shadows. A low-angle projection from a single source of light was cast on rows upon rows of very small, unidentifiable items that produced a 'forest of shadows' beneath these individual items on the central wall. On each of the two adjoining walls, a row of window-like structures appeared—as if to situate the action within the human-made environment of a town or city. For several years, most of Subrahmanian's work has been based on organic forms of seeds and pods as varying metaphors of fertility, movement, and migration. To most, this picturesque ensemble might appear to be an eco-friendly paean to nature and its fluid relationship with human life. However, a subversive reading could view this space as representing an urban underworld, filled with those people whom society chooses to leave as nameless and faceless—a pointed critique of our attitudes on immigration, and how 'the others' of human existence are left as mere shadows due to our indifference.

An enthralling ensemble of six interrelated sculptural pieces in stoneware, *Nature's Signature* (2016), by Vipul Kumar, resembled ancient monuments with decrepit exteriors. These sculptures had radiant bases of raw clay with fresh yellowish brown hues created with wood-firing effect. From these sculptures' crests, rough-glazed green porous bubbles, born out of mixing base glaze with volcanic ash, drooped in hideously skewed formations—evidently Kumar's way of underlining the gruesome future of the natural world and its unrelenting environmental damage.

I particularly enjoyed the works of two ceramists for their implicit humor and playfulness: Auroville-based Russian ceramist Saraswati Renata's *Antigravity* (2018) was an ensemble of fragile, wafer-thin architectural constructions in porcelain with whimsical outlines and angles that looked like humanoid forms—huddling playfully together as if caught up by an upward moving force. Renata explained to me, "To add strength to the porcelain, I add cellulose. It makes the process of clay preparation longer, because you need to add paper pulp to a slip (clay dissolved in water), mix properly in the mixer, and let it dry on the Plaster of Paris slabs. During firing, the porcelain slightly melts and softens, and causes visible changes in shape. I see it as an advantage and actually invite the softening of the geometry, the dancing mode of the

house-like structures.”

The other one, Shirley Bhatnagar’s tongue-in-cheek installation in stoneware, porcelain and earthenware—and mostly glazed in a bright palette—was a table laden with soup tureens, platters, teapots, and cups, most of which were oddly shaped and unusable. Titled *The Broken Promised* (2018), the installation was combined with unattributed popular statements by politicians to implicitly lampoon political leadership and the futility of electoral promises. Some of these promises were so ridiculous that they bordered on hilarity, while others were so frightening that one wished they would not come true. Bhatnagar seemed to allude to the absurdity of the common man being invited into the political realm, imagined here as an impossible meal, and the work could be relished fully when viewed like a three-dimensional graphic novel: One ought to engage with the text in order to follow the intent of her construed ‘curiosity shop.’

To end, perhaps the most intriguing work was a collaboration between the Indian ceramist Ashwini Bhat and the American poet Forrest Gander. Rather than simply inscribing words on ceramic pieces, Bhat wanted to create a shifted realm of imagery and pattern that linked visual patterns with poetry in a manner similar to Gander’s series of poems whose lines and breaks took the shape of his favorite running path. Bhat sought Gander’s collaboration as she wanted to create sculptural forms that would develop from a cluster of smaller structures towards a larger pattern. This led to their collaborative project *Compass Rose* (2015), made in stoneware sculptures and poetic texts. As Bhat explained, “this exploration of space is a map of longing. Forrest calls it a ‘periplum,’ a journey between islands recorded as if seen from onboard a sailing ship. The ‘islands’ formed by words and sculptures are the intermediate places on a journey of desire—artistic, erotic, emotional.”



Ashwini Bhat and Forrest Gander, *Compass Rose*, 2015.
Photo by the author.

CONTRIBUTOR

Romain Maitra

ROMAIN MAITRA is a scholar and critic based in India.

Get the *Rail* delivered to your doorstep.
Start Your Subscription Today!