

CROSS-POLLINATION

Sharbani Das Gupta

The quiet oasis of a third floor atrium in the Hyatt Hotel in Chennai, India. The eyes adjust to the light and space, and are drawn toward a towering wall of glass and a lush garden beyond, punctuated by sculpted clay forms. Bracketed by two groupings of ceramic pillars supporting two pergolas, a pool anchors the garden. Ceramics is the primary medium, front and centre to the art in the building, a continuation of a theme that begins with Passage, a monumental gateway of fired clay installed on an island in the hotel's entry drive.

The unusual choice of medium was sparked by an idea born in 2008 when **Rajeev Sethi**, art director and consultant for the Hyatt, acquired three large scale sculptures from ceramic artist **Ray Meeker**. A discussion ensued about the possibility of creating a poolside sculpture garden for the new Hyatt hotel in Chennai. Large-scale work would be required, allowing Ray to incorporate the sculpture of others too, and over the next two years, he would work with eight clay artists, five of whom would share his own studio at the Golden Bridge Pottery

in Pondicherry. With the bee and hive as conceptual backbone, Ray brought new insight to bear on the original plans for the hotel's outdoor space, integrating the input of a landscape designer and a botanical conservationist. The result, unusual for hotel plantings, reflects the natural local ecosystem in symbiosis with the art and architecture of the hotel.

Ray Meeker's massif Passage at the hotel entrance evokes ancient rock and South Indian temple gateways. The 21-foot-high Passage invites you to cross a threshold, to step into a new possibility – recognizing man as the pollinator of conscious, sustainable environmental health. The sculpture is formed of seventeen monumental interlocking blocks. Its rugged planes glow with warm earth tones from slow wood firings, the surfaces impressed with fragments of words and phrases that point toward an escalating consumer culture epitomized by the West and desired by the East.

Out on the third floor pool deck the distinctive pergolas come into focus. The pillars by **Aarti Vir** are covered with slips poured under and over wax paintings of Aborigine-inspired dots, layered again with glazes and finally wood-fired. To her the dotted lines resemble the nature of life itself, with its meandering progressions.

The second series of pillars, by **Rakhee Kane**, is also layered with slips and glaze. Like Aarti's pillars, six of them are load-bearing, the remaining eight free-standing. Marks depicting windows and climbing leaf motifs reject specific geographical location. Rakhee's pillars point toward the complex interaction between the natural and the man-made in a henge-like formation referencing the timeless.

Held secure within a crook of the pool's perimeter is an undulating bank of squared shapes of clay. Each individual component is, on closer inspection, a part of a small "treasure box" by Adil Writer. Asked by Rajeev Sethi to make a large-scale treasure box, Adil demurred, prefer-





above right
left
below

Miche Hutin, **Untitled**
Antra Sinha, **Tetrarch**
Adil Writer, **Treasure Box**





ring to achieve magnitude through multitude. From a window above, the variegated forms, textures and colours of five hundred boxes suggest a coil of the great glittering Aztec snake god flowing down the temple stairs.

At the other end of the scale is **Antra Sinha's** soaring Te-trarch. The five-foot form, deceptively simple, has its origin in a tiny piece of clay pressed between thumbs and forefingers. From thumb-size to palm-size and upwards, the form grew in scale and technical complexity. This piece at the sculpture garden is Antra's largest to date and required many firings and mechanical and engineering adaptations to achieve perfection.

Backed up against one of the pergolas and nested in the greenery, Ashwini Bhat's sculpture is a stark aesthetic contrast. Fecund, earthy, the Queen is powerful and primal. The shape derives from early fan-shaped Harappan headdresses, the swelling body containing energy and its arched axe-blade head dispersing it. Layered in slips and high-fired with wood, Queen's honey



above left
Ashwini Bhat, **Queen**

above right
Sharbani Das Gupta, **Connection**

center
Pool before redesign

right
Rakhee Kane, **Pergola**



tones and contours echo the theme of the bee and its hive.

Deborah Smith, cofounder and partner of Golden Bridge Pottery, brought her time-honed skills to bear on her work. Known for blue-on-white painting on functional ware, she has arranged large vase forms into a stately cluster embellished with floral motifs sprouting upward and swirling with energetic blossoms in blue – a counterpoint in colour and shape to the greenery around.

In the centre of the pool, **Michel Hutin's** three spare, delicately curved taller-than-life shapes play with form and counter-form, light and shadow. The white surface contrasts with figures of blue that appear to hover just above the skin. Matisse comes to mind. The blue of the pool echoes and extends the sculpture in a faultless synchronicity between shape and setting, creating the perfect axis for the lines of sight to revolve around.

Connection by **Sharbani Das Gupta** is a segmented bench installed at the edge of the garden, adjacent to the glass wall. Together the sections mimic the broken patterns of dry earth, the bench tops visually linked by a series of carved interconnecting ripples – concentric circles – where each centre represents an individual. Glazed in blue to represent water, the unifier, in contrast to the dry earth of the sides, the circles overlap; lives intersect.

In India, where clay is associated with the utilitarian or ceremonial, the sculpture garden presents a shift from the norm. Perhaps it will prove to be a step toward seeing clay as art – a seed that generates more opportunity. What exists is significant in range and endeavour. Each artist stretched far, attempting work at scales previously unimagined. Each brought personality and point of view to bear and each has had the privilege of seeing work through to completion. The deliberate choice of the hotel to try something atypical was part economics, part vision, ceramic art being both affordable and unique. The choice has created a showcase for the possibilities of clay and provides a glimpse of what a healthy coexistence between man, art and nature might be like.

Written by **Sharbani Das Gupta**. Edited by **Deborah Smith**

right Deborah Smith, **Untitled**



THE ARTISTS

Ray Meeker Architecture and ceramics at University of Southern California. Cofounder of the Golden Bridge Pottery in Pondicherry. Known for teaching, 'fired' buildings, and for independent studio work ranging from functional to monumental. raydeb@sify.com | www.raymeeker.com

Aarti Vir MFA in painting from Hyderabad Central University. Three-year apprenticeship in clay at the Golden Bridge Pottery. Makes woodfired salt glazed functional and sculptural work from studio in Hyderabad. aarti.vir@gmail.com | www.aartivirceramics.com

Adil Writer Architecture from the University of Houston. Partner at Mandala Pottery in Auroville. Demonstrates variations of "fired house technology" learned from Ray Meeker internationally. Known for woodfired sculpture. adil@auroville.org.in | www.adilwriter.com

Antra Sinha MFA from MSU Baroda. Long term apprentice to Ray Meeker and resident artist at the Golden Bridge Pottery. Awarded a scholarship to SCCP, Japan. Builds woodfired kilns, facilitates and conducts clay workshops around in India. Has studio in Pondicherry. antrasinha@gmail.com | www.antrasinha.com

Ashwini Bhat Trained classical dancer with an MA in literature. Studied ceramics at the Golden Bridge Pottery. Has participated in international art residencies and is a recipient of several grants and fellowships. Makes woodfired sculpture. ashwini@ashwinibhat.com | www.ashwinibhat.com

Deborah Smith Graduate in Japanese language from Stanford University. Studied pottery in Japan with Araki Takako in Nishinomiya and was apprenticed to master potter Yamamoto Toshu of Bizen. Spent three months in Mashiko as translator and companion to Susan Peterson during Peterson's research on Hamada Shoji. Cofounder and manager of the Golden Bridge Pottery. raydeb@sify.com

Michel Hutin Self-taught potter in Auroville. Early work was built with thick slabs of soft clay cut with wire. Now uses a "simpler, more immediate" method with no 'cut' that brings him closer to being at once deliberate and natural. The controlled undulations and unplanned intersections that "liberate the form always a surprise and often a delight". flame@auroville.org.in

Rakhee Kane BFA in painting from Faculty of Fine Arts, Baroda. Postgraduate diploma from National Institute of Design in ceramics. Apprenticed at the Golden Bridge Pottery. Participates in international residencies, exhibits in group and solo shows and also works as a curator. rakheekane@gmail.com | aavartan.wordpress.com

Sharbani Das Gupta Graduate from the National Institute of Design. Apprenticed at the Golden Bridge Pottery. Participates in several residencies, exhibits internationally and has curated and presented at the NCECA. Writes and publishes for art journals and other international publications. sharbanidg@gmail.com | www.sharbanidasgupta.com