

A New Mould

Issues of beauty, brittleness and brutality are explored at the inaugural Indian Ceramics Triennale, says **Mario D'Souza**.



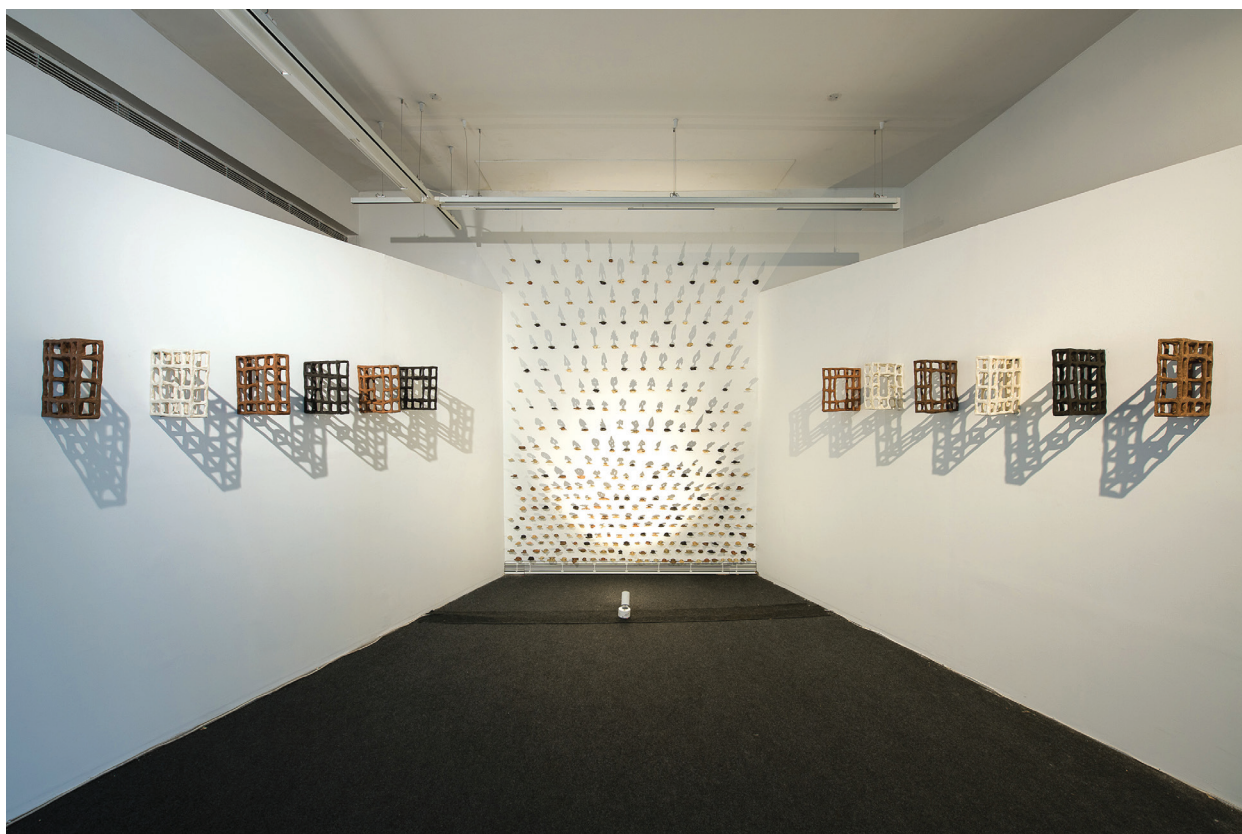
Moments into entering *Breaking Ground*, the 1st Ceramics Triennale at the Jawahar Kala Kendra (JKK) in Jaipur, we are confronted by a larger than life bust of a man who looks like he is screaming. Aptly titled *Man exhibiting Holes*, this work by L. N. Tallur sets up the many registers of labour, loss, fragility, dissent and hope that this show operates on. That ceramic history is traced through the clay-made remains of buried ancient civilizations and has for many years been preserved in a community-based utilitarian practice are the complex antecedents to thinking through the contemporary life of the medium. While this may be one of the starting points of the rather wide curatorial premise put out by the six artist-curators (Anjani Khanna, Madhvi Subrahmanian, Neha Kudchadkar, Reyaz Badaruddin, Sharbani Das Gupta and Vineet Kacker), the exhibition in many deliberate, coincidental and situational ways, breaks away from the finished and physical aesthetic the medium has come to be associated with.

The palpable anxiety experienced thanks to the politics of our times manifests directly and subversively through the works of several artists. Benitha Perciyal places the bruised torsos of two farmers on brick pedestals carrying the weight of a plough, their constructed bodies cured in clay and herbs,

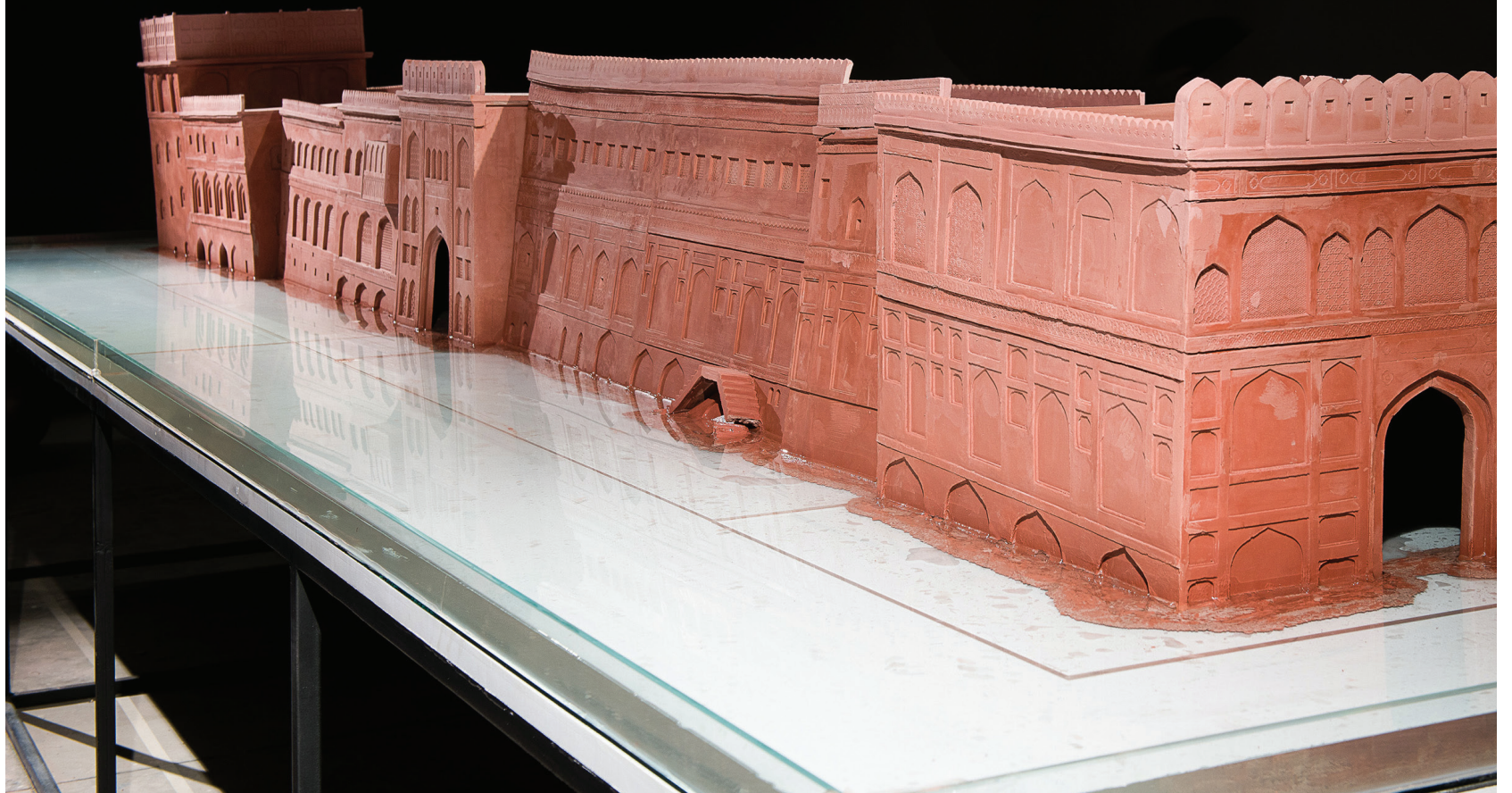
L.N. Tallur. *Man exhibiting Holes.*
Terracotta hollow block, cement. 2018.



Benitha Perciyal. *Let them own their land.* Frankincense, myrrh, powdered clay, bark powder, lemongrass and cider wood, essential oil, cloth, bricks, teak wood, palm seed, coconut coir rope, iron, cattle plow. 2018.



Madhvi Subrahmanian. *Untitled.* Stoneware, light, shadow and projection. 2018.



Juree Kim. *Evanescent Landscape – Svarglok.* Jaipur soil, clay, water, video. 2018.

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frankincense and myrrh, their sweat replaced by the scent of sweet spices. The installation, with the fragrance of the embalmed figures, is an ode to farmers' movements across the country. Perciyal's refrain is *Let them own their land*. In one of the adjacent darker rooms of the exhibition lies a scene of crime in Anjani Khanna's installation *Unnamed*. A body is carefully placed on the floor and two hang more lifelessly by a noose around the neck. Newspapers pasted on the wall and smeared with clay-red handprints surround the anthropomorphic bodies with cow-like heads. In the newspapers you read about atrocity after atrocity, till you reach a point of fatigue. The anxiety of the common citizen is echoed more directly in Shirley Bhatnagar's installation with cups and kettles, plates and trays placed on a table. Titled *The Broken Promised*, none of them is of any use – each item is punctured and faulty like the broken political promises of the electoral season.

With over 47 artists participating in the event, *Breaking Ground* stretches from the 31st of August to the 18th of November. Accompanied by workshops, masterclasses and a conference about the state of the ceramic arts, there is a retrospective of Kripal Singh Shekhawat's works as well – he is the gentleman responsible for the revival of Jaipur Blue Pottery.

Sydney-based Ramesh Mario Nithiyendran's self-portraits blur the strictures of masculinity and femininity to open up a spectrum of fluid selves. Not too far away from him are Thukral and Tagra's *Longing for Tomorrow*, ethereal porcelain sculptures and collage-based drawings. Opening up almost as a fantastic biography that chronicles the life and aspirations of the Punjabi community, rendered in colourful tones and fleeting, winged desires, the duo draws on their time at the Meissen porcelain factory to bring a light moment to the exhibition.

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In demonstrating hope in the times of technology, Irish artist Ingrid Murphy contemplates the future of Ceramics and preservation in keeping with opensource technology and philosophy. Her *Space Plates of Jaipur* function like magical portals. On scanning the images of landmarks of Jaipur on the plates using an application through your smartphone, you are teleported to their actual 360-degree views, creating a fascinating dialogue between the physical and the virtual.

In one of the most arresting rooms of the JKK lie the remains of two performances mounted at the opening of the exhibition. A mound of clay, powder red on the inside, bearing the memory of Israeli Ester Beck's poignant performance, sits on the floor in conversation with a video of Beck in her studio. In the video lie moments of anxiety, strength, fatigue and recuperation as we see her laboriously create a solid structure of clay slabs, only to eventually slice it to pieces bit by bit, with a thin wire. A few metres away, a miniature fortress fails at its foundations, slowly breaking from strength to submission. Sculpted by South Korean Juree Kim, the work is inspired by the city of Jaipur and the depiction of Svarglok (the abode of the



Thukral and Tagra. *Longing for Tomorrow.* Porcelain, drawings on paper. 2011 - 2013.

Gods) in an 18th century miniature. In its slow dissolution, the raw clay sculpture laments the erasure of peoples and histories to the promise of urbanization.

The architecture of JKK mirrors the red of the works, sometimes even breaking its sharp lines with the fluidity of the sculptures or adopts some works as a part of itself. South Korean Jae Joon Lee's *Guardian of Nature – Gatekeeper* is installed in the central open courtyard and almost blends into the red sandstone building, emerging quite suddenly, like a still sentinel. Asim Paul's brick pillars and barbed wire also creates the impression of a sinister borderland at the entrance of the JKK.

Many artists at *Breaking Ground* take the medium back to raw, unfired, unglazed forms almost as a protest against its finished and functional expectations. The emphasis on natural form and its textures continues to expand this protest – the oscillation between beauty, brittleness and brutality often records a potent visual debate, so rarely seen in exhibitions of this scale. /



Asim Paul. *Existence, Non-existence.* Ceramics, iron. 2018.

All images courtesy of Shine Bhola and Jawahar Kala Kendra, Jaipur.