



By RAKESH KUMAR
Special to Weekend Review

Ceramics have been marginalised in the art world for many years. To begin with, there was the art versus craft debate. The art fraternity didn't accept works in ceramics as a valid artwork. Ceramic artists were seen as studio potters who made little pots and pans and tea cups. They were not treated with enough respect in the art world fraternity. Ceramics was a second-class citizen in the arts world — maybe because of the historical baggage that the material — clay — carried or because of association of function or tradition in a country like India.

But in the last couple of decades, clay has pushed its way forward and made elbow room in the contemporary Indian art landscape. For a decade now, Indian ceramic artists have broken new ground around the world — China, Japan, Korea, Australia, Spain, the UK and USA. It was time, some practitioners decided, ceramics broke a bit of a ground at home.

An international event, aptly titled *Breaking Ground*, opened at Jaipur's Jawahar Kala Kendra on August 31 as the first iteration of Indian Ceramics Triennale. As many as 47 ceramists — 35 Indian and 12 international artists — have put up their works at different venues spread across the JKK, designed by one of India's greatest architects, Charles Correa, for preservation and promotion of Indian art on an international level.

"Some of us wanted to put up something that could put forward ceramics as it is practiced now, not just in India but all over the world," says Vineet Kacker, a member of the curatorial team.

In the last 10 years, Kacker adds, there's been a tremendous growth in the medium (clay). The number of practitioners has jumped a lot, there's a lot of interest in the medium, but it's been at the level of smaller shows, at the level of group shows, but there hasn't been much curatorial interest in ceramics.

Until some practitioners began planning the first Indian Ceramics Triennale (ICT) last year.

The Contemporary Clay Foundation, a not-for-profit organisation set up to promote ceramic art through exhibitions, workshops, international and national exchanges and residencies, joined hands with Jaipur's masterpiece of architectural beauty and symmetry, the Jawahar Kala Kendra, to present the ICT.

The seeds of this association were sown a few years ago, says JKK director general Pooja Sood. "Anjani (Khanna) and I ran an art management course three-four years ago and we got into a conversation about a biennale, triennale, and we discussed not just in management terms but also the ideology about it. I genuinely believe if you want to make a difference, you need to make a splash for people to critique it, question it, but also to set up things for discourse and discussion."

Khanna, the director of Contemporary Clay Foundation, says the ICT has been driven by a six-member core team of mid-career ceramic artists, Kacker being one of them.

Sood says she was happy to be pioneering India's first international ceramics event and hopes the triennale will increase visibility and allow ceramics to be appreciated as an art form in its own right.

Khanna is excited about the scale of the event. "Not just in terms of the number of artists participating in it, but also in terms of the nature of works that's on show at JKK," she says. The artists were told to go beyond their conform zone, extend themselves in terms of what they



Breaking Ground presents 35 Indian and 12 international artist projects, 10 collaborations, a symposium and workshops for adults and children

A triennale in India celebrates ceramics as an art form



were making. The brief was: we have a building and therefore there's an opportunity to work at a certain scale.

"The idea was to bring an aspect of ceramics in contemporary art practice so we have ceramics in conjunction with other material in certain artworks," says Kacker, who studied ceramics at the Andretta Pottery in Himachal Pradesh, and the Golden Bridge Pottery in Pudukcherry, and has been a resident artist at the

“Some of us wanted to put up something that could put forward ceramics as it is practiced now, not just in India but all over the world.”

—Vineet Kacker, one of the curators

Anderson Ranch Arts Centre, Colorado, and the Northern Clay Centre, Minnesota.

The international artists who came on board for the exhibition are superbly conceptual and fantastic, says Sood, and it kind of enlivened the whole city.

One of the big international names is Frenchman Jacques Kaufmann. The resident president of the International Academy of Ceramics has arrived here from his Geneva studio for his first

experimentation at real scale. He created a large firehouse installation at an outdoor location at the venue. The project, titled *To Purify Space*, has been made using brick, bamboo, fired local red clay and mirrors. Kaufmann said it was inspired by *Ceramic Houses*, a book by the US-based Iranian architect Nader Khalili.

Like Kaufmann's work, Danijela Pivašević-Tenner's room installation *Sphatic Gallery* also stands out. A lecturer at the University of Kiel, Pivašević-Tenner worked with local communities to collect objects of daily use and installed them in a living room made of ordinary furniture. A liquid terracotta clay slip was poured over the objects and the furniture in successive layers, day by day, to slowly reveal a new landscape hidden within the ordinary, well-known objects. With this work, Pivašević-Tenner raises questions about the values of daily objects and our relation to them. Digging clay changes landscapes and firing processes negatively impact the atmosphere. Pivašević-Tenner therefore chooses to use slip cast clay or porcelain in her artwork, which can be recycled. Her installation is titled *Do you know, what's behind?*

In a small courtyard near galleries I, II and III



Courtesy of Jawahar Kala Kendra



Clockwise from main image: L.N. Tallur, *Man exhibiting Holes*, 2018. Terracotta Hollow Block and Cement; Saraswati Renata, *Anti-Gravity*; Adil Writer, *A Deserted Barcode*; and Jaques Kaufmann, *Art Ichol at Maihar*

Below: Jessika Edgar, *Let's All be Ethereal and Transcend*

were selected through a nationwide open call. "By July, we had announced which were the artists who would be involved," says Khanna.

The fact that the event was positioned as a triennale, a three-year cycle of art shows, as many as five collateral events also came up at JKK. There were two symposiums, on September 1 and 2, in which 12 Indian and international speakers addressed groundbreaking developments in ceramic art practices looking at its interface with technology, design and the socio-political fabric.

To bring ceramic art and magic of clay to wider audiences, the JKK has partnered with Akshara Foundation of Arts and Learning, a not-for-profit public trust based in Mumbai, for a school outreach programme. AFAL invited underprivileged children from local schools to visit the exhibition and express their creativity in the clay room. Similarly, master classes for adults with leading ceramic artists are also going on during the event.

A collaboration with British Ceramics Biennial has been set up to develop a continuing reciprocal arrangement between British and Indian ceramic artists. Kristine Michael in collaboration with the Delhi Art Gallery has curated a concurrent exhibition of works by the late Kripal Singh Shekhawat, the artist behind the revival of Jaipur Blue pottery.

The exhibition's got a great response, says Sood. "Every day, almost a 100 people are coming to see it. This is also materiality so people get very excited about it. It is really valuable to see how people have responded to it. Everyone is talking ceramics in a slightly different way — which is what we set out to do."

■ Rakesh Kumar is a writer based in Jaipur, India.

■ Indian Ceramics Triennale: Breaking Ground will run at the Jawahar Kala Kendra in Jaipur, India, until November 18.

