



'Anti-Gravity' (2018) by Saraswati Renata

spotlight

contemporary art/lifestyle

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Ceramics Triennale

THINK OUT OF THE KILN

It's time to re-imagine ceramics, as the age-old craft form is stepping out onto a global sphere of contemporary art, with experimental works that go beyond all confines of medium, and even space. **By Jaideep Sen**

jaideep@newindianexpress.com @senstays



'Brick Temple' (2017), Jacques Kaufmann

HERE'S a certain seduction to clay craft that Hollywood buffs might readily equate to that much-referenced scene, involving a coy Demi Moore and a wild-eyed Patrick Swayze getting steamy over a potter's wheel, in the 1990 Academy Award-winning movie, *Ghost*. Peter Nagy, Director, Nature Morte Gallery, New Delhi, offers a critical explanation of that elusive quality of elation. As he puts it, "Primordial and ubiquitous, earth, dirt and clay speak to the very core of our beings and can spark our most fundamental creative energies."

Indeed, important art has been made in clay and ceramics since antiquity. And Nagy agrees that ceramic art is certainly not a new development — even as he happens to be one of three expert advisors to the core curatorial team of *Breaking Ground*, the first iteration of the Indian Ceramics Triennale, set to be hosted by Jawahar Kala Kendra (JKK) in Jaipur, along with the Contemporary Clay Foundation (CCF).

Joining Nagy as co-advisors are Ray Meeker, Co-Founder, Golden Bridge Pottery, Puducherry and Pooja Sood, Director General, JKK — working with a six-member core team of mid-career ceramic artists including Anjani Khanna, Madhvi Subrahmanian, Neha Kudchadkar, Reyaz Badaruddin, Sharbani Das Gupta, and Vineet Kacker.

"Many modern artists such as Picasso and Joan Miro also worked with ceramics," points out Nagy. "In India," he adds, "(the late) Mrinalini Mukherjee and Himmat Shah stand out for their long engagement with, and commitment to, working with ceramics and pushing the parameters of how we think of 'ceramic sculpture'." In any case, artists always have all manner of materials at their disposal. "But perhaps, ceramic artists are feeling more relevant today, because there is a shift back towards more hand-crafted and artisanal modes of production," notes Nagy.

He explains, "We're seeing this in fashion and food, as well as art, as a response to the increased roles that technology plays in our lives. The brain seeks a balance of aesthetic experiences, so as we spend more time connected to a barrage of images and information on our smart phones — and we crave other more sensual and tactile encounters."

The Indian Ceramics Triennale, thus, will serve "to highlight the finest practitioners of experimental ceramics working today, those who are expanding our conceptions of an ancient medium claiming its place in the future", as a festival note puts it.

'It's going to be a crazy show'

Importantly, the curators' intention from the very start was to take 'ceramics' away from the confines of studio pottery and functional objects, says Nagy. Matter of fact, "The field is completely open," he enthuses, "and the artists need only to have some element of ceramics — even, sometimes, loosely defined as dirt — in their works."

For a general note, the majority of works on show happen to mix ceramics and clay with other materials, and in some cases, the clay is not even glazed or fired, observes Nagy. "Every other conceivable material has been brought in to create mixed-media works of surprising diversity, including photography, video and performance. Some of the works will be site-specific creations, made at JKK itself in the weeks before the exhibition opens. Others are works that have been seen before, but certainly not in Jaipur."

"It's going to be a crazy show," Nagy asserts. For a word of caution, he adds, "Both artists and the audience will begin to think of 'ceramics' in a much broader sense because of this Triennale, but it may also prove to be just way too much diversity for others." In simpler terms, the thought of ceramics is no longer forced into retail spaces of tableware and non-metallic cutlery, and the art form has evolved from a purely functional standpoint to something a lot more aesthetic, and valuable, with significant artistic merit and worth. "We're talking about art here, mainly large-scale sculptures, with no relevance to what may be referred to as a 'lifestyle product'," urges Nagy. At the Triennale, the niche segment has certainly found its larger stage.



Peter Nagy

As Ray Meeker offers, "For over a decade, Indian ceramic artists have been breaking ground around the world — in China, Japan, Korea, Australia, Spain, the UK and USA. It's high time to break a bit of ground at home." Anjani Khanna, Director, Contemporary Clay Foundation and a member of the Curatorial Team adds, "We seek to broaden the horizon of the medium of clay. The Triennale aims to showcase alternative, experimental and experiential uses of ceramics within and beyond the boundaries of the traditional gallery."

Pooja Sood, Director General of JKK elaborates, "From a historical perspective, there has been a major turn in the field of ceramics worldwide. In a country like India, where ceramics and clay have always been considered as artisanal craft, the Triennale will increase visibility and allow ceramics

special



A sculpted piece by Shampa Shah

to be appreciated as an art form in its own right." Either which way, as an artist-led initiative, there will be no excessive probing of artistic motive and intent, assures Nagy. "The majority of the works take their own freedoms and investigations as their prime reason for being," he reasons, "certainly without regard for the pre-conceived aesthetic parameters of its audience."

Clay, baby clay

While that sentiment might prove revelatory for modest, highly skilled craftsmen around the country, the focus of the Triennale is clearly to propel Indian ceramic works into the global sphere of contemporary art. Also, the art form of ceramics has assuredly found a larger perspective — in sheer scope of scale.

By and large, Nagy explains, the curators have been focused on sizes, shapes and colours up to this point, thinking about the installation as a whole, and their placements within the architecture of JKK. "The Triennale will certainly dispel the notion that ceramic art is meant purely for aesthetic pleasure," he insists.

The show will also certainly include pieces that embody a social cause or political intent, and are based on pressing issues, with pointed content. For instance, Benitha Perciyal's new work is about the plight of the Indian farmer, acting as a sort of commemorative monument, notes Nagy. The abundant outdoor and courtyard spaces at JKK will also make room for "some very ambitious works" by Japanese and Korean artists, showing alongside the likes of LN Tallur and Thukral & Tagra.

Lately, an increased number of artists have begun to experiment with ceramics "simply because it is a very enjoyable material to work with, which can produce a variety of effects", says Nagy. "There is a very meditative, even therapeutic aspect of working with clay," he adds. "Sculptors, particularly, have moved away from the toxic fiberglass that was prevalent in Indian art 15-20 years ago, and moved more towards natural materials," elaborates Nagy, adding that the Triennale will hopefully encourage people to use more handmade objects.

As for the question of ceramic art gaining appreciation in financial worth—a crucial point to address for the future of ceramic art, among aspiring and longtime art collectors alike—all of it really comes down to what the artists choose to do with their work, how they conduct their careers and develop their practices, says Nagy. "Value in art,

in the end, is not based on the materials used, but the ideas the artist expresses and the overall development of a body of work, which takes decades to evolve," he explains.

Looking at ceramics anew

"Based on the number of exhibitions I have seen this year, there is definitely a growing appreciation for ceramic art in India," acknowledges Ray Meeker. "Exhibitions mean the market is growing, so I guess buying or collecting ceramic art can be considered part of a 'lifestyle'," he reasons.

Meeker happens to be a prime figure in the ceramics community down South, having founded Golden Bridge Pottery in 1971 in Pondicherry, along with Deborah Smith. The centre continues to be a thriving hub for ceramic artists from the country, and outside. "Today, our students are as interested in making functional stoneware as the sons of village potters are interested in continuing in their fathers' footsteps," offers Meeker, pointing out that many of their former pupils are now artists in their own right.

"How do you convince someone that they are looking at art, especially in a 'new medium'?" rallies Meeker, considering "It took time for photography and printmaking" to gain the same manner of discernment as fine art. Meeker goes on to quote fellow advisor Nagy, by saying, "There's still a subconscious thing where Indians see artists as craftsmen, and craftsmen aren't supposed to make a lot of money. Even for the super-rich, it's more than what they want to spend on art." As for overly intellectualised creations, Meeker opines, "Conceptual art without compelling visuals can often be stillborn."

At the Triennale, while most artists will be keen on gaining international exposure, the greater battle is to do with changing perceptions of ceramic art, as well as the livelihood of artisans, agrees Meeker. "Values, customs, habits, attitudes are difficult to change. The Triennale will move the needle on ceramics perceived as art, but that may not guarantee big bucks."

Set the right mud

The festival is likely to become "a valued destination for the best international artists working in clay", emphasises Meeker, while a symposium is expected to address core areas of interest within ceramics, and encourage scholarly discourse on the subject. There will also be master classes by Kate Malone, Ange Peter and Jane Perryman, as well as workshops for children,



'Containing Time' (detail) by Jane Perryman

organised by the Akshara Foundation for the Arts and Learning, Mumbai, under the festival's Arts for All programme, led by Ruby Jhunjhunwala, Kate Malone, Aditi Saraogi, Reyaz Badaruddin, Rashi Jain, and Kaveri Bharath.

"It's all happening today — multi-format work," offers Meeker. His picks among the works include Compass Rose by ceramist Ashwini Bhat collaborating with poet Forrest Gander; Neha Kudchadkar's *Somethingpolis* of glazed and unglazed terracotta, cement, plaster of Paris, clay, the artist's body, digital prints on paper, pencil and ink drawings, found (and altered) shards and sounds; Jane Perryman's *Containing Time*, which includes composer Kevin Flanagan's soundscape based on Jane's 52 ceramic bowls being struck and sounds of the local environment, apart from journal entries, poems and photographs; and Ester Beck's *Matter is a Centre of Dreaming*, a filmed performance piece involving 4.5 tons of clay to create a massive abstract vessel sculpture.

For artists growing with their practice, "social media seems to be the key" in the present day, admits Meeker. "Know who you are as an artist, and articulate it convincingly," he advises. For a few words of encouragement for aspiring ceramists, he adds, "Just do it. Observe. Explore. Take risk. Have courage. Defy if you must. In university, I was often told, 'Oh, you can't fire that!' Well, I did!"

Indian Ceramics Triennale: Breaking Ground will be held at Jawahar Kala Kendra, Jaipur, August 31 to November 18.

Important dates

Exhibition: August 31 to November 18.
Symposium: September 1-2: Twelve Indian and international speakers will address developments in ceramic art practices. Rajeev Sethi of Asian Heritage Foundation (who curated the 'largest Indian ceramics installation' at the Hyatt hotel, Chennai), art critics Abhay Sardesai and Nancy Adajania, as well as artists Kate Malone and Ingrid Murphy, among others, will participate. *Building with Fire*, a book by Ray Meeker on his experiments with fired houses, will also be released.

Workshops: For both adults & children, ongoing through the course of the festival.
Master Classes & Film Cycle: Ongoing.
Outreach: JKK and Akshara Foundation of Arts and Learning will host a schools outreach programme: Arts for All, a series of workshops for underprivileged children.
Collaborations: Kristine Michael, with Delhi Art Gallery, will curate a show of works by the late Kripal Singh Shekawat, the artist behind the revival of Jaipur Blue pottery. A program with The Indian Institute of Craft and Design, Jaipur is also in place.

ARTISTS ON OUR RADAR



Nidhi Jalan

An MFA from Hunter College, NY, Nidhi also appears in Susan Peterson's book, *Working with Clay*.

Satoru Hoshino

Japanese artist, studied at Ritsumeikan University.

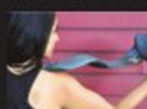


Elodie Alexandre

Elodie, from Himachal, works with feminist ideas.

Dipalee Daroz

Special interest in black pottery of Azamgarh.



Ashwini Bhat

Ashwini has a background in literature and dance, and is currently based in Petaluma, California.

Priya Sundaravalli

A leading artist in the Indian ceramics scene.



Rakhee Kane

Rakhee studied painting and ceramics before training with Jyotsna Bhatt and moving to Auroville.

Anjani Khanna

A former journalist, Anjani works in Ailig.



Reyaz Badaruddin

A teacher and artist, with his studio in Himachal.

Sharbani Das Gupta

Based in India and the US, she's a festival co-curator.



Vineet Kacker

From Delhi, engaged with Eastern spiritual thought.

Madhvi S

Artist, curator and writer, Madhvi Subrahmanian is an International Academy of Ceramics member.



Neha Kudchadkar

A visual and performing artist based in Mumbai.

All images courtesy: Indian Ceramics Triennale