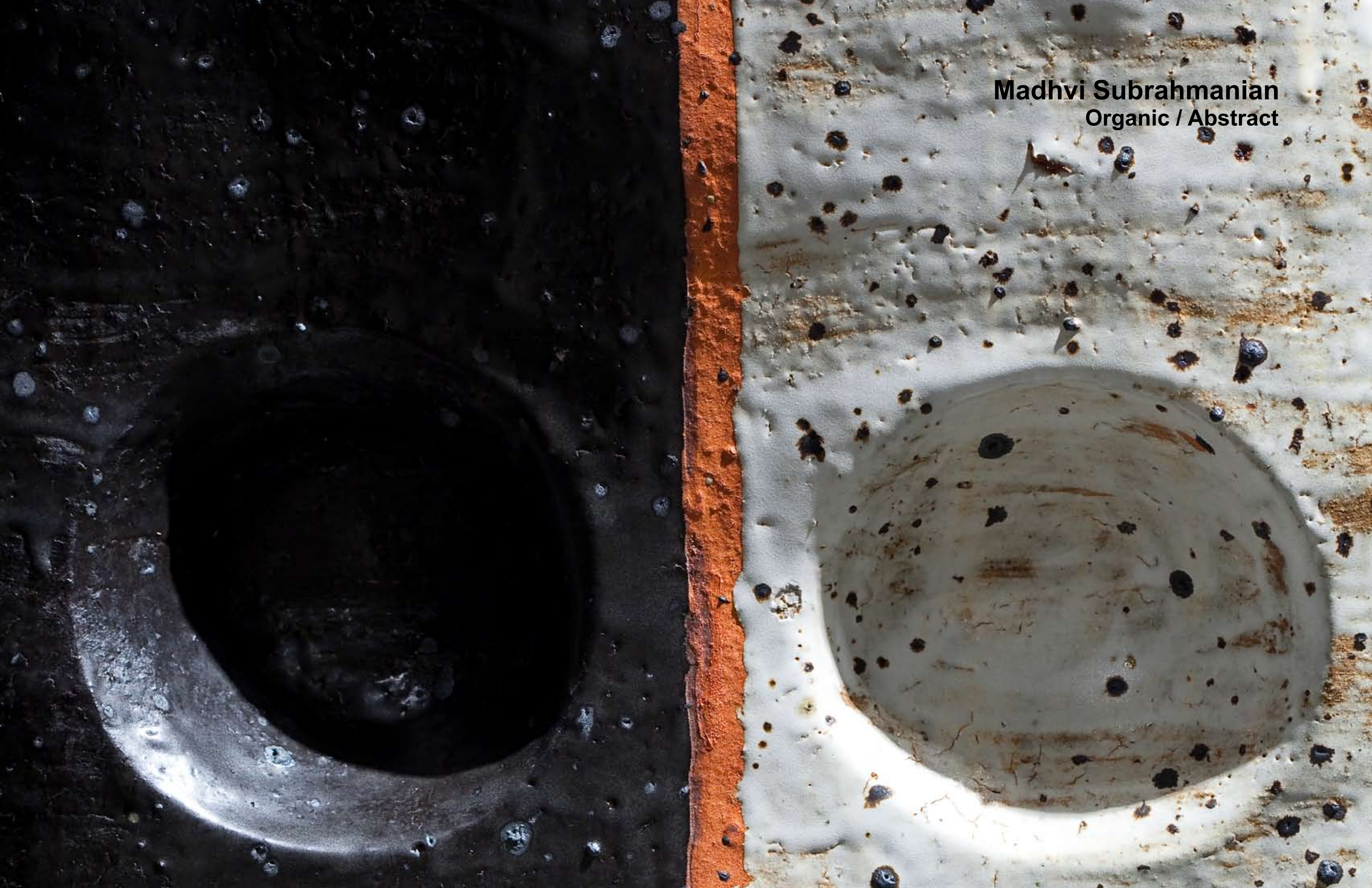


**Madhvi Subrahmanian**  
**Organic / Abstract**



Madhvi Subrahmanian

Organic / Abstract

installation and outdoor sculptures

January 18 - February 13, 2010



**Chemould Prescott Road**  
CONTEMPORARY ART GALLERY

### **Contextualizing Madhvi Subrahmanian's Sculptures in Clay in a "Global Cultural Economy"**

In her twenty-five year long practice, international ceramic artist Madhvi Subrahmanian has undertaken varied explorations within her chosen medium. A reconfiguration of ideas, materials and production processes are seen in Madhvi's work as a result of the mobility across nations and states. Using the dominant context of migration and employing the ceramists biographical references, this essay recapitulates some key aspects of Madhvi's work with reference to Indian and global ceramics and contextualizes her contributions in a "global cultural economy". The essay also discusses the inevitable process of indigenization or localization, which accompanies the predominant process of cross-cultural exchange and hybridization.

The formative years of Madhvi's career are situated in the eighties when the "back to earth ethos" had firmly taken root in India. Influenced by this backdrop Madhvi set off for Pondicherry in South India to train under the ceramic practitioners Ray Meeker and Deborah Smith at the Golden Bridge Pottery. This marked the foundation of her technical training and ideological orientation in the field of ceramics. The technical process of wood-fired stoneware and an output of utilitarian objects became chief guideposts for the ceramist.

The first paradigm shift in the nature of Madhvi's work as she pushed the functional form into a new aesthetic and cultural realm occurred when she relocated to the United States of America in 1989. Here Madhvi furthered her formal training; she earned a Masters in Fine Arts from Meadows School of the Arts at SMU Dallas Texas and briefly studied at the New York State College of Ceramics at Alfred University. A Charles Wallace fellowship to the United Kingdom, further developed her career. These dialogues in multi-cultural settings naturally led Madhvi to reinforce her Indian identity, albeit sub-consciously. Let us turn to examine some features in Madhvi's works which constitute this Indic context.

In the area of form, Madhvi continued to make open bowls and architecturally inspired containers; they signified a maternal spirit and a sense of "belonging" for her as they hold, protect and nurture. In terms of technique, Madhvi eschewed the potter's wheel and moved into the "low tech" world of hand building and smoke-firing using minimum tools. She moved from high-fired stoneware to low-fired earthenware, her techniques aligned with the indigenous Anasazi and Pueblo potters of New Mexico and the village potters of India. For texture, Madhvi employed perforations on the surface of the bowls; this reference was borrowed from the Anasazi potter who employed holes in pots, which serviced the traditional burial practice signifying the release of the soul. Paradoxically, Madhvi used the American-indigenous Anasazi potter's reference to bring to fruition her own search for a personal/Indian vocabulary. In addition, a specifically Indic identity was evoked through a vibrant palette of reds and orange, which was drawn from Madhvi's memory and yearning for India - the Indian landscape, textiles, food, etc.

These examples in Madhvi's intuitive practice marks a distinct overlap of cross-cultural references and

Indian elements in ideation and production that situate the ceramic output in a global context as opposed to a local/Indic context.

In the second theme of the essay, we see how the agency rests with Madhvi as the producer-artist and as an arbiter of repatriation of heterogeneous components of culture accompanied by a process of indigenization. Madhvi's works when repatriated to the Indic context, do not homogenize with it; instead, they enrich and alter the prevalent practice of Indian ceramics by adding new meaning, techniques and forms. These new specimens straddle multiple contexts and genres thereby belonging to the global cultural economy as opposed to being categorized in any one of a dichotomous framework.

We can turn to the explorations made by Madhvi in various genres of art. As we have seen with her containers, she brings in a conceptual enquiry into the ceramic medium and its usage for "expression" as opposed to "function". In addition, Madhvi's landmark series of floating belly pods enters the genre of installation art. With these works, Madhvi pushes the conventional scope of the material. As observed by Sian Jay, "Madhvi Subrahmanian takes her ceramic art practice and manages to make a material as tough as clay appear almost ethereal, as soft and delicate as lace" (Jay, 2009:9). Her belly pods—once concave containers—are now built with vein-like coils with large holes—making them light and airy. Conceptually they express movement and change as experienced by the artist. The "floating pieces" are suspended from the ceiling; as opposed to being placed on a pedestal situating the works in a new and unique position as opposed to the tabletop functionality of ceramic objects. Besides her personal explorations in installation art, Madhvi was part of a collaborative project that brought Indian ceramics into the genre of public art; interactive 7ft large sculptural "prayer wheels" were displayed on the pavement of the National Gallery of Modern Art, Mumbai in 2003.

The above examples demonstrate how Madhvi examines the virtues from other art genres, makes conceptual enquiry, pushes traditional boundaries and repatriates new heterogeneous characteristics in her work. This is what Appadurai refers to as the "repatriation of difference". This concept is further highlighted in the context of the current exhibition.

The exhibition displays works, which were produced between Madhvi's own studio in Singapore and the Golden Bridge Pottery in Pondicherry where she was a resident artist last year. The most apparent feature of these exhibits is that it contains works from both extremes of the ceramic material- earthenware and stoneware- and within a common conceptual framework displays great diversity of surface, texture and scale.

A strong presence of Indic cultural reference points such as icons of the village guardian deity Aiyandar, and the snake God Nagadevata lend themselves to Madhvi's subconscious process of marking her forms with an Indian identity. This is especially striking in the seedpods series, which bear a strong reference to raw and earthy votive sculptures in their nearly six feet tall frame. Most distinguishingly

however, is the presence of signs adopted from the Indian “roadscape” on her present suite of organic forms. Madhvi borrows chessboard patterns painted on trees across the roads of Tamil Nadu and merges them with her organic form as seen in the wall pod or anthill series. Universally used road signs allude to a primeval language for Madhvi, which connects the world together and links her own migratory experiences. Thus, each series serves as a marker of how heterogeneous characteristics are negotiated by the artist and repatriated in the global cultural economy of ceramics.

In conclusion, Madhvi’s intuitive work process brings out her subconscious search for a personal-Indian identity in this multi-cultural global world. The ceramist’s personal context of migration, through four countries over three continents, aggravates a desire to reconnect with her cultural roots. Thus while a process of indigenization may be active in Madhvi’s output subconsciously, there are many cross-cultural flows that are negotiated and repatriated by the ceramist which signify new and multiple meanings often enmeshed in a single sculptural form. These aspects undoubtedly locate Madhvi’s works significantly in the global cultural economy of art.

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Arjun Appadurai’s seminal essay *Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy* (Appadurai in Daring (ed.), 2007. pp. 216-226) uses the idea of a “global cultural economy” to debunk the myth of homogenization of local cultures as part of the larger project of globalization. He advances the idea of “scapes” which flow through the globe carrying capital, images, people, technology, etc (Daring (ed.), 2007: 216).. For the purposes of this essay, we will understand these “scapes” as concepts, ideas, production processes, techniques and cultural reference points which travel across the globe from one culture to another.

O.W. Wolters situates his model of adoption of Indic socio-cultural practices in the South East Asian context and discusses the idea of localization in the context of South East Asian cultures (1999). Wolters refers to “cultural unity” not as a homogeneous monolithic whole; but as a diverse sub-regional set of pre-histories, ideologies and practices that give rise to a heterogeneous process of Indianization/localization. Both authors give agency to the individual and his own socio-cultural context in the adoption, modification and repatriation of Indian and cross-cultural flows in the South East Asian and global contexts respectively.

This ethos was shaped by the post-independence engagement with the revival of India’s handicrafts, textiles, folk, and tribal art forms, which began in the 1950s.

In the case of Madhvi, indigenization means the sub-conscious search for an Indian identity in a cosmopolitan global playfield

As noted by cultural theorist, Nancy Adajania: “In the present series of works (2001), the functional impulse, which was her mainstay earlier, has been overtaken by sculptural possibilities” (Adajania, 2001).

Aiyanar is a guardian village deity worshipped very popularly in Tamil Nadu in South India.

According to the Hindu pantheon Nagadevata is the snake god who resides in the netherworld. In parts of South India, termite mounds are revered as informal shrines of Nagadevata.

These patterns serve as markers of direction for drivers.

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Appadurai, Arjun in Simon Daring (Ed.). *Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy in The Cultural Studies Reader*, (3rd Edition), pp. 216-226. Routledge, 2007.

Chattopadhyaya, Kamaladevi. *Handicrafts of India*. New Delhi: Indian Council for Cultural Relations, 2nd rev. ed., 1985.

Clark, Garth. *Shards: Garth Clark On Ceramic Art*. D.A.P./Ceramic Arts Foundation, 2003.

Wolters, O.W. *History, Culture and Region in Southeast Asian Perspectives*. New York, Singapore: Southeast Asia Program Publications and The Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1999.

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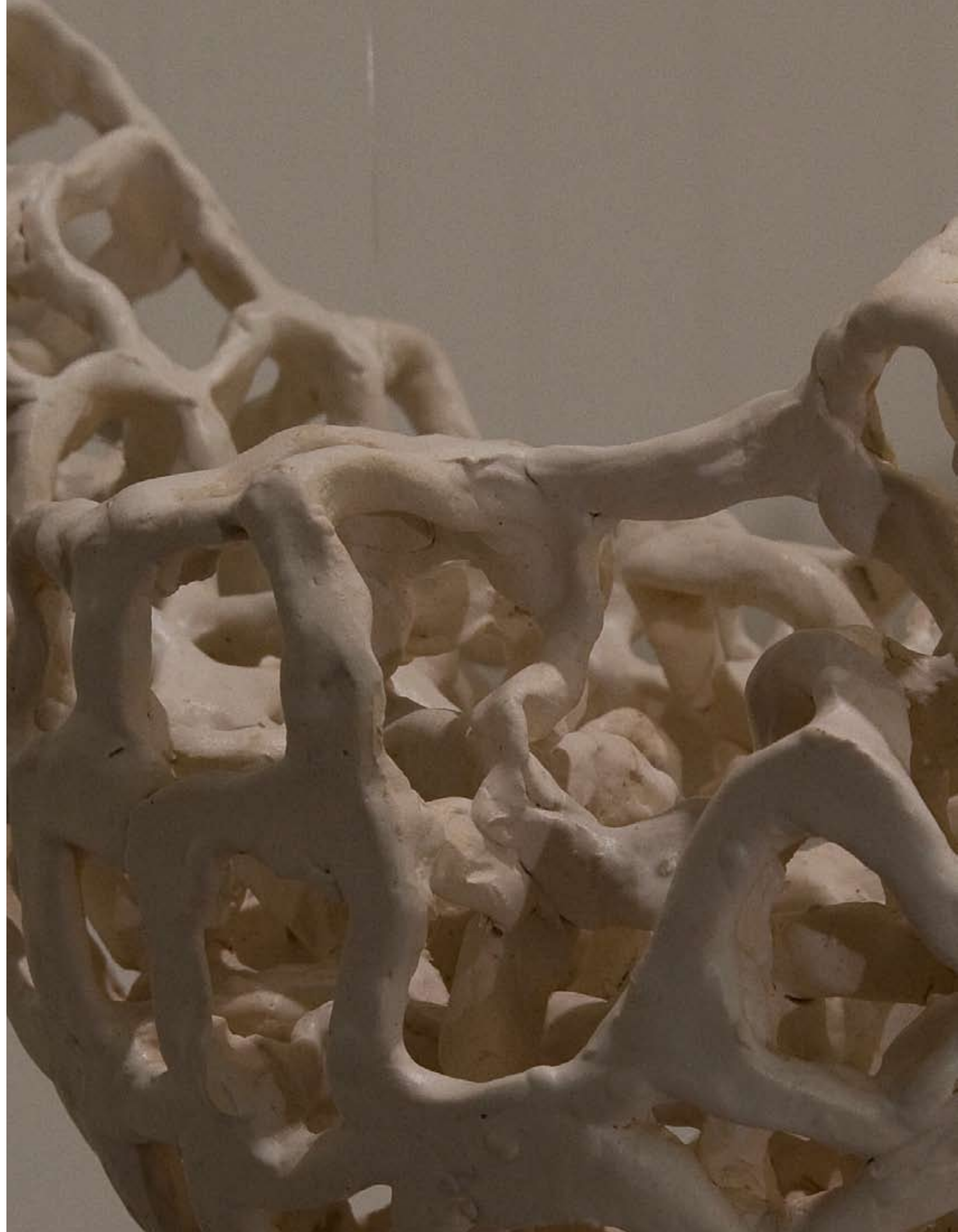
## Catalogue Essays

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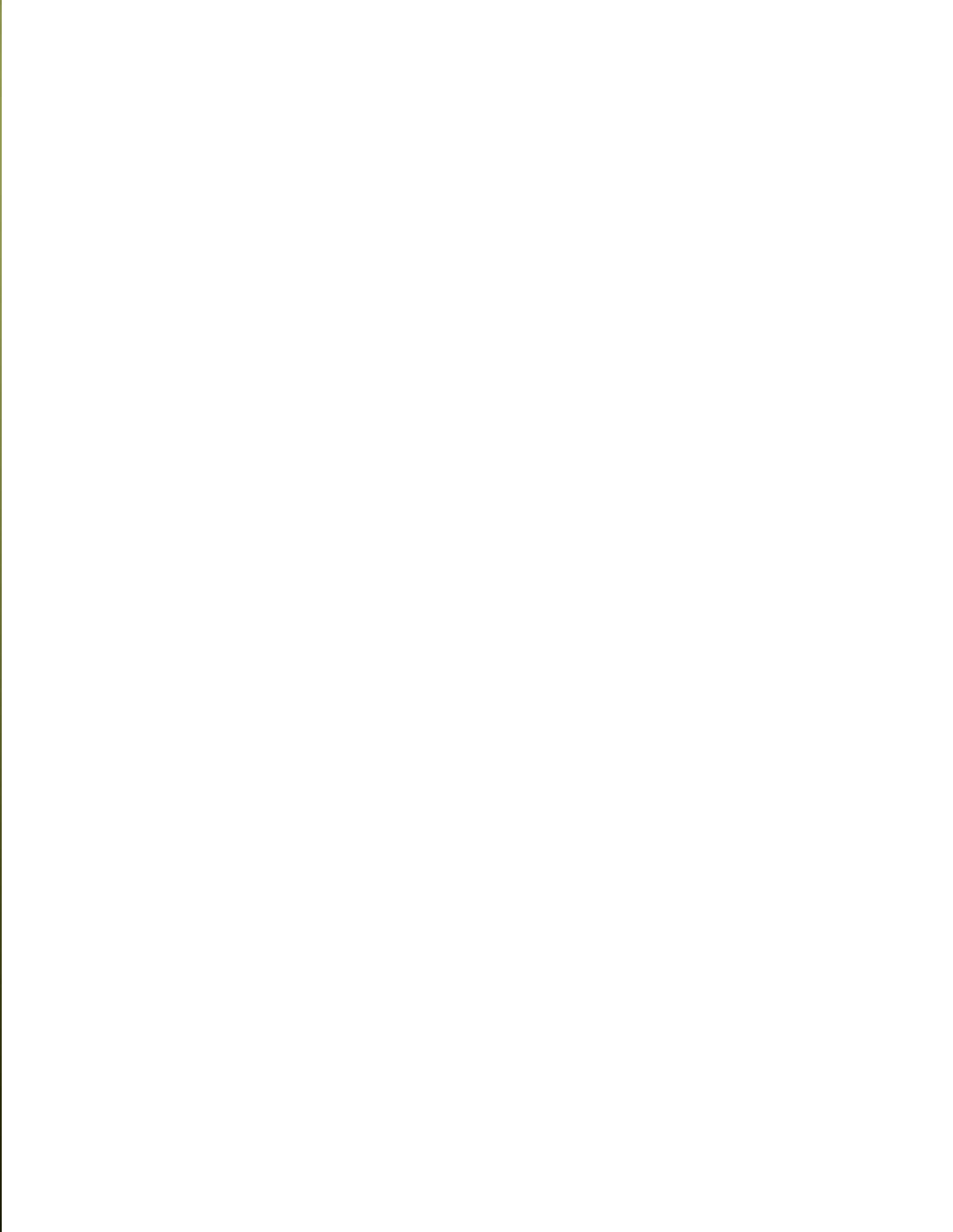
Jay, Sian, E. *Woman on Woman: Lace*. Essay for Exhibition “Woman on Woman Lace”, FOST Gallery, Singapore, 2008

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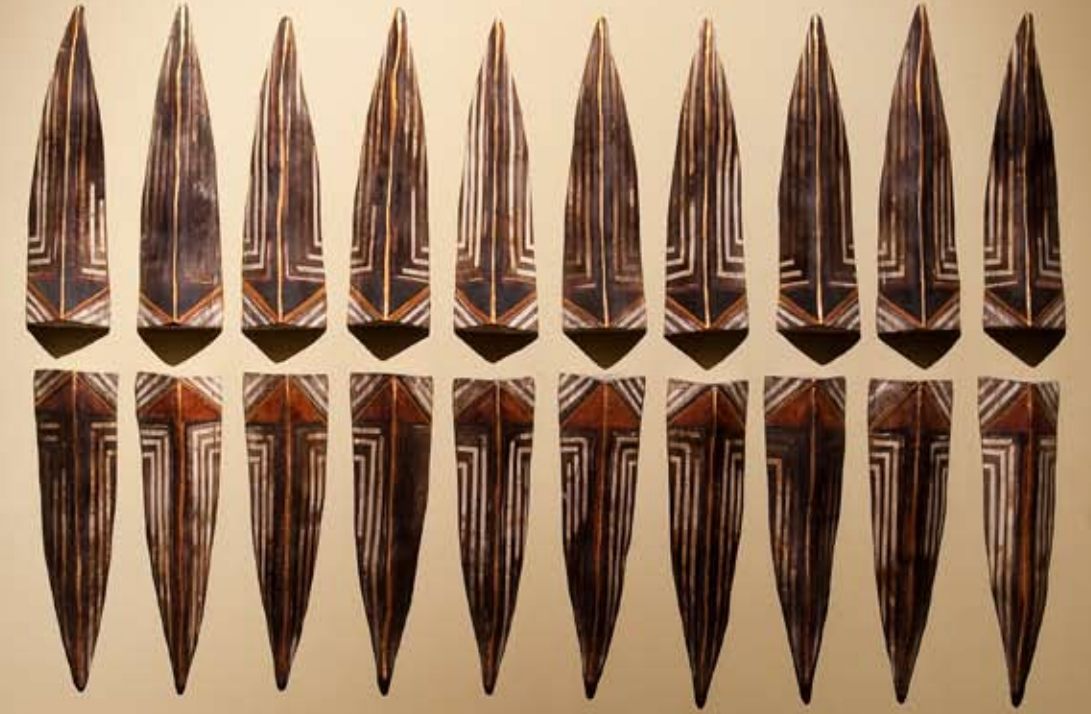














**Check Mate**

Roots  
Upturned.  
Beseeching.  
Why?

Hundreds of years  
That old road.  
Those old trees  
Checker flagged.

A warning?

Now split.

New four lanes.  
Great road.  
Love it.

Still,  
There must have been  
A better way!

*Ray Meeker  
Pondicherry  
October 2009*























Born in Mumbai, India

#### Education

- 2002 Charles Wallace Fellowship in London, UK with Kate Malone
- 1994 Assistant to William Daley, Haystack School of Crafts, Maine, USA
- 1993 Summer school with Val Cushing and Marilyn Lysohir, New York State College of Ceramics at Alfred, NY, USA.
- 1993 MFA, Meadows School of the Arts, Southern Methodist University, Dallas, USA
- 1990 Assistant to Warren Mackenzie, Peters Valley, Layton, NJ. USA
- 1985 Golden Bridge Pottery with Ray Meeker and Debora Smith, Pondicherry, India
- 1982 Bachelor of Commerce and Economics, Bombay University, Mumbai, India.

#### Grants and Awards

- 2005 Honorable Mention, Montgomery Center for the Arts, Montgomery, NJ.
- 2003 Dissemination Grant, India Foundation for the arts, Bangalore, India
- 2002 Charles Wallace India Education Grant, British Council study grant.
- 2000 Arts Collaboration Grant, India foundation for the Arts, Bangalore, India.
- 2000 Studio Pottery Award, Cymroza Gallery, Mumbai, India.
- 1991-93 Meadows Graduate Council Grants, SMU, Dallas, TX
- Margo Jones Award, SMU, Dallas, TX
- 1992 The Assemblage Show Award for excellence in Art, Dallas Visual Art center, Dallas, TX

#### Solo/two person Exhibitions

- 2010 Organic / Abstract, Chemould Prescott Road, Mumbai, India
- 2006 Madhvi Subrahmanian: Pods and Seeds, Anne Reid Gallery, Princeton, NJ. USA
- 2005 Distillations-Pam Farrell and Madhvi Subrahmanian Arts Council of Princeton, NJ
- 2003 Ceramics 2003, Gallery Chemould, Mumbai, India
- 2001 New work, Cymroza Art Gallery, Mumbai, India
- 2000 The pod and other containers Triveni Kala Sangam, New Delhi, India
- 1999 A Vessel and a Container Cymroza Art Gallery, Mumbai, India
- 1995 Mosaics Dallas Visual Arts Center, Dallas, TX U.S.A
- East meets West, Carmichael Gallery, Museum of Art, Tyler, TX, U.S.A.
- 1993 Masters of Fine Arts show, Meadows museum of Fine Arts, Dallas, TX U.S.A.

#### Selected Group Exhibitions

- 2009 French and Singapore, New Generation Artists, Alliance Francaise de Singapour
- Explorations in Terracotta, India Habitat Centre, New Delhi
- 2008 Woman on Woman: Lace, Fost Gallery, Singapore.
- Fusion III, Artmosaic Gallery, Singapore.
- 28 International Competition for Ceràmica L'Alcora, Spain.
- 2007 Contemporary Indian ceramics, Lemongrasshopper gallery, Ahmedabad, India
- New Jersey Annual Fine Arts Show, Noyes Art Museum, NJ
- Feats of Clay, Lincoln Arts Center, Lincoln, California.
- East meets West; Seoul, South Korea

- 2006 Princeton Artist Alliance and Preservation; D and R Greenway, Princeton, NJ
- In Diaspora: New Jersey artist of Indo-Pak heritage, Montgomery Center for the Arts, NJ
- Contemporary Indo-American Art, Indian Consulate, New York, NY
- 2005 Family Matters, national juried show, Baltimore Clayworks, MD, USA
- Ellarlie Open XXIII, Trenton Art Museum, Trenton, NJ, USA
- 2004 Ideas and Images, National Gallery Of Modern Art, Mumbai, India
- Peace and Harmony, The Habitat Center, New Delhi, India.
- 2003 Rain, curated by Bina Ellias, International galerie magazine, Sakshi, Mumbai, India
- Public art-contemporary ceramics in collaboration- temporary interactive installation on the pavement outside the National Gallery of Modern Art, Mumbai.
- 2002 Harmony, Arts trust exhibition, Nehru center, Mumbai, India
- 2001 Water Show, Habitat Center, New Delhi
- Shared Memories, The Art Club, Olive, Mumbai, India
- 2000 The Sixth Taiwan Golden Ceramic Awards Show, Taipei, Taiwan
- Mumbai Potter's Tea Party, National Gallery of Modern Art, Mumbai, India
- Studio Pottery, Cymroza Art Gallery, Mumbai, India
- Richard's Feast, Palmer Lake, Colorado, USA
- 1996 Sehweisen, S.E. Gallery, Darmstadt, Germany
- 1994 Holiday Showcase, at Pewabic Pottery, Detroit, MI, U.S.A.
- Dinner Works, Louisville Art Association, Louisville, KY, U.S.A.
- Scissor, Paper, Rock- Kay Rosen, Helen Altman and Madhvi Subrahmanian, Barry Whistler Gallery, Dallas, TX, USA
- 1993 Alumni Art Exhibit, Raritan Valley Community College, NJ, U.S.A.
- New Ceramics, Creative Arts Workshop, New Haven, CT, U.S.A.
- 8 Differing Opinions, Fort Burgwin Research Center, Taos, NM, U.S.A.
- The Assemblage Excellence in Art, D'art Visual Art Center, Dallas, U.S.A.
- The 15\*15\*15 Compact competition, LSU, Baton Rouge.

