

Working His Charm

Article by Ray Meeker

“OK THEN. MAKE 500.”
Rajeev Sethi to Adil Writer when Writer said, “No. I cannot make a three-metre-cube *Treasure Box*.”

“But 500 *Treasure Boxes*, no problem.” For Writer this is just another escapade for his fertile imagination. The 500-piece *Treasure Box* installation will be mounted permanently in the garden of ceramic sculpture at the Hyatt Regency, Chennai, scheduled to open at the end of the year. Halfway through the making process, Writer confesses, “This is the first time I have made enough of anything to really develop the idea.” The richness of this show is in no small part the result of this unusual discipline.

“The gift of a decorative box implies permission to conceal one’s secrets.”

“...the dialectics of inside and outside multiply with countless diversified nuances.”¹

These boxes are small. Many fit in the palm of the hand. Intentionally. They are made to be held – close to the heart – to be looked at closely and opened. Inside? There is virtually no inside. This is not a box

to be filled with pins, buttons and paperclips. A treasured ring? Perhaps. But what does a *Writer Treasure Box* hold? Unquestionably, your imagination. And a kind of rite of passage, if you wish to make the trip – from outside to inside – to Bachelard’s realm of “intimate immensity”. Here is the three-meter cube in the palm of your hand.

I have two *Treasure Boxes* on my desk as I write. *Box One* is a fireclay and porcelain mix. Understated by normal *Writer* standards, the dominant porcelain, a clean, soft matte white, is embedded on one side with a slab of beige fireclay, flashed to a rusty orange by the flame of a woodfired kiln. Here *Writer*’s verve is in his clay work rather than extravagant glaze treatment. An undulating wire-cut ‘equator’ swings across the box, bisecting the spare form with a line



as supple and varied as an oriental brush stroke. The pale orange of the fireclay appears again in an ascending tracery of abstract silhouettes, an earthy accent that casually adorns this elegant simplicity. Opened, this is a *Treasure Box* of breathtaking clarity. The inner chamber is ovoid, almost spherical. The twisted wire used for the cut has left a furrowed sheer-wall ice-scape surrounding two frozen bowls. Here the fireclay slab that narrowly borders two edges is a breath of warmth in the eerie silence of this immense interior space. The ice-bound hemispheres on the inside are shadowed by circular orange patches of flame-flashed pattern outside. I do not think this juxtaposition of heat and cold was just the luck of the fire. Or is my imagination getting away from me? Writer says this was not intentional. Either way, the subtlety and restraint exhibited in this piece adds welcome range to the work of this rapidly maturing artist.

Box Two is more robust. Though larger, it does still fit the hand and, though still a box, this is a mountain-scape, fissured, furrowed and stamped. The

huge fish-fossil escarpments that ascend opposite sides of this mini-mountain geode invoke geologic time and prehistoric life forms. The pattern of a regular grid suggests steeply terraced slopes—agriculture clinging to rock tenuously—a precarious human presence.

Writer, the former and still sometimes architect, often invokes the dictum, “form follows function”. And dare I add material? Yes. Clay: a chameleon that can mimic just about anything and hide in the guise of almost any other medium. Today many contemporary artists push clay towards the ephemeral, ignoring or rejecting its engaging physicality. “Less is more?” Not for this artist. Born and raised in the Mumbai cacophony (teeming life set against the swelter of several thousand years of history) there is more than a hint of Bollywood exuberance in Writer’s multi-layered treatment of material. In his *Treasure Boxes*, Writer welcomes clay’s unique plasticity, its receptivity and immediate response to his spontaneous handling, recording instantly and faithfully the synergy between material, thought and the artist.



Facing page: *Treasure Box (Open)*. Estonia, 2010. 4 in/h.
This page: *Treasure Box, Landscape*. 5 in/h.



Now living and working in semi-rural South India, Writer is anything but isolated. He is well travelled, interested in everything and an Internet savage. While he will gleefully adopt anything from anywhere and anyone, he is not a slave to the trendy. His work is contemporary without being effete and embraces content without being conceptual. Indian ceramic art, still largely under the radar, is beginning to surface. New paths may emerge that recognize the Western critical model but are not fettered by it.

The *Treasure Box* series is a repository of memory and imagination in a revel of fired clay – a material that Writer unequivocally loves.

Adil Writer, the imaginal man, working his charm. Poet of serendipity. Improviser. Indian. Open, absorbing and giving back, sharing the treasure trove of his imagination.

FOOTNOTE

1. Gaston Bachelard. *The Poetics of Space*. Beacon Press, Boston, Massachusetts. 1954.

Ray Meeker studied architecture and ceramics at the University of Southern California. With his wife, Deborah Smith, he founded the Golden Bridge Pottery in the South Indian town of Pondicherry in 1971. While Deborah now runs the Golden Bridge Pottery production, Meeker is best known as a teacher and as the 'architect/potter' who pioneered 'fired building' technology. More recently he has gained attention for his independent studio work, ranging widely from functional stoneware to monumental ceramic sculpture (www.raymeeker.com).

All photos by Ireneo Guerci, Auroville, India (ireneo@auroville.org.in). Adil Writer (www.adilwriter.com).

Facing page, top: Treasure Box, Iceage (Open). 4 in/h.

Facing page, Below: Treasure Box, Iceage.

This page, background: Hagi Tea Bowl. 2007. 4 in/h.

Below: Adil Writer.

