

# Sharbani Das Gupta

Insights  
for an  
Uneven World



Article by Laurie Rufe



Facing page: *Dinner with King Midas*. 2011. 6 x 2.5 x 3 ft.  
Photo by Sharbani Das Gupta.

Top left: *Urban Blooms Porcelain*. 2012. Found metal.  
6 x 4 ft. Photo by Sharbani Das Gupta.

Below left: *Seaward*. 2013. 11 in. Photo by Jared Leake.

Above: *Connection (With Detail)*. 2010. 2 x 5 x 8 ft.  
Photo by Sharbani Das Gupta.

STANDING AT THE CROSSROADS OF ART AND NATURE, at the juncture of Eastern and Western thought, and straddling two countries – India (her birthplace) and the US where she resides – Sharbani Das Gupta seeks insight in an undulating environment, searching for accord and balance in an ‘uneven world’.

Three impulses are central to Das Gupta’s sculptural work: the sacred in nature; the human condition; and the spirit of place, all guided by a deep respect for the environment. Much as in the Native American cultures of the Southwest US, both East Indian and American Indian philosophies are cosmologically centred – articulating a belief that all things are interrelated, a striking contrast to modern ideology that espouses the harnessing and subjugation of nature. “We are a product of the Earth,” Das Gupta states, likening her relationship to it as being at the terminus of an umbilical cord stretching between her and the world.

As an environmentally oriented ‘activist artist’, Das Gupta’s provocative clay and mixed media works are marked by a soulful conviction in which she speaks urgently to a planet in crisis. She echoes the concern uttered by Swiss psychiatrist Carl Jung: “As scientific understanding has grown, so our world has become dehumanised. Man feels himself isolated in the cosmos, because he is no longer involved in nature and has lost his emotional ‘unconscious identity’ with natural phenomena. . .” (*Man and his*

*Symbols*, 1964). Das Gupta’s artistic voice is an ode to this “unconscious identity” underscored by a cautionary cry over the blindness of environmental degradation.

Her art resounds with a question lodged in her memory, the source long faded: “When the last tree is cut down and the last river dries up, will that be the time we know that money cannot be eaten?” This question brings us to her 2011 collaborative installation *Dinner with King Midas* (with Nidhi Jalan who built the Midas visage). The artwork uses King Midas’ tale, his greed and fate, as a metaphor for the “increasingly unsustainable and inhumane methods of modern food production”. Midas’ toxic touch renders the lavish feast tainted, inedible; the alarming concomitance of arid earth tone slips on what should be alluring delicacies points to the virulent nature of this repast. The centrepiece, skeletal remains of a large fish (a symbol of fertility and abundance in India) – each vertebrae and the skull a three-dimensional interpretation of the international biohazard symbol – underscores the hazards of a global food system going awry.