





Facing page, above: **Buddha Rocks**. 34 in/h.  
 Facing page, below left: **Buddha Rock**. 22 x 9 x 30 in.  
 Facing page, below right: **Buddha Rock-Mudra**. 23 x 9 x 34 in.  
 Above left, centre and right: **Spirit Markers**. 34 x 5 x 5 in.

## Article by Sarah Bancroft

TERRACOTTA HAS BEEN USED FOR MORE THAN FIVE millennia on the Indian subcontinent to fashion everything from the divine to throwaway cups and even in today's large metropolitan centres it remains relatively easy to locate a clay Ganeshi and pile of *kulaar* at a local *kumar's* stall. (To find the stall you will have to search behind the main drag of shops selling white goods, the latest Levi and Benetton imports and burgeoning coffee shop outlets. But that's another story.)

It comes as something of a surprise, then, to the outsider to find that India has no tradition of what the West terms studio pottery, which puts the handful who call themselves ceramic artists in one of the tiniest minorities of that nation of one billion-plus. Left to shape their own paths, it is simultaneously a testing and privileged position.

At 42, Delhi-based Vineet Kacker is one of the most recent members of that group to be claiming a space

within the burgeoning Indian art world. Kacker had the courage to commit himself to a substantial apprenticeship, first exhibiting seriously only at the end of the 1990s, nearly a decade after his initial training with Ray Meeker and Deborah Smith at Golden Bridge Pottery, Pondicherry. Since 2004, however, when he had his first show at Delhi's Nature Morte, a gallery known for introducing major new talent, it has been clear that the years of preparation are bearing substantial fruit. In April 2008 Kacker joined Kristine Michael and PR Daroz as representatives of contemporary Indian ceramics at the World Ceramics Biennale in Seoul, Korea. In August 2008 he took part in the Tokoname Ceramics Festival in Japan.

Although he still designs a small range of domestic ware, Kacker turned his focus early on to non-functional objects, gradually producing a series of totems, tableaux, platters (piling them with fruit or anything else is the last thing you would want to



*Sutra Stone. 22 x 12 x 10 in.*

do to them), *Temple Tiles*, *Spirit Markers*, *Sutra Stones* and *Buddha Rocks*. As their motifs and inscriptions indicate (borrowed eclectically from Hinduism, Islam and Buddhism among others), they unashamedly reference the spiritual. However, this is deeply nuanced. As well as delineating something that might be termed 'sacred construction', the playfulness of Kacker's work – at times verging on the profane – disallows any notions of orthodoxy.

Mimicking the language of India's spiritual landscape, the pieces draw the viewer in with a Pavlovian complex of mix-and-match patterning, symbolism and layered texts and tales. Hindu 'god parts', as Meeker has rightly called them (often enough they are compilations rather than one godhead swallowed whole) adorn Buddhist *chortens*; a tile with Ganesh at its centre is labelled 'Made in USA' and exhorts supplicants to call the toll-free 1-800 Good God. Another, *Hanu Remix I*, has Hanuman flanked by pop hearts that could have walked straight off of a T-shirt saying, 'I ♥ New York'.

*Sutra Stone. 22 x 12 x 10 in.*



One can read these as cynical, compact comments on man's perennial ability to domesticate and tame the gods. These are something akin to India's household shrines, with their telltale signs of adaptation and manufacture, or places of worship the world over that hold half-obliterated marks of an earlier faith supplanted by another, subsequently deemed more politic. But to limit them to such an interpretation would be to miss a much wider exploration.

Nearing the end of two decades as a potter, Kacker brings a formidable array of skills to his output. He is a master of pigment and glaze, deploying a subtle and beautiful array of matt earth colours on stoneware, occasionally piqued by a gloss finish, a note of celadon on porcelain, or binding of coloured thread. He seems as comfortable with the discipline of sharp-edged constructs such as obelisks as with jars that take their lead from knotty-skinned *kohlrabis*; as ready to incorporate a plastic Hanuman or Tibetan woodblock stamp as use his bare hands on the wheel. Such a blend of ingredients is seductive

*Sutra Stone. 22 x 12 x 10 in.*





*Sutra Stone*. 22 x 12 x 10 in.



*Sutra Stone*. 22 x 12 x 10 in.

and could easily produce closed, finished work. That it has not is testament to Kacker's repeated willingness to lose himself in a much bigger landscape.

The Himalayas have been a cypher for Kacker from the beginning: they were where he was born as a potter. Having newly qualified as an architect in 1989, he headed for the mountains before taking up his first job. He had trekked there extensively but lost his way in the Kangra Valley and came across the Andretta Pottery run by Mary and Mini Singh. Within a few months of this first encounter with clay, he had left Delhi for Meeker and Smith's studio at Pondicherry. Over the following four years, Kacker was closely involved with Meeker's fired building projects, but by the time he left he had made a clear decision to pursue ceramics rather than architecture. With hindsight, one can see that what stuck was his fascination for another kind of ordering of space: the monumental – man's need to place markers, to define boundaries between states of being.

At first the Himalayan motifs and mountainscapes were little more than ornamentation on Kacker's cups and pots. By moving away from functional ware, he allowed the decorative a fuller presence and hence meaning. The result has been a long and rich investigation of the relationship between the superficial and substance. The series of *Buddha Rocks*, begun in 2004, and more recently the *Sutra Stones*, both first and foremost pieces of sculpture, represent the epitome of this thus far. His *Spirit Marker* pillars, which emerged close on the heels of the *Stones*, are an allied development.

Between two and three foot high or wide and made of coarse stoneware that echoes the rocks of Ladakh or Sikkim, all three strands have an air of having been drawn out of the landscape. Unlike the cut, architectonic *Markers*, however, the *Rocks* and *Stones* are lumpy, primordial; and while their surfaces are highly embellished, the fine porcelain implants that glinted from many of the *Markers* are gone. Instead, the snatches of almost indecipherable Sanskrit, Hindi and Urdu that had begun to appear on the *Markers* have become central. In the case of the *Rocks*, insistent tattoos crawl over the majority of the surface; one, for example, quotes a passage from the 2000-year-old *Patanjali* treatise on yoga.

The *Sutra Stones*, as their name indicates, use aphoristic legends around which geometric bands of colour and patterning are organised. Ambiguous phrases reverberate around themes such as *vish* and *amrut* (poison and nectar), *bhakti* and *prem* (devotion and love), *khuda* and *juda* (God's name in Islam and 'separation'), *karm* and *hukum*, (doership and divine will), *leela* and *karma* (playfulness and sin/fate).

Many Indians will identify these texts; that they escape a wider audience does not worry Kacker. In fact, he is mildly irritated when a woman exclaims in delighted recognition at the *Patanjali*. "I'm not trying to say this is the answer. I'm quite happy when people can't 'read' the script," he says. "It's like prayer flags: I connect with them without knowing what's printed on them. I know they are endowed with positive energy. It's not that the words on my pieces don't matter, rather that I want to expand their meaning, let them communicate beyond the conscious."

Fully titled *Sutra Stone for Contemplation*, the stones are Kacker's bravest work to date. Shaped somewhere between pellet, potato, pillow and bound torso, they pay almost no homage to formal beauty, eschewing even the verticality of the *Buddha Rocks* and suggesting that they have been found and decorated rather than formed. (In fact, Kacker was so committed to their form he built them all from the same casts. "I wanted them to be canvases," he remarks. Intriguingly, the grog pushed into the clay, colour, text and patterning are enough to make each highly distinctive.) What they insist upon is that they are bundles of something. Of what is for us to discover.

Sited in the Himalayas, both *Buddha Rocks* and *Sutra Stones* could find a place along with the wayside cairns, prayer flags and *stupas*. In a gallery or domestic space, they leave us with a plethora of questions about what turns the ordinary into the sacred; about interior and exterior landscapes; about the need to locate the internal and the means of doing so. This is the holy grail of art practice: Vineet Kacker has brought us to *darshan*, the drawing of the gaze outwards and inwards.

---

Sarah Bancroft is a British writer and critic based in the UK.