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ART

**ASHWINI BHAT:  
CERAMIC SCULPTURES  
JUDITH BELZER:**



Ashwini Bhat, *Tactile Language*, length 26 inches, stoneware clay, woodfired in a salt kiln, Appomattox, USA, 2016.



Ashwini Bhat, *Garden of Earthly Delights* series, height 8 inches, width 5.5 inches, depth 3 inches, native clay from Virginia with found muddauber nests and feldspar chunks, woodfired in the anagama kiln, Appomattox, USA, 2016.



Ashwini Bhat, *Garden of Earthly Delights* series, height 7 inches, width 4.5 inches, depth 2.5 inches, earthenware clay, fired in an oxidation atmosphere in an electric kiln, Petaluma, USA, 2018.



Ashwini Bhat, *Stele*, height 24 inches, stoneware clay,  
woodfired in an anagama kiln, Pondicherry, India, 2010



Ashwini Bhat, *Matrikas*, height 24 inches, stoneware clay, woodfired an anagama kiln, South Dartmouth, USA, 2016.



Ashwini Bhat, Unknot, height 16 inches, stoneware clay,  
woodfired in an anagama kiln, South Dartmouth, USA, 2015.





Ashwini Bhat, *Priestesses of Pahoehoe*, height 7 inches, stoneware clay, fired in a reduction/soda atmosphere in a gas kiln, Montana, USA, 2016.



Ashwini Bhat, *Honoo-no-Mori*, height 7 feet, width and depth 2 feet, stoneware clay, fired in an oxidation atmosphere in a gas kiln, Shigaraki, Japan, 2017.

## Vital Forms—Ashwini Bhat’s Art in Clay

Emily Wilson

Three slightly warped rings of stoneware rest improbably one on top of another; their rough wood-fired surfaces tinged reddish orange in areas, a rich, almost leathery brown in others. Leftover links of a weathered iron chain? A colloquy of snakelike torques? Like many of Ashwini Bhat’s sculptures in clay, the piece (p. 166), part of her *Unknot* series, suggests the uncanniness of objects neither wholly rendered nor found. It shimmers in its medial place between nature and art, between compact movement and stasis – the decidedly figural loosening, de-figuring. Some of Bhat’s pieces seem to have only just come into physicality, born of disparate, far-flung materials; others as though some primal organizing shape seized and forced the pliant material. The range of this work hints at a long, spirited study of the act of acquiring form, of restlessly pursuing approaches and pathways to it. For an artist of Bhat’s sensibilities, the medium seems particularly apt—ductile, firm, flexible, retentive.

Bhat grew up in a small town in Karnataka, India, and trained and performed as a dancer before finding her way to ceramic work. This linkage is apparent both in the formal tensions her pieces display, their balance-seeking tilts and arcs, and in the dense choreographies of their making. During her apprenticeship at renowned Golden Bridge Pottery in Pondicherry, Bhat chose to focus on realizing her pieces without the use of a kick wheel because she felt it imposed too much control, too much symmetry, on her creative process. She has said in interviews that the relative slowness of building with clay by hand allows her to “internalize” her forms.

For much of her career, Bhat has been drawn to the complexities of wood-fired kiln-work, particularly traditional Japanese *anagama*, which can bestow intricate surface textures and natural ash glazes unique to particular types of fuel wood. The rhythms and results of wood-firing differ greatly from those of gas- and electric-based processes, and involve nuances in temperature, oxidation, and reduction that come with the loading and repeated stoking of the firebox. In a recent conversation, Bhat told me that wood-firing enables her to get closest to “the naked quality of the clay.” The discrete movements of hand-

building – coiling, stretching, scooping, joining, embedding, smoothing – all precede firing activities that can spread over days or even weeks. Intervals of soaking, brushing, and slow, methodical scrubbing often follow. In this sense, the pieces come to embody the artist’s technique, what the art historian Henri Focillon once called, in his influential study *The Life of Forms*, “a whole poetry of action.”

Yet Bhat’s work is somehow stranger than that. Her pieces ride enigmatically apart from their various grounds and sources. They have a ruggedness, a kind of fierce, animated abstraction that girds the delicacies of intellect, emotion, and handling that go into them. They evoke the immediacies of their composition, of fire and earth and mineral inclusion, and, at the same time, feel like ulterior presences. Totem or cast-off, artifact or abrupt primordial chunk – each tends toward and away from summary definition. Out of a web of idiosyncratic allusion – to Bosch’s teeming *Garden of Earthly Delights*, to the fossil-rife strata of the Cambrian Explosion – Bhat’s pieces buck and fold, bunch, twine, stand for themselves. And yet there is an intimacy to their energies, an inviting *thing-ness* that seems to have to do with their relatively small scale (most are less than a foot to two feet in height) and with their complicated surfaces; you want to hold them, to turn them over and view them from many angles. Bhat attends keenly to “cleaning” the ones she fires in wood kilns, meticulously going over their prickly encrustations with a variety of tools – most tellingly, a diamond pad – to remove any too-sharp projections. Even her larger pieces seem eager for interaction, near enough to human-sized that the viewer feels a recognition, a semblance.

For Bhat, the search for form involves conscious engagement with the facts of working in a given time and place. “Each clay has its own limitations,” she told me, “and you have to break down your strategy in response.” She often makes use of the “backyard” clays she finds in the environment around whatever kiln or studio she happens to be using. (Before settling into her current home in California, Bhat lived as “a wood-fire groupie,” moving from one residency to another and studying with as many artists as she could in order to observe a diversity of methods and firing styles.) While working in Appomattox, Virginia, she found it difficult to roll the local clay she had dug to make her customary coilings. The discovery led her to try building a piece from a slab instead, extracting from it as a sculptor would from a block of stone. This divagation initiated the many slab-based experiments that are a major branch of her formal taxonomy. *Tactile Language*, a large stoneware spiral fired in a salt kiln, was derived from a single super-stretched slab. For a newer series loosely based on

Darwinian themes, Bhat is folding thick skinlike sheets of clay into biomorphic shapes that suggest both curvilinear vessels and articulated musculature, their dark wood-fired surfaces frosted with residual ash.

Recently, Bhat has turned more frequently to the problems and possibilities that come with electric and gas-fueled firing processes. To her, this shift feels something like moving between salty and sweet foods, and it has engendered other changes. Vivid primary-colored glazes have been making an appearance in some of her studio pieces, like pileated birds amid the earthy rusts and charrings of the wood-fired work. To counter the drift toward perfection and purity in her process, Bhat is adapting industrial techniques such as sand-blasting and spray-painting. With its smear of egg-yolk yellow, a recent piece in her ongoing *Garden of Earthly Delights* series (163) both furthers and challenges the distinctive evolutionary base of her working method. Fired in an electric kiln, it is a gnarled impaction of ancient and late materials: garnet schist and sandstone, coarse earthenware, fine porcelain, and brilliant-hued glazes like those employed by the Modernist- and Abstract Expressionist-inspired ceramicists Betty Woodman and Kenneth Price.

Bhat's pieces not only compel an awareness of the material particularities of clay, of its discrete responses to each conceived instance of building and firing. They go even further in the way they make us think about *matter* in general, with its infinities of composition and metamorphosis, its endless featherings off of form and state and appearance, of incorporation, transition, and dissolution. An earlier work in the *Garden of Earthly Delights* series is a composite of inter-related elements, all corresponding to the place of its making: a knot of feldspar taken from the ambient clay-layered matrix, the same clay fashioned into a chambered nest by mud dauber wasps, then the clay itself pulled, fixed, and inscribed by the artist. Suddenly distinctions of kind begin to break down and we glimpse the awful interstices, the fundamental fields of transaction among assumed categories—animal and human, biological and geological, figure and ground. We glimpse what Focillon called the “unequivocal bondage” between art and matter. What fastens and releases us.