

# VINEET KACKER

## Signs from the Interior

Sharbani Das Gupta

In the high Himalayan reaches of Bhutan, Tibet and beyond are the reliquaries or Chortens of Buddhist saints and wise men. Isolated and windswept, built of stone and dirt, they commune with the earth and sky, creating a link between mortal and immortal. At the mystic core of most faiths is the belief that the universe is contained within us. The shape it takes encased in an outward form that could be interpreted as the body or church, the temple or mosque or the chorten. This perception of an infinite mystery within, an interior world that lies hidden below the surface is what Vineet Kacker's work aspires to express.

For Vineet the chorten structure has proven to be a versatile form in which to embed his search for expression. His sculpture, replete with symbol and enigma communicates perfectly in the unspoken language of the object; so much in fact that I questioned the necessity to write about his Chorten series at all. I asked him "When the art speaks for itself, what need is there for words?" Vineet replied, "In a silent world, words seem

like an extravagance... but in an intellectual world, words can sometimes serve as a means to point towards the silence."

I will try to make my writing point toward his silence.

To come of age in India is to be steeped in its stories and beliefs. With the web of contemporary life lying woven through, it is possible to pass continuously between the ancient and modern, its mythological and historical past bound into a continuous stream of the mundane, modern and quixotic. Ubiquitous street shrines, daily prayers to household deities, wandering god men and tales of epics told for entertainment and edification are *nom de rigueur*. Its influence is potent and artists



opposite **Changing Landscape I,**  
17 x 17 x 21 in h

right **Hsuan Tsang's Dream II,**  
9 x 9 x 30 in h

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but in an intellectual world,  
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as a means to point towards  
the silence."**

can go both ways, either consciously rejecting overt references, or by choosing, as Vineet has done, to embrace its nuances, ride the wave of its tide and dive in. Deeply influenced also by his treks through the Himalayas, the rarified monasticism of the chortens, the rugged power of the mountains offset by fragile prayer flags and the vibrant rituals of his upbringing, his sculptures tell of manifold influences.

The chorten's stacked profile of three root shapes, the square, the circle and the triangle is imbued with symbolism. The square base reflects the four-pointed aspect of the physical world, made up of Earth, Wind, Fire, Water. The circular body denotes the cyclical, self-perpetuating nature of existence that has no beginning or end. A triangular elevation refers to the tri-fold character of being – Dreaming, Waking, Consciousness. At an abstract level Vineet uses a free wheeling association of symbols to construct and gild his forms. Toying with cultural intent and unanticipated juxtaposition, his pieces are just disorienting enough to provide a glimpse of alternative perceptions and layered meanings. A scimitar that references Persian history could also be recognized as an ancient weapon, a blade forged for destruction or clarification; a flame that is essentially Buddhist may be a symbol for both annih-



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lation and purification; a sickle, recognizably communist, yet too a tool for reaping and harvesting. In the snow series, the landscape is half obscured by a pure white glaze, the snow a theme for wintry desolation, mortality or perhaps monastic contemplation? Though the expression is non-denominational, there are clear references to sacred objects, incense, prayer flags, and the work is undeniably rooted in the visual idioms of the East.

Structurally the forms straddle the space between organized composition and organic shape. Like bones running through

below

**Winter Landscape II**, 26 x 9 x 16 in h

opposite

**Out of the Dark Earth, Into the Sky**, 13 x 8 x 13 in h

tissue, the use of edge and line creates a frame from within which the form blossoms. The chortens travel from a rigid squared base to soft ballooning shapes to a sharply upward moving triangulated spire, referencing mountains, boulders, and the journey of the spirit. Together they bear a resemblance to the figure of a man in meditation seated in an upward motion toward the sky.

Despite the varied sources of content, Vineet's work achieves a harmony that reflects his control over material. Originally an architect, he contrasts the semantics of construction with the natural lines of rugged mountain terrains. From his understanding of structure comes his approach to assembling premade clay architectonic elements that have been cut to templates and dried carefully, and from his time in the mountains comes his use of organic volumes that do not follow a predefined pattern. In the landscape pieces that he has been making in the past two years, the bases are coaxed into shape with the use of improvised armatures. Clay slabs are coated with deflocculated slip and scored with precise rhythmic lines that delineate the soft forms. The slabs are then stretched to highlight texture and line, and draped over moulds of sponge and newspaper. After further shaping into boulder-like forms, they are quickly hardened using a heat gun to enable the removal of the sponge moulds before they begin to cause cracking. The use of contrast is continued on into the surface treatments. Matt and dry planes studded with jewel-like inserts glazed in traditional celadons heighten texture and emphasize the soft billowing bodies. He has mastered the art of using difference to accentuate the whole.

Two decades after I first met Vineet in Pondicherry his sculp-





### ARTIST'S STATEMENT

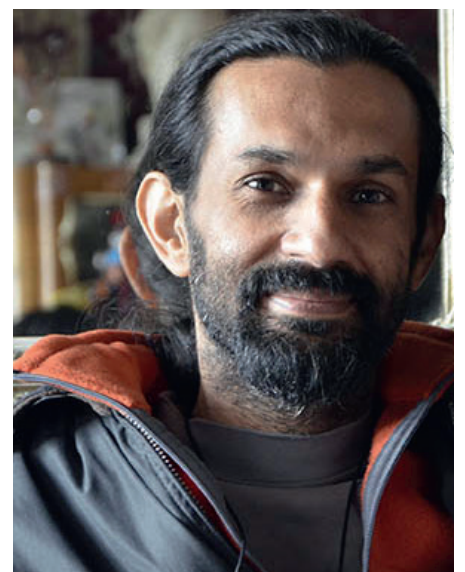
While the time-worn textures and iconographic markings on the surfaces of my sculptures appear to reference established traditions and myths, I like my work to walk a line between the meditative and the playful, exploring their interchangeability. I see myself sampling and remixing old texts, icons and imagery that I have grown up with into new works that are accessible without being populist, and symbolic without being derivative. I view my works as visual clues to mark inner landscapes that perpetuate a dialogue between the sacred and the profane, the timeless and the contemporary, the eastern and the western.

**Vineet Kacker** was born in New Delhi, India in 1965. His work is informed by his formal architectural training, and inspired by his travels in the Himalayan regions of the Indian sub-continent. After being introduced to clay at the Andretta Pottery in the state of Himachal, he honed his skills at the Golden Bridge Pottery in Pondicherry, alongside assisting Ray Meeker on his Fired-Earth housing projects. Vineet has done artist-in-residence programmes at the Anderson Ranch Arts Center in Colorado, and the Northern Clay Center, Minnesota, U.S.A. In 1999 he did a post-experience programme the University of Wales Institute, UK, and also apprenticed with Alan Caiger-Smith and Sandy Brown. He has won several awards, notably the Charles Wallace Fellowship and the Fulbright grant. His work has been exhibited widely, and is a part of several collections notably the Ceramic Museum at Icheon, Korea, and the India Museum at FULE International Museum Complex, Fuping, China.

ture has developed and grown steadily from the nascent forms I saw him experimenting with then. The jars with Buddhist inspired iconography are still there, only now they are at a scale and intention that reference their origins as vessels only in passing. Vineet says, "The chortens made for the India Museum at Fuping – Hsuan Tsang's Dream I, II, III – were not made as jars, their inner space contained yet unreachable. The scholar Hsuan Tsang had travelled to India centuries ago, and came back to China after a historic 17-year journey, with sacred manuscripts that he later translated as he was deeply concerned about the misinterpretation of Buddhist texts in Chinese Buddhism. And now here I was, making these ancient forms in a new China that seemed so impatient with history! The spires of the chortens are wrapped with red thread, indicating today's China, with its new value systems. The stark black and white bodies of the chortens accentuate duality – the yin against the yang, the spiritual against the material, the unchanging eternal against the rapidly changing transient."

In this, his latest avatar of the form, the sealed vessels raise more questions than answers. Clay with its simultaneous associations of sacred and mortal seems the perfect medium to express duality. The technical needs of firing clay automatically demand an inner space; a space that in Vineet's pieces becomes more than just mechanical necessity but conceptually integral to the meaning. It is now however a space that is implied, accessible only in abstraction. By obscuring obvious meaning the path to understanding becomes intuitive rather than rational. There are myriad keys that Vineet provides, signs that hint at the way, that reflect an interior and timeless truth, set against changing values and the realities of chronological time.

**Sharbani Das Gupta** currently lives in New Mexico and works as an artist primarily in the medium of clay. She has written, shown and presented internationally while remaining intimately connected to her roots in India.



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