

NEW CERAMICS

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6
14



ASHWINI BHAT

Neolithic chunk maker

Mark B. Jacobs

Ask ceramicist Ashwini Bhat to characterize her work and she'll say: "Neolithic" – knowing full-well that she has both made brilliant word-play and deftly caricatured her work in the way of all good comedy, hitting at an essential truth while turning it on its head. The work is indeed solidly massed, indelicate, and primitivist. Its references reach back into prehistory – often very far back. But it is also exquisitely, meticulously rendered and profoundly evocative. In a world that presents itself in confused, often conflicted ways, irony is Ms Bhat's algorithm to decipher the fullness and joyfulness of life. And it is the key to her gorgeously simple, gorgeously complicated artwork.

Ms Bhat's sculptural ceramics produce echoes from two close-

ly related disciplines: archeology and palaeontology. Like the scientists in those fields, Ms Bhat works in the clay of the earth to deliver evidence of our lineage and our essence, discovering the patterns and processes that have come to constitute and define us. But her art does not portray or comment on the traces of the past science has unearthed; it is generative and imaginative, inventing forms, forcing morphologies, and conjuring its own cultural narratives. She tells her own stories of origin. Like the fossil record and archeological discoveries, her stories may be subject to a degree of interpretation; but the hard evidence represented by her pieces cannot be easily dismissed.

Her series "Cambrian Explosion" – the title referring to the rapid diversification of life forms, from single-celled and sim-

ple organisms to fauna of great complexity, roughly 540 million years ago – gives both the immediate sense of fossilized animals and a feeling for the rock within which they are entombed. The organic shapes are both familiar and strange, evoking a zoology that is only slightly alien, but in no way a literal reading of the biology or geology of the Paleozoic era. By fancifully retelling this key chapter in the story of evolution, Ms Bhat underscores its key themes of contingency and convergence, as well as the wonderment it evokes.

In other recent work – including her *Cat's Cradle*, *One Over Two*, *Two Over One*, *Queen*, and *Stele* series – the references are decidedly more anthropological. Drawing from an archeology of ancient forms as diverse as burial dolmens, pillows, and head-dresses, Ms Bhat deconstructs the structures into more naturalistic manifestations and asks us to consider the ways in which we imbue fundamentally organic shapes with totemic significance.

A visit to Ms Bhat's rural Pondicherry studio reveals the remarkable extent to which the artist has immersed herself in the figurative narratives she creates. Her clay-making tanks, work tables, drying racks, and wood-fired kiln tuck tidily into the rear of her cosy home, set in a thicket of flowering trees. The house is constructed of predominantly of rammed earth. She is literally enveloped by the iron-stained local clay. It is as if both her possessions and her artwork are the proto-artefacts of the future, already a part of the sediment of time.

For years Ms Bhat expressed herself through dance, more than a decade studying and performing Indian classical Bharatanatyam and, following her M.A. in literature, three years touring with the contemporary, Chennai-based Padmini Chettur Dance Company. She began her explorations as a ceramicist under the tutelage of Ray Meeker of Golden Bridge Pottery in Pondicherry,

South India. She has rapidly gained an enthusiastic audience, working and exhibiting broadly in India and the United States, as well as in Australia and China. Her first monumental piece, *Queen*, executed in 2010 and standing more than a metre high, is on permanent display in the sculpture garden of the Grand Hyatt Hotel in Chennai. Since then, her work has been commissioned for private collections and acquired by the FuLe International Ceramic Art Museum, Fuping, China where, in 2013, she was shortlisted for its Emerging Artist Award.

Ms Bhat says that it has taken time for her to reconcile her transition from the kinaesthetic art of dance to her sculptural work. Indeed, the megalithic quality of her work seems to aggressively reject any inkling of movement. And yet, to watch her work in-studio is to see the meaningful place dance still has in her art-making. Ms Bhat does not simply manipulate her clay; she verily dances with it, creating folds and fissures, curves and massings through a choreography of precisely weighted, carefully angled movement. The manipulations flow from one to the next, without interruption. Her hands touch the clay, but her movement is full-body as she glides throughout the process of creation.

opposite **Queen Series II**, h 127 cm, stoneware, fired to cone 10 in a woodfiring kiln at Golden Bridge Pottery Pondicherry, India, 2011.

photo: Ashwini Bhat

below **One over two, two over one II**, h 25 cm, w 36 cm stoneware, fired to cone 12 in an anagama kiln with Nick Schwartz, Comptche, California, USA, 2013

photo – Ashwini Bhat



Beyond the physical gracefulness with which she pulls her sculpture into being, there are more subtle resonances of dance in her work. If, as Miles Davis said, music is found in the space between the notes, then much of the essence of dance is located in the stillness and gesture amid the motion, in the groundedness of the dancer. The gravity and centeredness of her work – particularly the large-scale pieces – suggest incipient movement. Ms Bhat explains the connection in still another way: “I have come to ceramic sculpture retaining an abiding sense of engagement as motion. Because of the almost human scale of my larger work, the viewer is forced into a bodily encounter with the art.” It is a dance we have all done in art galleries, museums, and public spaces where large, three-dimensional art is on display. Ms Bhat is aware of this process of engagement in a way that few of the dancer-observers ever are; and she very consciously builds this experience into the work.

Whether as a consequence of Ms Bhat’s meticulous practice or in spite of it, she bears an ambivalence to craft tradition from which ceramic arts emerged and to which she feels the medium is still enslaved. “The long tradition of ceramic arts being considered as craft work puts an undue emphasis on technique, sometimes at the expense of expressiveness,” she says. “The focus should fall on the work itself, on the ideas being expressed. This is a freedom that artists working in most other media allow themselves. I have developed certain techniques in order to give my work its primeval, chthonic forcefulness. Although I respect the craft tradition, my imagination is more restless.”

Here again, there is irony in her approach. Take, for example, the way in which she expresses the weight and power of her burial dolmens in the series *One Over Two, Two Over One*. She

begins by creating the solid, massive form, and then painstakingly hollows-it-out in order to create a fire-ready piece. This is delicate, feather-light artistry in service of density and immensity. There is also an amusing contrariety in the precision and deftness of her technique with the deliciously organic forms she produces. Her pieces look as if they were bent by the whimsy of nature, but the gracefulness of every line is, in fact, consciously engineered through a studied, practiced microcosmic replication of geologic forces. Her skill in moulding clay is paired with a growing mastery of wood firing technique, once again reproducing the processes of nature in the service of art.

The result is earth that evokes the earth, rock that speaks of rock. If this feels like the ultimate irony in her work, it is one that Ms Bhat embraces with a profound sincerity. “Rocks stir something inside me,” she explains. “Rocks make me want to be buried – not in a suicidal way, but drawing me into them, in an embrace or swaddling.” *Cradles*. *Dolmens*. *Fossils*. It is unsurprising that these are the forms that find resonance in her work. And perhaps it was inevitable that this artist would find her medium of expression in mineral and fire.

Mark B. Jacobs practices volunteerism to build community, meet the needs of the underserved, foster environmental conservation, and facilitate the creative visions of others. He is one of the core members of the team Vandocument (<http://vandocument.com/>) documenting Vancouver’s art scene. He lives between Vancouver and Pondicherry. <http://www.memestream.org/>.

Cat’s Cradle II, 23 cm, w 41 cm, stoneware, fired to cone 10 in an anagama kiln with Josh Copus, Asheville, North Carolina, USA, 2012
photo – Tim Barnwell



One over two, two over one II (detail), h 30 cm, w 33 cm, stoneware, fired to cone 12 in an anagama kiln with Nick Schwartz, Comptche, California, USA, 2013 photo – Ashwini Bhat

DESCRIPTION OF TECHNIQUE AND MATERIAL

I hand-build with coils or I work through solid clay blocks, shaping the form, scooping out clay to create negative spaces. Although I trained in wheel throwing, I became a handbuilder by choice. The slowness of handbuilding allows me to internalise the forms, intensifying the physical process. I make my own clay, soaking and sieving what I select from where I live or from nearby states. This long, slow process has brought me closer to the material. I also use a high percentage of grog in my sculptures, as it allows me to vary the textures, to coax out a rough beauty. Mostly unglazed, my work is not prone to elaboration or ornamentation. There is no academic narrative, no meta-theme. I'm passionate about form – mass, volume, material. I'm passionate about tectonics and movement, and I celebrate the earth from which my work is derived. To get to know my sculptures, it is necessary to walk around them, to interact with the revealed and the hidden. I like to fire in an anagama kiln or with very little clay slip in a wood-fired kiln.

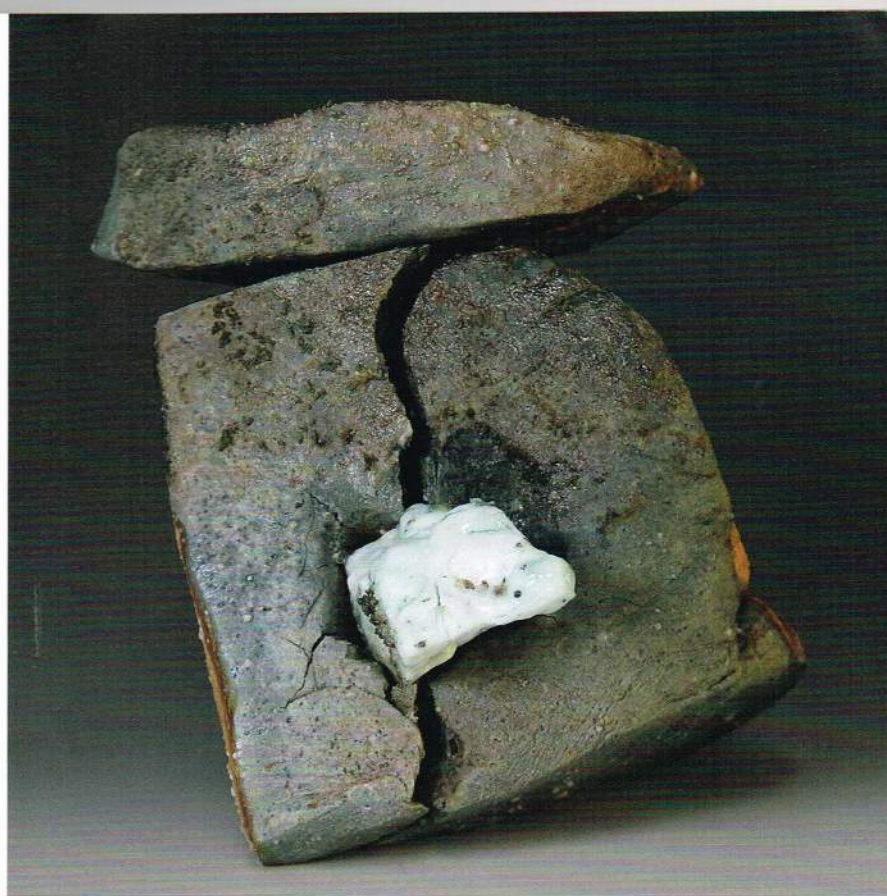
ARTIST'S STATEMENT:

My journey as an artist has been a vigorous interrogation in search of a form. I have a background in literature, in translation and in classical dance. Now I gather shapes from the world around me, from travel, and from my journeys through books. I also look inside myself for forms and I translate those into bodies of clay.

I don't want my classical dance background to be an exotic reference point for my ceramic career, although dance is a significant part of the past that has shaped me. Both involve the choreography of spatial relations. But with clay, I have found the material that allows me to exercise my creativity at large.

My work expresses my thinking less through what have become standard artist references to contemporary theory and various isms, than through my engagement with the materials themselves. I don't make grand claims for my art, but my concerns are distinctively international. When I say international, I mean that my own identity is connected to identification with others. If I speak several languages, if I can call on resources in literature and dance, perhaps I can use this distinctive experience in my ceramic work to break down some of the borders that keep feeling, empathy, even beauty bound. I want my ceramic work to enter into the course of the lives of its viewers, emerging, receding, resurfacing, turning them away from habits of perception.

I guess I can say that I value gesture over statement and that I'm less interested in traditional forms than in exploration. I have mostly gotten to know myself as a ceramic artist from my mistakes. Perhaps in the end, I simply want to give body to spirit. I want to choreograph intimate transformative experience in clay. And I want the work to be convincing to myself.



Ashwini Bhat studied ceramics with Ray Meeker at Golden Bridge Pottery, Pondicherry, India. She has a master's degree in literature and studied classical dance for nearly ten years before working as a professional dancer in the Padmini Chettur Dance Company for four years. Her work has been featured internationally in many galleries, permanent collections and exhibitions, including most recently the Indian Museum at FLICAM (Fuping, China, 2013); United Art Fair (New Delhi, India, 2013); NCECA (Houston, USA, 2013). She is working towards her solo show *Earth Took of Earth* (Newport Art Museum, Newport, RI, USA, 2015). She was awarded the Howard Foundation Fellowship for Sculpture (Howard Foundation, USA 2013-14) and was shortlisted for the Emerging Artist Award, ICMEA 2013 (Fuping, China). In 2012 Bhat built her studio and the woodfiring kiln near Auroville, Pondicherry, India and continues to make sculptural ceramic works there and abroad.

ASHWINI BHAT

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GALLERIES / MUSEUMS:

At present:

- Crimson Laurel Gallery, Bakersville, North Carolina, USA
crimsonlaurelgallery@gmail.com
<http://www.crimsonlaurelgallery.com/>

In 2015:

- Newport Art Museum, 76, Bellevue Avenue
Newport, RI 02840, USA
<http://www.newportartmuseum.org/>
- Solo show, opening mid-January 2015 till May 2015
in view during the time of NCECA
- Imago Gallery, 36, Market Street, Warren, RI, USA 02885
<http://www.imagofoundation4art.org/IFA/Welcome.html>

Group show during the NCECA in Providence

- Gustin Gallery, 231, Horseneck Rd
South Dartmouth, MA, USA
<http://www.gustinceramics.com/contact.html>

