

Antra Sinha  
Centre of Gravity  
The Evolution of a Wood-fired Sculptural Form

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I studied painting at Maharaja Sayajirao University of Baroda, in Gujarat, India from 1996 to 2002. I was naturally inclined to use clay as colour, and plaster and cement to create textures in my work. This led me to specialising in mural design for my Master's Degree. At that stage I had to make a decision regarding my future. I was a good student of Art History as well as Fine arts. A conversation with my teacher, Deepak Kannal, who was a sculptor turned art historian, raised a question – did I want to be a maker or a critic?

I became an apprentice to Ray Meeker at Golden Bridge Pottery in Pondicherry in 2003, first training to be a thrower, before moving on to press-moulding sculptures, and then continuing to fire the kilns, as well as helping to install monumental work. I also taught throwing for a number of years. As an independent artist I eventually exchanged working in the pottery – firing glaze work, facilitating visitors, visiting artists and workshops – for studio space. During this time I also received scholarships to attend conferences and participate in residencies overseas.

Prior to learning to woodfire at GBP I had observed traditional low-temperature firing, but not the entire process. As I gained experience of woodfiring I began to enjoy the planning, process, and results, and didn't have to think twice when it came to choosing a firing technique for my own work.

The first woodfiring that I did without any guidance was in 2005, and it was difficult to tell whether or not I was succeeding in reducing the kiln. However the results were excellent, and I knew I wanted to repeat it for the following six firings, as I was working towards an exhibition to which I gave the title *Churnings* – exploring the extremities of life through a concept drawn from Indian mythology in which gods and demons churn the ocean separating poison and nectar.

One evening while we were all sitting around at the pottery, Ray and Amrita Dhawan were discussing an arch form that she was working on. Ray described the process of the shrinkage of a wedge-shaped slab. The description of this process stayed with me, and I took advantage of it when I began making my own sculpture.

At this time trying to answer the usual existential questions I was reading Zen and came upon Sengai's seminal painting *The Universe*. This led me to the exploration of 'root forms'; rendering them in three dimensions as a sphere, a cube and a tetrahedron. Moving forward I wanted to get away from the stiffness of these forms, and began exploring tetrahedra. I also see this form as a metaphor for life. Because it is the least number of facets that can make a stable form, for me it has parallels with a pilgrim's life, which survives only on necessities.

I modelled many four-faced forms, yet wasn't close to achieving what I envisaged. Then I thought of pressing a small ball of clay between the forefinger and thumb of both my hands – elemental – which would result in something four faced. My mind couldn't complete the form virtually, so next day in the studio I created the shape (see photograph 2, opposite). It is a starting point for many forms, and I developed one in which the ends converge. Intuitively I created parabolic curves to shape these faces. Because the three-dimensional arc also looks like an axe – the initial title that I gave the form was *Tetrax*. However I was pleased to come up with a simpler title – *Tetrarc*.

In 2009 having made almost a hundred 'tetrarcs' of various sizes from 5cm to 1m (2 inches to 3ft.) (see photograph 3 opposite, and title page), I received a commission to make a 1.5m (5ft) high version. Having previously made moulds of various sizes I now had to make a much larger one. I began the project by providing carpenters with a sketch to create a mock-up in flexible plywood. This was used as a guide to carve the support in Styrofoam. Once the shape was ready I began sculpting the first form to make a mould. I decided to use a technique I had learnt from artist Nel Banner during

a residency at the Ceramic Cultural Park in Shigaraki, Japan. This was to sandwich burlap as a supporting material in building up a form. It took a long time to make this piece and the initial part of the form that I created dried out too quickly, leading to its collapse. In my next attempt I used plywood templates to build a solid quarter part of the form in clay to make a mould, as the form is quadrilaterally symmetrical. However, there were difficulties as there was an undercut, which I only realized when the mould wouldn't separate.

The third attempt involved creating half of the form in solid clay and then making moulds with seams on the edges. The mould became very heavy so I introduced wooden handles. I also attempted to make the mould lighter by incorporating a metal frame to support the plaster. But the relatively light grade of metal that I used was too flexible and was unsuccessful. These experiments were facilitated by the fact that my family's architecture firm – Ovoid Atelier, was located next to GBP.

After these attempts I had a heavy mould that took six people to move, in which I press-moulded the sculpture. This took four days, working twelve hours each day and 450kg (1000lbs) of clay. Once the clay was stiff, we removed the mould and supported one side of the form with a wooden frame. I then spent weeks finishing the edges (see photograph 4, page 14).

The first moulded form cracked in the bisque firing. This was very disappointing, yet knowing the nature of clay, I already had another piece made and drying. This one survived the bisque firing and I glazed it in situ on the kiln car and began firing. The form fired successfully with a nice glazed surface, but one of the arcs had a crack. I decided to make yet another piece, this time with clay firing supports. After practicing the idea on a maquette of 46cm (18 inches), I embarked on the large version (see photographs 5, 6 and 7, page 15), which fired successfully and was subsequently installed at the Hyatt Regency Hotel in Chennai (see photograph 8, above).

While this form is close to being geometric it has the fluidity of a natural object. I find the presence of both of these aspects in the same form extremely satisfying. Each time I make a variation of the form I discover new aspects to it. Having parabolic curves and a helix shape forming its edges – it stretches the limits of the material in the making process, tricks the mind, and once finished has the potential to rock – constantly in motion. All of these characteristics inspire me.

I find the process of woodfiring both engaging and challenging – not always under control – letting go and embracing the consequences.

Antra Sinha studied painting and mural design at Maharaja Sayajirao University before training at Golden Bridge Pottery in Pondicherry. She moved from India to the USA in 2015 and gained her second MFA from Utah State University in Logan in 2018. She is currently Gallery Coordinator for Tippetts & Eccles Galleries, USU.

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