

Dialogues between man and nature



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Ceramic artist Madhavi Subrahmanian's third show is a meditation on her migrant meanderings and fleeting impressions of places and thoughts, shaped in clay

Mud, earth, clay and dung – tactile, malleable forms which are alien matter, far removed from the modern, concrete spaces we

inhabit today. Artist Madhavi Subrahmanian however, uses these very organic materials to build her sensory world, in the ongoing show 'Mapping Memory'. Broadly broken into 11 parts with distinct labels, the show weaves the story of her many journeys, of time and distance, between cities, countries, home and studio, as well as past and present.

Shifting shadows of trees that once stood sturdy on a certain stretch of the street, but have now been cleared to make way for newer construction, are likened to memories that were once living, breathing realities, but now exist only in a fast fading past. At the core of the work lies a "dialogue between urbanisation and nature", expresses Subrahmanian. Change to her is a constant, both in professional and personal life. First, as a ceramic artist who creates by way of moulding, and second as a frequent traveller between Mumbai, her city of birth, and Singapore, where she now resides. It is but natural then, as an observer of perpetual transformation, that an expression/s of it finds its place in her narrative.

Looking over Floor Plan, her artwork where branch-like stoneware stretches out over square bases, resembling an overhead view of a city or ruins of a civilisation, it also brings to mind an image of the artist as a frequent flyer at her window seat, contemplating aerial views of earth as her aircraft flies past. One can imagine roofs and routes of approaching destinations, as the plane begins its descent, forming a maze of images in the artist's mind, that finally get distilled as memories of journeys made over time.

Changing landscapes

On the wall across is 'Reclaiming the Road', where an iPhone image of tarmac is "flipped and opened up as an accordion", describes Subrahmanian. This road, with shadows of trees running like veins across it, is not only her starting point in the day from her home to her studio in Singapore but also a "segue into the show". Trees, explains Subrahmanian further, are the primary sacrificial scapegoats of any infrastructural

developments. Be it making buildings, roads or bridges, trees are the first to be cleared out to make way for burgeoning settlements. With 'In the Shadow of Trees', stoneware buildings are lit in such a way, that their impressions on the wall behind hark back to what once stood in place of their shadows. But nature draws its own course, springing out from the tiniest hole in the wall and sprouting from every cracked crevice in stone and concrete. 'Tree of Life' is proof of just that, where plants intertwine with the edifice morphing into whole new forms, part nature and part man-made. Subrahmanian's performing objects installations that recreates for the viewer the process by which a village turns into a town and then a city with the help of lights, shadows and sounds extends the idea of urbanisation at the cost of nature yet again.

Subrahmanian also explores ideas of shape through geometry, design and structure. Be it her exquisite line-up of porcelain discs in 'Upla' or the rest of the spherical artworks that follow down the same line. Upla, a name for the trademark Indian village cowdung patty in Madhya Pradesh, as an idea for artwork came about when Subrahmanian was stationed in the state, as part of an artist residency in February 2016. As an ode to the maker of these patties, Subrahmanian made a mould of the originals with the fingerprints intact before turning them into pristine white porcelain at her studio. "I have put a lot of touch and feel in the clay in this show because I feel materiality is really something that we are losing...we have become very much this (makes a swiping action on her phone screen), and this (repeats swiping action on phone)...but we don't have a feel of the material at all. Luckily we are Indian, so we eat with our hands..." she elaborates while analysing the western world's lack of physical contact with their immediate environment. "Your material (the western world's) is only metal (metal cutlery). Where do you feel the difference of the grain...between the grain of your rice and your chapati and your dal and your sabzi? You don't have any sense of touch or feel. They are so further removed from the ground. So, I feel in India we are so much closer to

the earth than in other part of the world.”

Working hands

The fact that Subrahmanian has handcrafted every piece in this show is proof of the importance she attaches to tangibility. To extend this learning to self-experience, she invites viewers to take a dig at her porcelain ‘Rolling Pins’ by working them on the sand pit or using a mound of clay and sticks to create a tree by hand, which will then be added to ‘Forest’ where it acts as a natural fencing to a cluster of some Jack in the Bean Stalk-like structures of enormous looking barks, housing tiny homes on their crowns. A reverse play on scale, where a horde of tiny cones form a larger sphere, their spiral design channeling energy upwards, both ‘Growth’ and ‘Germination’ symbolise change and movement - an integral part of the process of transformation.

Adding another layer of personal experience to the show, Subrahmanian presents ‘Mappa Mundi’ which is Latin for world maps as they were known in the 16th century. Only that here, the maps traced out on broken pieces of pottery belong to Subrahmanian’s own personal world. Her world made from colours of the earth – jade greens and rusts, on which her paths taken, glimmer in real gold dust, reflecting rivers glinting in the sun. The process is inspired by the Japanese art of kintsugi where damaged earthenware is repaired with gold, making it all the more precious than it was before. To Subrahmanian, these golden routes, markers of her identity, trace her personal trajectory as both an individual and an artist are just as priceless. Or as she puts it, “It is what it is, because you are who you are.”

Mapping Memory is ongoing at Chemould Prescott Road, Fort until September 29, 2017