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# Visible Roads Invisible Bridges

*Article by Sharbani Das Gupta*

**G**IANT 'ANT HILLS' SURROUND ME AS I WORK ON MY sculpture in Pondicherry in South India. They intrigue me and during the still afternoons I look at them, trying to fathom the spirit they contain. They look almost primitive and remind me of the ancient Indian sage, Valmiki, who, in a state of deep meditation, gets covered over time by anthills. They are Madhvi Subrahmanian's sculptures I am told; waiting to be fired, to be completed on her return. I have the opportunity to live among them before they are quite complete, in a state of suspension and they almost certainly affect the atmosphere of my inner space. Titled *Connection*, my sculpture seeks to express through the metaphor of earth and water the physical separation of individual existence and the psychic connections of the spirit that links them.

We are working in the Golden Bridge Pottery, in a shared physical space, Subrahmanian's semi-completed, mine still nascent and, our mentor, Ray Meeker's in progress all around. For more than 30 years Meeker, Deborah Smith and the pottery they established have encouraged the development of the art of clay in modern India. The unique juxtaposition of clay studios with the beauty and rhythm of a running production pottery creates a distinctive atmosphere, open to all persuasions. It is a place where students come to learn about the material, but end up learning about themselves; an exceptional place where the spirit grows, lives intersect and bridges form.

Later, when Subrahmanian and I meet, we dive into a discussion about art and its interpretations. We talk also of the pottery workers, of Pondicherry

*Seedpod Series Installation.*





and of Meeker and Smith and their consistent support. There are many things in common; nomadic lives, steady-as-rock life partners, children and, of course, clay. The ideas that Subrahmanian expresses in clay resonate with me but perhaps what we share the most is an interest in how the threads of history and experience interconnect, weaving webs of relationship and insight and how life and memory act as the lens through which art is deciphered.

The practice of art is often shrouded and inscrutable. It is an organic process and like the seed-forms that influence so much of Subrahmanian's work, germination happens in the fertile soil of the mind, ideas grow like plants and connections branch out like trees. There are many fruits, many roots and a forest to explore. It can be hard to follow the progression of thought, the synaptic connections that lead to the formal expression of ideas; but clear and present in Subrahmanian's work is a 'friendly relationship with chaos'. This quote, borrowed from an article on creative thought, perfectly describes the development of idea, form and structure in her art. It is a pleasure to watch and engage in the process with Subrahmanian, a uniquely open and generous artist who relishes the examination of her own process. She enjoys, in fact, invites the active interaction of others in it.

It is an invitation I accept. We embark on a retrospective journey that revels in non-linear thought

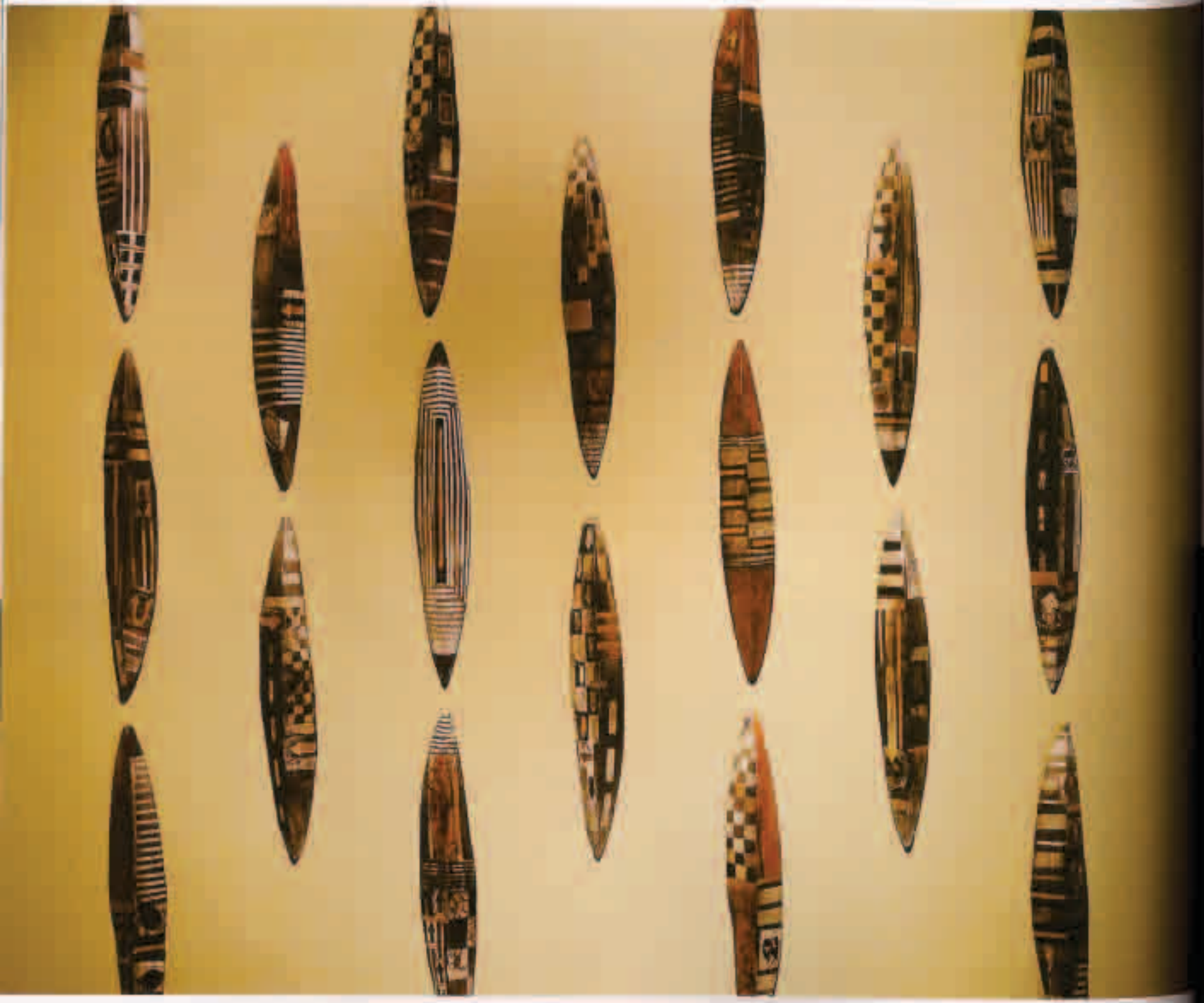
lines, bifurcations and parallel paths and I watch as her ideas coalesce into a convincing whole. I am arrested by her story of being on the road and finding her budding thoughts coming together into a coherent vision; affirmation of my own experience of the open road, when, suspended between places and demands, I find my thoughts coming into focus. I have grown to appreciate the value of the passage and the peripheral nature of the destination and I understand Subrahmanian's reactions to the journey, its sights and suggestions. She tells me about the ancient trees that line the roads, marked with black and white checks and the inferences; the votive images that casually line streets and the offhand nature of the transitory life alongside in India. I love the idea that it is the experience itself that she wants to share. We discuss how she wants to finish the pieces and how she sees them coming together. I see test pieces, glazes, maquettes, fragments and forms and talk about perception and expression. In the end I feel as if I can see her thoughts actualized but nothing prepares me for the full effect of the final exhibition in Mumbai at Chemould Prescott Road.

Here, in a shadowed room the ant hills have transformed again, grown again. They are seed pods now. Or ancient trees or maybe still the ant hills of their unfired stage. Organic and intuitive, they come in pairs in their nearly six-foot frame. One could walk among them; experience them as

*Cornucopia-12. Smoke-fired earthenware. 14 x 18 in/ea.*









markers or mirrors, superimposed as they are with the vignettes of travel and change. Dualities, so ever present in the Indian psyche, reflect and complete the other; gods are at once male and female, human and divine. Existence couples with non-existence, good shades evil and black frames the white. Valmiki in his state of divine meditation becomes the anthill itself, everything is present within the same space and form at the same time.

The smaller forms are urban scapes with direct and often obvious road references overlain on the natural surfaces, forming bridges between the architectural and ancient. They make one investigate the associations as well as the discordance between growth and the modern geometrics of the road; between nomadic wandering and urban settling. They cast light on the tensions that creep between setting down roots and the desire for adventure and movement.

The inferences of the road continue in the wall installations, aptly described as *Road Markers*. Here the references are obvious only through their titles

*Facing page, top to bottom: Floating Belly Pods.*  
Cone 6 stoneware. 7 ft/l.

*Road Markers.* Smoke-fired earthenware. 6 x 8 ft.  
*Installation View of Ant Hills.*

*Below left: Pedestrian Crossing on Hwy 45.* Woodfired cone  
10 stoneware. 19 x 13 x 8 in.

*Below right: Madhvi Subrahmanian's Signature.*



and close examination which reveal the road signs in the shape of primitive markings on the forms.

She draws freely from associations, from the ubiquitous minimalist symbols, the ancient threading, the cacophonous modern, the mundane and the profane. Life in India, with its casual acceptance of history and disregard for the living contrasts the careful touch of the work she brought in from Singapore. Her role as a mother reflects the nature of evolving symbiotic relationships, the forms building like vines that cradle and encircle each other, supportive and emergent, fragile and tensile as in *Cornucopia* and *Belly Pods*. She describes them thus, "The floating belly pods mark a moment in time, of pregnancy and expectation, when I made a cast of my belly and used it to explore the ideas of incubation, growth and change."

For many artists, the contradictory dynamics of change and life can create a dissonance. Presenting a consistent body of work is complex and difficult but Madhvi Subrahmanian makes it appear easy. She sweeps over the panorama of her life, the travel, uproots and re-roots; resolves the mother, artist and traveller and reveals a coherent maturity, a centred core. In her work it is possible to see and feel the winds of other lands and the abstract ever-regenerating nature of life. It illustrates the strength that it takes to thrive and embrace change. She expresses this best herself: "The current body of work is inspired by the road and is about the road: the road I choose to travel, the one that connects the various places I have lived in and it joins the dots between my experiences."

In retrospect it seems more than coincidental that the sculpture I was working on at the pottery is about connection. I contemplate the implicit meanings, intended and unintended and the long lines of history that tie our past to our present and our peers. I am thrilled at the enchantment of it; at the connections stretching between us, at the possibility of invisible bridges waiting around the corner for our discovery.

Sharbani Das Gupta is an artist and ceramic sculptor currently living in New Mexico. She combines visual metaphors with her sculptural work which spans a range of issues from the personal to the political and the environmental. Life for her exists between two countries and inspiration comes from juxtapositions of the incongruous, myths, media and life as an expatriate. The continuous travel enables perspective, a cross-cultural platform and a need for balance in an uneven world. (www.sharbanidasgupta.com, www.madhvisubrahmanian.com)

