

FIGURES OF THOUGHT; OBJECTS OF EXPERIENCE

Madhvi Subrahmanian's forms interrogate and re-order the ossified conventions of ceramic art, claims **Priya Maholay-Jaradi**.



Madhvi Subrahmanian. *Yoni pods*. Smoke-fired earthenware. 10" x 9" x 5". 2010. Photograph by Anil Rane.

The narrative of early post-colonial Indian visual art was shaped by key tropes, many of which originated in the larger, interlinked discourses of Orientalism, Colonialism and Nationalism. It remains widely known that European travellers and colonial officials perceived India as lacking in the fine arts; unaware of the right context to appreciate Indian sculpture and painting, these foreigners readily favoured the rich designs and workmanship in metals, textiles, clay and wood, which formed the bulk of Indian industrial arts or crafts.¹ The Great Exhibition of 1851 too hailed Indian handicrafts as a perfect counter-point to staid British mass-produced goods.² All the same, the sites of the village and the craftsman were soon reclaimed by nationalists who shifted focus to self-sufficient rural economies.³ Even post-independent India's continuing emphasis on rural crafts promoted the idea of a *pre-modern, timeless* and *static* crafts' domain.⁴ The *making* of a national art collection at the National Museum, New Delhi (1947-48) did not help to ease this situation; it was pre-occupied with ferreting art traditions at the cost of excluding all contemporary experiments.⁵ This was also the case with the making of Asian art collections and Asian art histories in museums and academies in the West.⁶ A consequence of these developments was the creation of a dichotomy between the *arts* and



Madhvi Subrahmanian. Installation view of the *Organic/Abstract* show, Gallery Chemould, Mumbai. 2010. Photograph by Anil Rane.

the *crafts* (often guided by the choice of materials) and the constant elision of contemporary visual art experiments from both frames. It was thus left to practitioners of numerous genres to demonstrate the primacy of their processes and concepts over the hierarchy of materials. This was achieved at schools such as the Maharaja Sayajirao University, Baroda. Since the inception of the Fine Arts Faculty in 1949-1950, the making of its archives and art history and fine arts curricula was guided by a cosmopolitan spirit.⁷ Artists such as K. G. Subramanyan and Jyoti Bhatt built exemplary practices which embraced a wide range of materials and genres such as terracotta, murals, prints and photography. One profiles contemporary ceramist Madhvi Subrahmanian against the backdrop of these tropes to demonstrate how individual practices have given value to the principle of *egalitarianism* in the shaping of Indian and Asian visual arts and their increasing presence in the global arena.

In 1985, Madhvi Subrahmanian began training at the Golden Bridge Pottery (GBP) founded by American artists, Ray Meeker and Deborah Smith, on the Coromandel Coast of India. GBP was born of Meeker's engagement with the 1960s California funk and abstract expressionism and Smith's training in utilitarian genres of Japanese pottery (which have occupied the highest positions in the ceramic, painting and sculpture constellations there). Outside of mainstream art school education and university affiliations, GBP and its students may be situated in these rapidly changing contours of visual art production, several of which remain less rigorously or only partially documented as part of nationalist/post-independent /civilizational histories, exhibitions and museum displays.

Subrahmanian accessed complete training which in ceramics is a supply chain format: preparing clay bodies, formulating glaze and building kilns to produce utilitarian items. Her post-training peripatetic lifestyle led to major shifts in



Madhvi Subrahmanian. Photograph by Sanjay Kewlani.

tech world of hand-building and smoke firing, replaced the wheel and wood-fired kilns. Subrahmanian also moved from high-fired stoneware to low-fired earthenware. This experimental phase allowed a shift from table-top objects to exploring clay as a sculptural form; a Masters in Fine Arts from the Meadows School of the Arts at Southern Methodist University, Dallas, Texas (1993) and apprenticeships with master ceramists in America and UK groomed Subrahmanian's practice for exhibitions.

Catalogue essays published in Bombay around the turn of the millennium record the "laboratorial approach" and the scope for "chance" and "accident" in the ceramist's works.⁸ Subrahmanian questioned the conventional understanding of pottery for curators and audiences: the native conditioning to expect perfect form and finish was reoriented to appreciate asymmetry, rough edges, perforations and variations in the rendition of unlikely forms such as seed/flower pods and objects with layered and dry glaze. Added to this, the artist's body itself became a valid art source as its reference was extended in a cast made from her pregnant belly. This station of impending motherhood in the ceramist's life brought with it several ideas of birth, germination, nurturing and nourishment. One views this as a major defining force in the way Subrahmanian would produce increasingly concept-based art.

Through 2000-2002 a grant from the India Foundation for the Arts facilitated collaboration with four other ceramists for a public art project. 7-foot high rotating Buddhist prayer wheel-inspired columns were placed on the pavement outside the National Gallery of Modern Art, Mumbai. This project re-oriented both, ceramic-making and viewing, as it extended ceramic skills to a larger scale and site, resulting in installation art for a public space. Furthermore, this display endorsed the material's tough resistance to weathering when compared to fibreglass or bronze. It marked the arrival of clay in the vast repertoire of materials hitherto used for installation. In the time to follow, Subrahmanian undertook extensive fieldwork and photo-documentation in India; her later exhibitions at Gallery Chemould (2003, 2010) and the India Art Fair (2013) display acute awareness of a large body of imagery: arrows marking road directions, anthills, village deities and rangoli/kolam designs.

After the Mumbai and Frankfurt interludes, Subrahmanian moved to Singapore (2007). Her keen understanding of yet another adopted home and its audiences led the way for more public art and community projects. For *SingaPlural* (2013), hosted by the National Parks Board, Subrahmanian collaborated with furniture makers to craft fallen tree trunks from the island's nature reserves into a bench. Arduous sculpting of the trunk over at least 40 hours produced a bench which sits in the popular East Coast Park. At the Gillman Barracks, Singapore's three-year old cluster of art galleries, Subrahmanian made a wall installation for a public space (2014). She explains, "This was a really unusual experiment because ceramics in an outdoor vertical space was most unexpected by the audience". She returned to Gillman Barracks for a community project (2014). A sizeable number of trees sculpted by the artist multiplied through children's participation to eventually create a rainforest! Pregnant belly casts suspended from the ceiling, large-scale pieces looking skyward and modular works hung on vertical walls thus marked the play of size, scale, movement and reconfiguration in Subrahmanian's evolving practice.

One considers the many grants, workshops, residencies and art biennales which Subrahmanian has accessed actively from this regional arts hub, especially since 2012. "Living in Singapore has given me the opportunity to explore and experience the rich ceramic culture in South East Asia, Far East and Australia", notes Subrahmanian. A residency at the Shigaraki Ceramic Culture Park, Japan (2012) assisted a two-way process: as resident ceramist Subrahmanian interacted with the contemporary ceramists in Shigaraki and her work was acquired by the Culture Park. In 2013, she became resident ceramist with 16 other invited artists from India at the PuLe International Ceramic Art Museums (FLICAM), China's first Contemporary Ceramic Museum, located in the Shaanxi Fuping pottery village. The immediate context for this residency, a brick factory, made the *brick* Subrahmanian's inspiration and material for work. "I was drawn to the mass of bricks and the scale of the factory; deconstructing the brick, slicing it like bread and reconstructing to build up forms that looked lingam-like and had architectural and urban overtones," she says. Subrahmanian also contributed pieces to the permanent



Madhvi Subrahmanian. *Cocoon*. Ceramic and painting. 52". 2015. Photograph by the artist.

collection of the Museum⁹, thus steadily placing Indian studio-based clay practice in international museum collections and their extensive documentation projects. She contributed to this trajectory earlier in a landmark curatorial role which produced the first dedicated show on contemporary Indian ceramics in the USA, *Traditions Evolving: Golden Bridge Pottery and Contemporary Ceramics in India* (2013).¹⁰

At a time when 'archiving' itself has attained so many different forms and meanings, it may be said that alternative archiving of ceramic art is being facilitated through private acquisitions and their effective displays. Collectors dialogue with Subrahmanian to acquire works or commission them. Her famous series of large seedpods was acquired by one of India's foremost collectors, Sangita Jindal, and are displayed since 2012 at Kaladham built by JSW and located in the vicinity of the archaeological site of Hampi, Karnataka. They sit comfortably between the outdoor ruins of the 15th century Vijayanagara Empire and a museum which re-interprets the site through interactive kiosks and virtual exhibits. In a similar vein, Aarti Lohia, collector and patron of public art projects, now based in Singapore, has commissioned Subrahmanian to create works for her upcoming residence, Villa Shanti in Ubud, Bali. The collector's desire for organic forms and Subrahmanian's imagination of *home* as a "place of refuge" and a "state of mind" converge as she takes cues from seed pods,



Madhvi Subrahmanian. *Floating Belly Pods*. White stoneware. Dimensions variable. 2009. Photograph by Anil Rane.

nests and cocoons. Subrahmanian's works have enjoyed a marked reception in Singapore. Curator Jason Toh notes how contemporary Singapore art is dominated by photography, video and installation art for the past decade; genres such as printmaking, sculpture and even painting seldom enjoy inclusion.¹¹ He recognises how Subrahmanian's ceramics, with their alternative conception as installation art become a part of the Singapore contemporary arts paradigm.¹² Likewise, her studio at the Thow Kwang Dragon Kiln founded in the 1940s in Western Singapore contributes actively to the revival of this historic space. The kiln was dedicated to commercial ceramic production from the early-1950s to the mid-1990s before slipping into disuse. Today, the kiln is not only activated through individual ceramists such as Subrahmanian, but also through groups of children and adults who visit the space for basic experience with clay and firing or to view the artists at work.¹³

In spite of this prolific engagement with "museums, curators, collectors, residencies", components of an art world which flourishes with an emphasis on the primacy of *idea over art*, the utilitarian orientation of GBP and of the clay medium in general is courted nonchalantly by Subrahmanian. She participated in the International Chawan Expo (2014) which displayed 300 tea bowls from around the world. Table top functionality and conceptually-driven installations meld as she pushes the bar of her own multifarious practice to qualify for previously non-accessible visual art domains. Subrahmanian's keen understanding of material, design, form and technique come to the fore and remind us of the *raison d'être* for Indian crafts' success at the Great Exhibition of 1851. Simultaneously, her contributions to Indian studio-based clay art and its place in a rapidly growing sphere of international ceramic art and Asian and global contemporary art remind us of debunked categories and hierarchies, many of which also originated in 1851.

End-Notes

1. Partha Mitter. *Much Maligned Monsters: A History of European Reactions to Indian Art*. Clarendon Press, Oxford. pp. 6-10. 1977.
2. Richard Redgrave. *Supplementary Report on Design in The Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of All Nations: Reports by the Juries on the Subjects in the Thirty Classes into which the Exhibition was divided*. Spicer Bros, London. pp. 708-709. 1852.
3. Abigail McGowan. *Crafting the Nation in Colonial India*. Palgrave Macmillan, New York. 2009. Arindam Dutta. *The Bureaucracy of Beauty: Design in the Age of its Global Reproducibility*. Routledge, London. 2006.
4. Vishakha Desai (Ed.). Introduction in *Asian Art History: In the Twenty-First Century*. Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, Massachusetts. pp. vii, xiii. 2007.
5. Tapati Guha-Thakurta. *Monuments, Objects, Histories: Institutions of Art in Colonial and Postcolonial India*. Columbia University Press, New York. Chapter 6. 2004.
6. Desai. p. vii. 2007.
7. See Ratan Parimoo's "Adventures in Art Education: N. S. Bendre at the FFA" and Chithra K. S. Rashmimala Devi, Sabih Ahmed's "Archival Imaginaries: Art Practice and Pedagogy in the Early Years of the FFA" in Priya Maholay-Jaradi's (Ed.), *Baroda: A Cosmopolitan Provenance in Transition*. Marg Foundation, Mumbai. 2015.
8. Nancy Adajania. "Flesh Made Clay" in *Madhvi Subrahmanian: New Works*. Cymroza Art Gallery, Mumbai. 2001. Bina Sarkar Elias. "Madhvi Subrahmanian". British Council and Gallery Chemould, Mumbai. 2003. Exhibitions: *The Pod and Other Containers*, Triveni Kala Sangam, New Delhi, India, 2000; *A Vessel and A Container*, Cymroza Art Gallery, Mumbai, India, 1999.
9. It has a holding of 10,000 works by 500 ceramists from 50 countries.
10. The exhibition particularly documented the role of GBP's contribution to contemporary ceramic art in India.
11. Jason Toh. "The Keramikos World of Madhvi Subrahmanian", in *Madhvi Subrahmanian: Connections*. Indigo Blue Art, Singapore. 2011.
12. Ibid.
13. Carolyn Lim. "The Dragon Kiln Breathes: Thow Kwang Dragon Kiln" in *MUSE SG*, Volume 8, Issue 2. pp. 46-49. 2015.