



# MADHVI SUBRAHMANIAN

## *A Homecoming Residency*

**M**y training in the world of clay did not start in my home country India with the ubiquitous village potter – but with an unusual American couple, Ray Meeker and Deborah Smith, who live and work in a town on the Coromandel Coast in South India called Pondicherry.

As a young girl I was enthralled to see their Japanese-looking handmade pottery at a craft shop in Mumbai and I knew immediately that I wanted to find the source of these works and learn from the masters.

When I set off for Pondicherry in 1985, I had no idea what an impact Ray, Deborah, and their pottery, Golden Bridge, would leave on me for the rest of my life.

My training at Golden Bridge started with the clay, the wheel and the pot. It was learning not so much by instruction as by immersion, by observation and osmosis. As I observed how the pottery functioned, the dedication and the commitment to material, the patience and resilience, letting-go and acceptance – so omnipresent here were awe-inspiring. It is no wonder that today Golden Bridge is known for the finest handmade ceramic wares and is a much sought-after ceramics-learning centre in India.

Learning about the craft from the inside out, slaking/sieving chunks of clay to make the clay body and glazes, learning to build a kiln and fire it with wood while battling simultaneously the heat, humidity and the mosquitoes were all an uphill struggle for me.

Equipped with a strong foundation, I set out to explore and understand the larger field of art, history and my place in this vast ceramics universe. I had the opportunity to do my Masters in the US with Peter Beasecker and to learn further from a number of artists like Val Cushing, Marliyn Lysor, William Daley, Warren Mckenzie and others. One of the most rewarding ex-

### ILLUSTRATIONS -

opposite page - "Seedpod untitled #8-9" - h 160 cm x w 50 cm x d 50 cm - woodfired cone 10 stoneware

right - "Seedpod untitled #7" - h 160 cm x w 50 cm x d 50 cm - woodfired cone 10 stoneware





## ILLUSTRATIONS -

top - "U Turn to Vishnu" - h 28 cm x w 30 cm x  
d 23 cm - woodfired cone 10 stoneware

opposite page - "Seedpod untitled #11-12" - h 160 cm x w 50 cm x  
d 50 cm - woodfired cone 10 stoneware

periences however, was learning the art of the round-bottomed pots from the potters of Dharavi in my hometown of Mumbai.

Over the years, I gave up the functional form in search of the sculptural. I gave up the wheel to experience an intimate contact with my material through hand-building. Eventually, mostly due to my nomadic life, I gave up high-fire stoneware and started working in earthenware and smoke firing, the simplicity and immediacy bringing me closer to the world of the Indian traditional potter.

With motherhood, and a migratory life in four countries on three continents, much had changed for me when I returned to Pondicherry and Golden Bridge Pottery as an artist-in-residence in 2009.

But here it seemed as if time had stood still. The open-walled sheds with their graceful red tile roofs and the large bamboo tree at the entrance had stood steadfast through the years. The pottery continued to function with no automation, the soft hum of the kick wheels and the rhythmic thumping of clay being wedged floated through the air and welcomed my senses.

However, life surrounding the pottery had grown more intense. Increased frequency of the trains at the edge of the compound, and the town with its sounds and smells encroaching on the small acre of land spoke of the rapid growth and change sweeping through contemporary India and Pondicherry.

In their oasis, Ray and Deborah had gotten older, but their dedication to their work, their warmth and generosity knew no bounds. For me, it was a homecoming, and I was welcomed with open arms.

Inspired by Ray's personal work, his monumental forms, the open studio space, huge kilns and abundant supply of clay, I set off to search for the extra-ordinary.

For several years, I had been exploring the concept of containment present in forms such as the bowl and the platter

– the receptacles that provide sustenance to the body, mind and soul. Then with the onset of pregnancy, the concept of containment spread from the bowl to the pod and the seed and came to include the womb as a receptacle that holds, protects and nurtures. Parallel to this, the idea that the seed and the pod were metaphors expressing my migratory life started to take shape in my mind.

Responding to the fast changing contemporary urban-scape in India, where new constructions are continually sprouting up, I embarked on a series of amorphous structures. My organic urban-scape started to echo the housing of a small colony of white ants just outside my studio space at Golden Bridge. Several other creatures and critters, also saw it fitting to build their homes here, given the abundant supply of clay. Most interestingly, people in this part of India worship the termite mound, and one such shrine for the termite mound and the cobra stands just outside the property line of the pottery. As my eyes and mind adjusted to this wonderful organic and votive world buzzing around me, the growing anthill city in my studio was somehow validated.

Simultaneously the idea of expanding the small seedpod – a form

that I had come to understand intimately through my earlier work – to a larger-than-life, human scale excited me. Quickly built up with groggy clay coils, as were the smaller anthills, the nearly six-feet large forms came forth in pairs, each enclosing space for the seed and the pod. Through their humanoid forms, I sought to experience this space, with its male and female, positive and negative attributes, accentuating the surfaces in minimalist black and white.

While journeying on the road to Pondichery, I came across black and white checkered markings on tamarind trees painted to forewarn motorists about the impending turns in the road. Fascinated with the meeting of the organic with the geometric, I superimposed this signposting and other symbols of the road onto my organic forms. The language of the road transformed into primordial expressions evoking the votive world and expressing the path I travelled on literally and metaphorically.

In the time between the form and the fire at Golden Bridge, I sustained a rare dialogue with my material and myself, opening my eyes anew to the organic magic of the world that surrounds me. While I was immersed in the experience of pushing my boundaries on all fronts, the residency allowed me to discover that my life, like my art, is a journey filled with markers at every corner, signposting the way forward.



**MADHVI SUBRAHMANIAN** was born in Mumbai, India. She studied with Ray Meeker and Deborah Smith at the Golden Bridge Pottery in Pondichery, India. She graduated with an MFA from Meadows School of the Arts, SMU, Dallas, Texas, USA, where she studied with Peter Beasecker. In 2002, she went to England under a British Council scholarship and worked briefly with Kate Malone. Madhvi has born and brought up in Mumbai, India and has lived in USA, Germany and currently lives and works in Singapore. Madhvi is well known for her smoke-fired forms and her works have been published in several magazines and two recent books: *Smoke firing* by Jane Peryman and *Contemporary Ceramics* by Emmanuel Cooper. She has shown in several countries including India, Germany, Spain, Taiwan, Korea and Singapore. Her works are in several collections the world over.

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