

Exploration Experimentation + Examination

An
International
Art Residency
in India

by
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In a world of increased conflict and turmoil people seem to be separating on basis of ethnicity, religion, colour – yet we ceramic artists continue to converse and unite under our common banner of clay. We hope to build bridges and deeper understanding through our common language and, in our small way perhaps, push the idea of world peace further. It was with these thoughts that I set off to plan an International Ceramic Residency.

Ambica Beri, the director of Art Ichol invited me to curate a residency at her art centre, Art Ichol in Maihar, Madhya Pradesh, India. The theme of the residency was Exploration, Experimentation and Examination and the mandate was to create large outdoor works in a short span of 12 days for the sculpture gardens of Art

Ichol. Given the complexity of working with clay, the glazing and firing process, I knew from the onset that the mandate I had set would be very challenging to achieve. This experiment was to conclude with a symposium in New Delhi that would include local artists discussing and elaborating on the various explorations in their own practice.

I had met the invited artists on several occasions at different points in my life had always admired their approach to clay.

Alvin Tan from Singapore and myself work in the same artists' studio space and I knew his large carved vessels would find an appreciative audience in India.

The architectural works of Jacques Kaufmann (president of the International Academy of Ceramics) from France/Swit-

zerland, had inspired me when I first saw them at conferences in the US and Australia.

Kathy Erteman from the USA and I met at a workshop in Singapore and subsequently in New York. I was struck by her minimalistic/painterly style and her adventurous attitude.

When I was in a residency in Fuping, China in 2013, working for the India Ceramic Museum, I met Naidee Changmoh (Thailand). Naidee was creating large figurative sculptures and given India's figurative.

The colourful Sandy Brown had been to India on two occasions before and I met her in Mumbai years ago. We hit it off instantly and kept in touch over the years.

Thiébaut Chagué from France had come

Kiln at the peak of the firing

Jacques Kaufmann working on his form



Sandy Brown with her large colourful form in the background



Madhvi Subrahmanian with her large tower forms built with cow dung multiples



to Singapore a couple of years ago to participate in a residency programme. We exchanged many ideas and talked about his unique large and temporary fibre kiln.

I was excited that a group of such high calibre artists agreed to join and explore together various aspects of ceramic arts.

The residency started with the overnight train from Delhi to Maihar. It was on this train journey that everyone first met each other. While I was anxious to see how they got on, in my heart I knew they would all really like and respect each other.

Our residency started with a day trip to Khajuraho, an amazing UNESCO world heritage temple site. We made so many stops along the way at the roadside shrines and brickyards that we reached the great Khajuraho temples to see their intricate carvings only towards the end of the day.

As we started working in the studio, large works started emerging, reflecting aspects of the architectural, spiritual and natural environment of Art Ichol and its surroundings.

The studio already had a small wood kiln and gas kiln but we needed a big kiln for the large scale works. Thiébaud and I had coordinated across continents, with him in France and me in Singapore, planning out the fibre kiln over the internet. But when we got to the residency, the design of the kiln had to be modified to accommodate more works than already planned. After only 5 days of working in the studio, some works were loaded in the wood and gas kilns while the 6 ft/180 cm large finished forms were loaded on the brick base of the open updraft kiln. The large works were preheated and dried out in the open kiln, which was enclosed later with the prefabricated fibre-mesh metal frame. As we ramped up the firing with wood in the fire-box, we introduced vast quantities of coal into the kiln from the top. The firing was part process and part performance as it required a steady rhythm and co-ordination among all the participants.⁷

Meanwhile we had interesting results from the gas and wood kilns, though not without its fair share of challenges. After firing for 48 hours, the fibre kiln took 5 days to cool and finally when it opened we had mixed results. The kiln was hotter on the top than below. While the works looked great overall, the temperature difference resulted in some cracks and unmelted glaze on the works.

Regardless, we felt the firing was a huge success as we gained in so many ways. The process was lead more through collective intuition and feeling than pure technical knowledge. It was the experimentations with the materials and risks that we took that made our experience so fulfilling.

At the day-long symposium in New Delhi the residency artists met several local ceramic artists and heard them speak. Among the speakers was the noted art historian Naman Ahuja who spoke on Post-Mauryan two-dimensional relief covered vessels.

We all left the residency with a great sense of achievement and connection, the material and process becoming a metaphor for us, that in this unpredictable world, our hearts and hands can come together despite our cultural differences, uniting us for larger-than-life experiences such as this.

Watch the film on the residency on You Tube under International Ceramic Residency, Art Ichol. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1h4EFoijycU>

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Preheating and opening the kiln

