

“Indelible Impressions”

Vineet Kacker (India)

In 1989 I graduated as an architect from the School of Planning and Architecture, New Delhi. At that time I had no idea of the unexpected turn my life would take soon after, with a chance introduction to the world of clay! Through my amazing journey I have been fortunate enough to come into contact with some wonderful teachers, and the fact that I could make for myself a life and career out of clay without ever having had a formal education in ceramics is a tribute to their love for clay, that they infected me with.

I first came into contact with clay at the idyllic Andretta Pottery in the Himalayan foothills. My teacher here was Mini Singh, whose father Sardar Gurcharan Singh, having met Bernard Leach and Shoji Hamada in Japan in the 1920's, is credited with having set up the first pottery studio in India. Thus far my only exposure to clay had been through traditional Indian terracotta pottery, and I had no concept of “studio pottery” or “ceramic art”. But the material felt magical to touch, and I loved the immediacy with which one could interact with it. I wanted more...

In the early nineties I was fortunate to get a place as a student at the Golden Bridge Pottery in Pondicherry, India. Two Americans, Ray Meeker and Deborah Smith had started the pottery in the nineteen-seventies. Ray and Deb were terrific teachers, amazing artists, inspiring individuals and as time went by, they became wonderful friends. My continual joyous involvement with clay owes everything to those early enthusiastic interactions with them. At Golden Bridge, the rhythms of clay-making and hand-made production pottery making provided an inspirational backdrop to my initial struggles with the material, the making and the firings. I was also extremely lucky to be a part of Ray's “Fired Earth Project”, which involved building forms out of mud bricks, in self-supporting shapes of vaults and domes; then filling the structures with terracotta products and firing them like giant kilns. The firings stabilized the mud walls, and later the buildings were plastered and finished as homes for people to live in. This poetic theatre of mud architecture, product making and loading, and often week-long firings was an intense and exciting learning ground on the understanding of material, kiln-building and firing.

This paper however talks about four other influences that changed the way I worked with clay. Two of these influences are not even real people, but more on that later!

I returned to Delhi after my training in Pondicherry, and was faced with the challenge of making work without having a studio space of my own. At the time I was trying to balance working with clay alongside working on architectural projects. In 1999 I had the opportunity to take up an artist residency at the Anderson Ranch Arts Center in Snowmass, Colorado. This was my first trip outside India, and the exposure to galleries and museums, meetings with different artists and discussions with other resident artists all led me to think about the sort of work I wanted to make. My time away from the familiarity of my country paradoxically put me in touch with the Indian sources of my inspirations - the landscape, art and architecture of the Himalayan regions; the street shrines and iconography that I had grown up with.

It was on this trip that I had the opportunity to meet the artist Jun Kaneko at his studio in Omaha, Nebraska. When I visited Kaneko I was too inexperienced to digest the significance and sophistication of the aesthetics of his gigantic body of work. What impacted me was the sheer scale of his work - walking into a warehouse opposite his studio building to see a cluster of fourteen foot high “Dango” sculptures, seeing rows upon rows of enormous works in various stages - raw, bisque, glazed - in his huge multi-level studio building. I was astonished to see a whole

floor set aside as his painting studio. Here was someone that had worked in ways that seemed to challenge the limits of clay as a material, yet as an artist he seemed to be dedicated not just to clay but to his artistic vision. For two days I walked around his studio spaces, watched him work, and I just let myself take everything in.



Jun Kaneko (in black) observing his “dangos-under-construction” during the Fremont project, California, 1992

In my student years I was all consumed by the idea of making friends with clay the material, and thought about glaze essentially as surface decoration, and technique as a fundamental means to an end. I learnt a lot by having my simplistic concepts challenged, through the observation of other art practices and ways of working. I quote some of Kaneko’s own words on material and technique: “I’m interested in investigating my own ideas and finding the best material for my work. I don’t want to force any material, to make it obey my concept. I want to understand the material in depth, then come up with a deeper way of projecting my idea. Technique is not mechanical, it is an attitude you develop, an attitude to problem solving. It is a very personal thing, something that follows the experience and the demands of creative desire. It is not universal, but particular to each piece of work. It is preceded by that work’s concept. No one technique can serve everybody’s needs”.

Soon after my American residency I was awarded the Charles Wallace Fellowship, which gave me the opportunity to apprentice with British artist Sandy Brown in Devon, England. Sandy makes artwork with an exuberance that celebrates the primal joy of creation. Her work is an extension of her individuality, and her strength lies in her ability to find a source of stillness within herself that becomes the unmoving center of her cyclonic creativity. In my time with her I did several exercises in creativity that put me in touch with a more intuitive way of working, and also gave me the confidence to value and accept my own artistic language and expression.

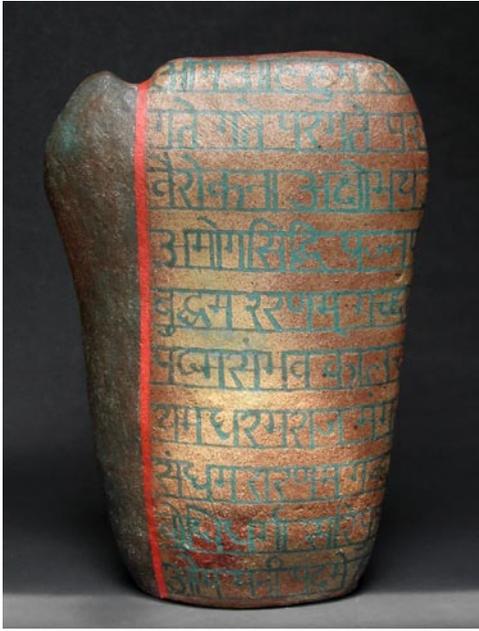


Sandy Brown with her work from the project “Ritual: Still point and the Dance”, 2007

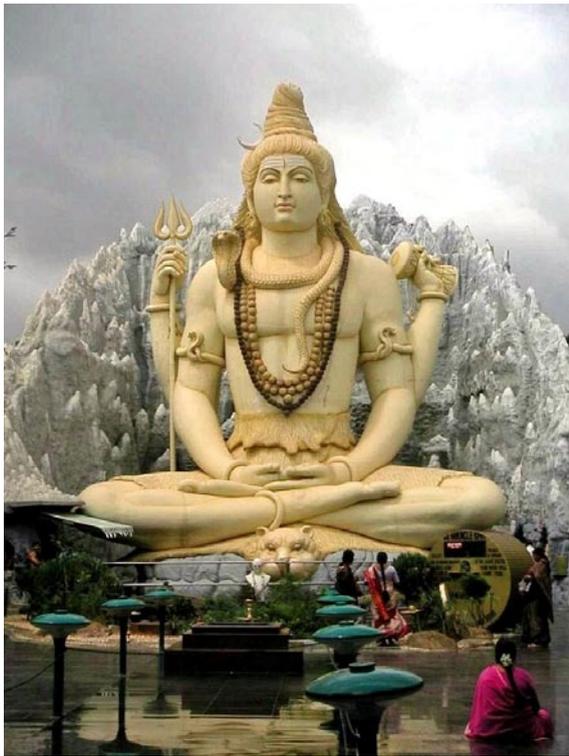
While Kaneko and Brown were very different individuals with different approaches to their art practice, when I look at their work I can see several parallels that are inspirational for me. The first thing that strikes me is that they are fearless as artists, completely unwilling to operate within a comfort zone, always looking at new opportunities, new materials - painting, sculpting, designing their way into uninhabited artistic spaces. Yet they remain true to the source-space of their creativity, uninfluenced by external trends and flavors, always finding new ways of singing their songs. They are masters not just of line and color, drawing with strength and purpose, but also of space and silence: the marks on the surfaces of their impressive works point to an underlying energy that cannot be seen, yet can be felt charging the space around their work. This is an aspect that has influenced me greatly in my own work.



Clockwise from Top Left: Sandy Brown, from the “Jazz series”; Jun Kaneko “Dango”; Vineet Kacker “Buddha Rock”



What I received from Kaneko and Brown was not a technique or a philosophy, but rather it was the confidence to trust my instincts and see where they would lead me, to undertake an exploration of my own ideas and concepts, to make work that was an expression of my own individuality...which brings me to the two other figures that have been highly influential in my art practice. The first is Lord Shiva, part of the Hindu holy trinity, who is also known as the supreme mystic and the lord of the Himalayan mountains. While I was still studying towards an architectural degree, the experience of traveling in the Himalayas and in Nepal and Bhutan left an indelible impression on me. All my work at some level draws from that certain “sense of self” experienced on those travels, through an encounter with something ancient, mystical, magical, timeworn but timeless, which makes one breathe deeply and wonder!



Left, A Shiva shrine with the Himalayas with a depiction of the mountains at the back
Right, “Temple Fragment” by Vineet Kacker

The second is Lord Buddha, who for me is a symbol of contemplation and introspection; a figure that has inspired reverential art, architecture and ritual all over South -East Asia, and also in the high Himalayan regions of India. Visually my works draw upon and reference these diverse sources - the geometries of sacred architecture, the stark dry landscapes of the high Himalayas, the kitschy-ness of urban street shrines, and the theatre of rituals that goes on in various spiritual traditions, in which I have been both an observer and a participant since my early

years. My endeavor is to walk a path between the meditative and the playful, responding to both the sacred and the profane, exploring their interchangeability. While my works often reference the spiritual, personally they are intended as markers delineating an inner landscape, one in which things are constantly re-arranged as I continue to interrogate and to investigate the spiritual concepts I have grown up with.

As I started becoming more confident of my personal vocabulary as an artist, I drew upon techniques used in contemporary music to give expression to this: sampling and remixing old texts, icons and imagery into new works that are symbolic without being derivative, accessible without being populist.



While the subject matter of my works is the ancient and the timeless, this is juxtaposed with urban-contemporary approach in the making process. Often molds are made from cheap and kitschy figurines sold on the street, and symbols from several different spiritual traditions are referenced together on a single work. Parts that are molded combine with parts that are thrown, parts that are pre-determined and geometric complement parts that are organic and indeterminate till they are formed. Rough textures of stoneware surfaces may contrast with shiny porcelain inserts. Slips and washes of oxide are used both at the raw and once fired stages to add layers and depth.



Top, Chorten or Stupa forms in Himachal; Bottom, Winter Landscape Tableaux, Vineet Kacker

As an artist, I am grateful for each day spent in the studio, as it brings new possibilities to work with, new directions to explore...a process both meditative and celebratory. Impressions that have been stored within find new means of expression, articulated through the process of working, till they are rendered indelible on clay.