

circle uncircled... ...an installation in ceramic

by

Rahul Kumar

Memory is a faithless device. At the National Museum in New Delhi – as in museums everywhere, at excavation sites and in archaeological mounds – disinterested (or little interested) visitors walk past what are described somewhat drily as “pottery shards”. These remnants of long-ago habitations and civilisations find frequent mention in the media as another ancient heap yields itself to the archaeologist’s microscopic diggings. Hundreds, perhaps thousands, of years ago, these pieces of pottery would have served their masters and mistresses well. Imagine, if you will, the stories they could tell, of loving containments, of mead stored, meals served, and secret ingredients in their embrace.

Mud. Earth. That most fundamental element was probably shaped by ancient man – Neolithic, Paleolithic, aboriginal – into forms not very different from those we know today. In their resulting forms, families stored their grain, meals were eaten, liquids aged. They were probably decorated, hands lovingly grasping at grooves, clutching at handles, admiring the motifs that adorned their contours.

These then are the stories of mankind, the DNA of our lives, the receptacle of our memories. How seductive those stories, the voluptuous relationship between hands that tend – and knead – and the fire they kindle, the imprint of ecstasy, happiness, betrayal and despair glazed into a surface of a trillion stories. For unknown millennia and forgotten centuries, potters have shaped the destinies of mankind. What they took to create, the gods turned into life. These, the results of their toils, was the breath of civilisation, the slow marks of progress, development.

Heritage is an imposing word, terrifying in its complicity. And yet, Rahul Kumar is as much a comprador as he is an artist. It has fallen to him – and to countless others like him – to shoulder that burden, a segue between our forgotten histories and our lived lives.

On such a day, he embraces his material. Grapples with it, fights it, manipulates it. It is an act of the greatest intimacy, this tactile embrace that turns a lump of clay into something only the caress of greedy, possessive hands could employ. It is a relationship as physical as it is emotional, a surrender of the senses that abjures the limitations of reason, conscience and intelligence. It is at once elevating and empowering.

Artists must love their medium. It is their primary tool. In Rahul’s case, it is one which has a primacy in all human lives. Lips will touch a cup of tea, forks will scrape over china, food will lay in dishes. Clay has been a gathering point for civilisations over millennia. Amphoras and pitchers, jugs and platters, they were utilitarian objects of beauty that became objects of affection and love. The evolution from the utilitarian to the purely aesthetic was probably a quest of the

twentieth century when the relevance of objects for functionality alone became anathema. Artists wanted – *needed* – to experiment with mediums that had informed their lives for purely applied reasons. Could these be viewed for artistic pleasure alone? What reactions would they evoke?

This gamble between what makes sense, is functional, and that which is purely decorative, an object of adoration, is a fine distinction, one which may require the artist to deconstruct – as Rahul has done – in an act of creation. Abstraction – even in pottery – is by its nature rebellious. It stands apart, a form of protest against the known and accepted. It is stubborn, defiant, uncontrollable, unmanageable. It is a route artists have chosen in which to make their statements.

Rahul, contrarily, has pitched for the familiar. The flirtatious kneading of clay, the shaping of form, the ease of assumed shapes, these are the basics of everydayness. His initiation was born of that familiarity with form, the sublime endeavour that would cast him in the manner of his mentors, Dipalee and PR Daroz, before he could stand apart on his own.

This constellation, then, is a major step in Rahul's quest to determine a language that he can claim as uniquely his own. Determined steps have led to it. In turn, he has been quirky and experimental. But no matter how sure that voice, how do you distinguish yourself when the objects you create have a fluency that comes from being shaped by a long lineage of potters and artists? If you are not to distort that form beyond all recognition, what choice do you have in the matter? To overcome these constraints, Rahul challenged himself – responding to Bollywood, working in the miniature format (difficult, very, very difficult), even, early in his career, overdoing, then overcoming, the academic learning so each work resonated with multiple voices, drowning in a cacophony of artistic devices, colours and distortions.

If he was in a hurry then, he seems to have arrived at a point that resembles a plateau now. From here, he can view his goal. It is this time – and this installation – that is the culmination of the journey.

This psychedelic, pop constellation marks a change of pace for the ceramic artist. Each segment of the installation is thought through. This is not to say that the work lacks spontaneity – that is the magic of the kiln that he can ill-afford to eliminate and no artist can anticipate – but that chance is forethought. With few exceptions, these plates, or discs, have been hand-contoured to retain that essential element of deformity, suggesting the primacy of the earth and the smell of land and water, and of unrestrained skies. Though they soar on a wall, it is as though they have been left to float in ether. They occupy space and volume, but appear weightless. In a feat of magnificent conception, Rahul has created a symphony of constructed chaos.

What might these be? To me, they are many things. First and foremost, they suggest primordial landscapes. Each disc erupts into contours that suggest terrains. Ridges scar them. Ancient earths erupt in formations of grand splendour. Terrestrial markings tame them into nature's surrender.

But there is poetry too. A hint of calligraphy, glimpses of floating islands, the magical feel of rain. Here are – huts? fish? the blazing sun? moons? many, many

moons? Rivers are captured mid-flow as waves suggest an impediment in their course. Are those floating clouds? Fields? Habitation?

To see them together, this assemblage of 101 discs, is a sensory as well as a visual pleasure. Together, there is much that can be recounted of the universe Rahul has created. If there is a sense of mystery, there is also the familiarity of the observed. The overload distracts from the little details at first, the recognition that each individual plate is, in part too, a work of art. The cohesiveness creates a panorama of all that there is; the smallest jigsaw component harbours the markings of intimate suggestion.

There are interesting insights too. Rahul has chosen to show the discs in a concave format, avoiding the convex. If there is a reason, it might lie in the suggestion of a viewing, where a glimpse allows him to reveal what lies *inside*. This supposition of the divulged would not have been a possibility in globular discs, a format Rahul has clearly avoided.

Another device he has used with deliberation is to lip the plates, creating an edging that uses the etymology of an ancient cosmic universe, weathered by nature. It has allowed him to play with shapes, so each circular disc retains the honesty of its shape, but is also deconstructed beyond its simple symmetry into a more complex vocabulary. Far from constricting his vision, or freedom, it allows him to play with the clay, infusing it with a heritage as old as itself.

And the glazes. What might one say of the brilliance of his colours? The cerulean cool of deep blue, the chimera-like range of aquamarine, the sobriety of sienna, the blazing orange of the sun itself? He has chosen to arrange the orbs asymmetrically in a teasing juxtaposition that allows them to play hide and seek, deliberately obfuscating a few. Nor do the larger spheres obscure the smaller ones, merely creating a perception of depth and thereby, without alluding in any obvious way, to a horizon. Here then is a constellation that looms extra-terrestrially, choking up space – eating it up – as it grapples for a slice of the sky in which it floats – tethered, yet free.

It is a tenuous world, one which might be as flighty as balloons, as light as bubbles, a kaleidoscope of dancing lights. His choice of glazes, of kilns – these are the technicalities of construction that the viewer need not concern himself with here. The voids in the constellation are pregnant with the possibility of more appearances. Will a disc appear here, a sphere there? The mysterious tug of possibilities influences the senses, turning them into repositories of emotions.

It is of work such as this that Johann Wolfgang van Goethe might have said, “Each has his own happiness in his hands, as the artist handles the rude clay he seeks to reshape it into a figure; yet it is the same with this art as with all others: only the capacity for it is innate; the art itself must be learned and painstaking.”

Rahul has learned it well. That gift of learning is now for us to behold. We may not possess it, but no one can stop us from marvelling at it in the manner of all high art. It is his bridge into a future of recounted stories, untold possibilities.

- Kishore Singh

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