

*Astronomically small* is a recent body of ceramic works by Rahul Kumar, showcasing primarily a cluster of ultra-tiny pots that epitomize in art, the true strength of the axiom "less is more". Rahul's fidelity to his chosen medium has strengthened his belief in its immense expressive and communicative possibilities, and this is despite that within the mainstream, ceramics as an art form remains relatively marginalized. Drawn to its malleability and its transformative nature, Rahul brings clay to life, his miniature forms acquiring a serene presence in the space around them. Though working with an obvious paradigm, his fresh articulations on the enduring form of the pot are a means to address the duality of solid and voids, vulnerability and strength, the organic and the mechanical. Divesting his palm-held pots of their functionality, Rahul extends their being into realms of subjectivity and imagination. The transference of scale, the play on colour and the slight eccentricities of the human hand that nudge the symmetry of the perfectly centered pots, all intrigue the viewer, unsettling our readymade observations to seek meanings embodied within the form.

Rahul has a sustained proclivity towards the inner reserves and radiance of clay. Pushing his imagination into corners of his consciousness, Rahul started working with the idea of combining the wheel-thrown pots with hand-built methods to bring uniqueness to each piece, taking away the uniformity of a stereotypical form and the predictable destiny of a pot. For Rahul, it is important that form and space play out new configurations, with the object receding in size but not in presence, as it brings a charge to the space it occupies. No wonder, Rahul could achieve such strength and elegance in his diminutive pot-forms.

Rahul was initiated in the tradition of functional pottery and gradually began to innovate from within the basic vocabulary he was trained in, to invest his pots with sculptural and painterly attributes. The artist's hand remains the primary tool in the creative process and in due course, the raw earthiness of matter is put through tests of resilience and beauty to gain in its evocative appeal. The rich red glaze brings a smooth finish to the pots that invite instant touch and a tender caress.

Artists who use ceramics swear by the medium despite its unforgiving nature, drawn to the pleasures of its adaptability and response to human feel and touch. Air, sunlight, water and fire, all natural elements are part of its making and evoke a strong connection with time- seasons, climate, the temperature and temperament of each day. If Gurcharan Singh of the Delhi Blue was his mentor, Rahul was equally inspired by Himmat Shah's modernist assertions through enigmatic forms in terracotta and Jyotsna Bhatt's sensibilities as a ceramic artist. And equally, P.Daroz's pushing of boundaries to extend his vocabulary in the medium remains a lesson in the way technical know-how goes hand-in-hand with the creative process. These were perhaps exemplars that helped Rahul to think through the medium and its indulgent elasticity.

Rahul came into Ceramics at the Delhi Blue pottery studios with a background in Management. He was awarded a Fulbright Scholarship to the United States that allowed him to complete his Masters degree in Ceramics and there triggered the need to think of pottery as form beyond function. The exposure to Peter Voukos's abstract expressionist approach made Rahul think a lot more about the dichotomy that a single little pot could address in terms of being both "a pot and non-pot". And while there was no committed gallery dedicated to the showcasing of ceramic works in India, group exhibitions have once in a while brought to the viewers diverse contemporary expressions in the medium by artists. It is interesting and rare then and perhaps

needs a mention that this series of red pots was invited by Sotheby's London to be part of an exhibition in 2012.

From the early series of works to the displayed now at Art Heritage, Rahul has indeed evolved his vision and enriched his creative dialogue with the medium. For instance, in *harmonic discord* we see Rahul focus on the coexistence of contraries, attending to surface treatment with glaze dribbles and random decorative elements that make the pots dramatic in their externalization. In their vertical elongated posture, they look like figurines, reminiscent of Sumerian or Indus Valley figures, retrieved torsos with broken arms and heads. One of the interests that Rahul has consistently engaged with is how to retain the pot /vase/ and yet subvert its character and function. In the apparent nudging and collapsing of parts and specific details, we register an attempt by him to reinvent the aesthetic potential of the pot and the visual experience.

In the *tranquil flame*, Rahul Kumar intensifies his vision, working on a miniature scale, reducing his pot-like forms to a dramatic size, barely three inches and a little more. Some of them take on sensuous forms, some an introverted identity, the little pot sometimes leaning a bit more on one side, all carrying marks of manual working and tweaking. Of course, the vertical slender pot has now taken on round bulbous shapes, often placed upside down with its belly up. In their tiny *avatars*, they transform from objects into enchanting forms with the inherent textures resulting from the red glaze.

The recent works also draw our attention to the mediations between acts of controlled working and chance occurrences in the desired form. His bare pots are stripped of all superfluous ornamentation and deliberate excess of surface patterning and textures. If anything, the artist is seeking to liberate the medium of its mundane presence and predictability. Perhaps he seeks the flaws and aberrations in the logical sequence of making a pot as if they are an aesthetic adventure. The eye moves on delicate irregularities, its tiny imperfections and its almost invisible hollowed interior. Rahul allows for the incidental and the intentional to come together in order to amplify a certain informality within the discipline of its formal making.

Rahul amplifies the space and form relationship in a more articulated way, extending his foray into creating environments/ base/ shelves/ ground for his miniature pots to perch on. Though staged, memories of clay pitchers resting on the wall of the well, or on wooden shelves, or even occupying the ground in villages and towns are refreshed by the placing of the pot in its extended context. Equally, Rahul sharpens his dramatic play on dualities through deliberate juxtapositions. The smooth roundness of the pot-form is accentuated by the raw unevenness of the rock-base on which it sits. The controlled shape and symmetry of the pot placed against the porcelain base that sometimes is a toppled lump of clay salvaged in its own shape. The contrasts of colour- natural against glazes in red or blue also heighten the serene visuality of the ensemble. They gain in poetic whimsicality that exceeds measure and embraces grace.

For Rahul, perhaps this is the moment of liberation as he breaks the bound of the pot and its flesh to traverse the terrain of the non-objective, where matter speaks through its bearings and without the compulsions of remaining contained within a recognizable form.

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