

the untold resides somewhere

assembling fragments

What instantly strikes us as we encounter the recent corpus of works by Rahul Kumar, is its 'unexpectedness'. For ages, centuries now, the earth as matter and medium was befriended by humans to aid their survival and their agrarian settled existence. In their day-to-day life, work and play, clay remained the most malleable and flexible material, to transform from the functional to the fantastical, from utilitarian vessels to crafted toys.

The earthen pot became the container of all human life and lived reality. It brought together human necessity and imagination, expanding the 'the sphere of making', to context, creativity, design and aesthetics. In the evolution of its form, the utilitarian object was embellished with animal and vegetal world motifs- stylized, drawn, and painted. The perfecting of the pot remained central to the practice of the master craftsmen.

Rahul was trained as a studio potter and spent several years learning to master his craft. Despite the relative marginalization of the medium from the mainstream art culture, he was mesmerized by the innate beauty and potential of clay as a creative medium. There was also inspiration that came from great artist-pedagogues such as K G Subramanyan, who was against existing hierarchies in the practice of Art and worked to bridge the art and craft divide, Jyotsna Bhatt and her fine sensibilities as a ceramic artist and PR Daroz's catalytic abilities that energized a new vision in Rahul. He was awarded a Fulbright Scholarship to the United States that allowed Rahul to complete his Master's Degree in Ceramics, and the experience triggered in him the need to think of pottery as form beyond function. The exposure to Peter Voukos's abstract expressionist approach made him think a lot more about the dichotomy that a single little pot could address in terms of being both 'a pot' and 'non-pot'.

In modern times, the ancient medium's elasticity and use became radical in Himmat Shah's iconic totemic-forms and his hand-held junk object casts. Rummana Hussain's conceptual use of the common place pot and its debris to speak about violence and divisive politics evoked a metaphor for trauma and pain. These were perhaps exemplars that helped Rahul to think through the medium and its resilient elasticity.

I recall his solo exhibition in 2013, where Rahul divested his palm-held tiny pots of their functionality, attempting to extend their being into realms of subjectivity and imagination. In quite a subtle way, he was unsettling our readymade observations to seek meanings embodied within the form. The tiniest pot he made could perhaps hold only the sound of a whisper in it. I had essayed then a text on Rahul's practice, emphasizing his fidelity to the medium and his ambitious explorations of its expressive and communicative possibilities.

The soul of the potter does surface in him and he keeps meandering between heaps and mounds of clay, wanting to knead, shape, fire and glaze. There was a phase (until 2015) when he was completely immersed in the colour and sheen of the ceramic glazes. His constellation (*circle uncircled*) of small and large ceramic discs with glossy surface saturated with deep and intense tones of blues, yellows and greens was quite an ambitious project. With few exceptions, these discs, retained eccentricities of the human hand that nudged their perfect symmetry and contours, bearing the imprint of organic terrains and the continuously changing natural world.

Was this a representation of an ever-expanding fecund landscape or a galaxy of stars in the sky?

Rahul could keep adding on more components to this endeavour. He expressed to me, "I like to balance the sculptural quality between wheel throwing and slab construction; wheel thrown pots representing symmetry, rigidity and hand-built components showing the organic, fluid nature of clay." 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.

But, the recent corpus of works, made through the pandemic years and subsequent lockdowns are visually and conceptually nowhere close to his previous projects. Having relinquished for the time, both colour and gloss, and the aesthetics of the seductive surface, one is moved, rather hit hard by the

peculiar and enigmatic quality of Rahul's objects. They mark a radical shift from 'digging the earth' to the 'digging of the mind' with his medium now behaving as a tool to excavate the deeper, sometimes dark corners of one's inner being, dormant with memories and secrets, hiding as if, the 'untold' that resides somewhere in it. The beauty of the work is in its imperfections, its tattered and torn shards exuding a rugged tactility. Perhaps this is a moment of true liberation for Rahul as he has broken the bound of the pot and its flesh to traverse the terrain of the non-objective, where matter is made to speak through its affect bearings and often without the compulsions of remaining contained within a recognizable form.

The container still exists in some works, sometimes separately made multiple small pots squished by hand when still moist and fresh (titled *Matrix*), making an introverted turning within. Out of shape, they present an unfamiliar story. Subsequently, the container appears in the form of an appropriated corrugated cardboard box or as an intimate treasure box held close to the chest, with some torn letters bursting out while most remain sunken within. They speak of time, they mark the bygones as buried, eaten away by insects or partially destroyed. They reveal moods of anger, some hurt, some indifference, but nevertheless, they still speak of something. They hold some suspense for us, the viewer, as they induce us to conjecture and address the conundrum. Rahul plays out new configurations of space and form, taking our focus in and out of stacks, piles and grids, and to heaps of letters un-read, partially burnt or shredded, closed and concealed. Clay here is treated like a piece of paper, with edges often left unfinished; sometimes pierced or wounded. One may recall the large monochromatic installation with 220 discs of variable size, heights, and angles referencing the urban surroundings and loss of heritage, overlaid with an abstract impression of a city grid. The scale now is psychic and intimate, resonating with an evocation of ruins, of loss, of something left unresolved that still haunts these innerescapes.

There is a mess, an entanglement; there is the dichotomy of preserving while discarding. The human need to anchor emotions in a bookmark of a dried flat flower, a torn letter, unshared poem, not willing to let go, or bring closure to. How does this become a subject to express in clay?

For Rahul, it is important that form and space play out new configurations, with the object often receding in size but not in presence, as it brings a charge to the space it occupies. Tapping into the inner reserves of clay, the biggest challenge he now faces is of how to make his medium of clay speak, express, and communicate a personal emotional state? Was it a big ask from the medium?

This can be contextualized as a need amplified by his dual career in the Arts and in Journalism as a writer and editor, where the practical and rational straightforwardness of the written word must be consumed by the readers with ease. It was in the realm of art and creativity that Rahul wanted to drop his guard and express beyond the prescribed function. In 'Boxed Emotions' and 'Pages from my diary' we see gold foil along the contrasting presence of precise geometry and random squiggles. His use of gibberish texts or the melting and dispersing letters/alphabets are a deliberate attempt on trespassing the function of legibility and arriving at an unspeakable script. There is for the artist, a felt exigency to enter realms of the 'unspeakable'.

At this point of time in his artistic practice, one finds Rahul embracing the vulnerability that risk-taking brings with it, but also the exhilaration that one is breathing and alive, and (fired) toughened to face the uncertainties that life brings to our doorstep, each day.

While pursuing his hobby of playing the piano, he indulges the notes of the music he loves and the rhythms that resonate. In his journalistic writings, he tunes himself to varied artistic practices that allude to social, political, and ecological catastrophes but in his art, he turns to solitude, and to the silence and the noise within.

Art, for Rahul, is a mysterious power, perhaps some kind of a magic emollient, that pieces together our broken selves in a disintegrating world.

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March 2023