

ART, CRAFT AND ... KALA

SCENE 1: BOMBAY 2006.

Reliance Industry's Harmony show in Bombay is curated by the vibrant Ms Tina Anil Ambani. This 'all-India art' show has become an event that brings out some of the best Indian art every year and places it in front of the common (and not so common) man. This show in 2006 coincided with all the hoopla in the press about prices of Indian art going through the roof internationally ...and the new trend in urban India's page 3 circles of investing in art instead of playing the stock market or the cricket bookies!



Leaf platter 2

On the last day of the show, I was sitting with a few co-exhibitors over cups of coffee. Sitting alongside was journalist, Gopal Mirchandani, who was penning some of my thoughts down for the Bombay Times.

Along comes a flirty socialite who had been hovering around my "Leaf Platter" for the past two days. She started with, "You know Adil, I *love* your leaf platters; I may have bought one for myself too, but the are sooo overpriced, *thousands of rupees each?!!!* " I politely pointed out to where my work was displayed, and mentioned how my collection of work was one of the more reasonably priced on show, in a room full of paintings, almost all of which were priced over 5 lakhs of rupees each, almost all of which were red-tagged on opening night. And to top that, many of these artists were not even "known". To which the lady quipped "but darling, those are *paintings*... not pottery items...*aapki plate toh sirf mitti hai...*"

I was quite stumped by that and decided to observe a moment of equanimity before I put my foot into my mouth (as I usually do.. and maybe am doing so right now too ;-)). As if on cue, a painter friend of Gopal's, quipped in, "this is where you potters lose out, 'art' is paintings, and what you do is 'craft'. People are not happy paying money for crafts ..." To this, Gopal came up with something I never really knew. He said that in Hindi, our national language, there is no distinction between 'art' and 'craft'it is all clubbed under the word, '*kala*' ...which if you literally translate, means 'art' anyways. This was news to me and I will never ever forget this.



Leaf platter 3

Looking back at it all, I realize this art-craft thing, is a legacy of the British schooling system, where for eleven years in Bombay's Don Bosco High School, we had an art class once a week, and a craft class every other week. Art was where we *painted*; craft was where we *made* something. Nice paintings were pinned up on classroom boards; nice paper-boats didn't stand a chance.

[SCENE 2: AUSTRALIA 2007.](#)

In 1995, Australian potter Paul Davis was awarded the prestigious Japan Foundation Scholarship, which enabled him to live and study in Japan for five years where he achieved the honor of being adopted into the 12th generation of the 500-year-old hereditary Hagi-yaki pottery studio in Hagi. Paul is driving me over to Sturt Contemporary Craft Center at Mittagong, an hour's drive south of Sydney. The word

"craft" in the Center's name makes me relate the episode of the Harmony show to him.



[Paul Davis](#)

Paul explains the Japanese angle to art and craft. He says that in Japanese culture too, there is no difference between what is "art" and what is not. Centuries of ceramic awareness in the Orient have kept the "craft" of the potter on par with any other medium in the art world. There is no differentiation at the school level too...."which is where the problem starts", he says. "In the Great Britain of yore, museums like the Victoria and Albert were designed to cater to the elitist section of society. Patronage was directed towards art-forms like painting, sculpture & print-making, and this mentality quickly seeped into the education system of the British Raj.... permeating into the commonwealths of India and Australia."

Looking back at all this, in front of my laptop in Sydney, I realize that in a way, I too am guilty of passing this on to another generation. For two years at Transition School in Auroville, I played 'art teacher', while another friend played 'craft teacher'. This probably still goes on in most schools all over the country today. A simple, innocent subdivision

of curriculum is glueing itself to the memory of our genes and perpetuating a fallacy.... making a two-dimensional panel superior to something in 3D, initiating a dialogue.

I ask myself if I have a solution. I don't. Though i hope this initiates a dialogue. Maybe teachers need to reappraise the charmingly folded paper-boats in "craft" classes.

I should also mention that the leaf platter I did not part with at a discount, looks lovely in my Dadar bedroom. Happy and contemplative. Whether one calls it arty, or crafty, doesn't matter. It's all *kala*, one way or another, isn't it?

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