

Continental Drift

Anagama in South India

It is said that Bodhidharma, a Buddhist monk from Tamil Nadu in South India, arrived in China in the 6th century CE and founded the Ch'an sect of Buddhism. By the 12th century, Daruma's legacy had reached Japan as Zen, permeating art and culture over the next several centuries. Enter the highly stylized tea ceremony. Impermanence, asymmetry and asperity, the foundations of the wabi-sabi aesthetic fundamental to Tea, neatly intersected with potters in Bizen, Shigaraki, Tamba and Iga, where pots were wood-fired in an open atmosphere inviting the fortuitous: the cracks, the subtle and the not-so-subtle crusty accumulation of unmelted wood ash and the free-run of melted ash glaze. Daruma is generally depicted as scruffy, ill-tempered, heavily bearded and bug-eyed, shunning the conventional.

A small group of Indian ceramic artists from the south have embraced this (for India) highly unlikely aesthetic. An Indian temple façade is anything but spare. Gods, demons and humans cavort in a bewildering display as complex as life itself. Gold, silver, saturated color. More is more. Indian art and culture can be highly refined, but rarely minimal.

Deborah Smith apprenticed for a year in Bizen in 1968. Nevertheless, in 1971, when we founded the Golden Bridge Pottery in Pondicherry, we began a line of glazed, functional stoneware. This was already a stretch for the Indian market—Daruma, a bull in the china shop. Stainless steel and bone china were preferred for the table. Our first kiln was a 30 cft catenary cross-draft. We chose kerosene as fuel. Oil/water drip. Wood seemed a luxury when an old goatherd in our compound was scavenging every burnable twig to heat her cooking pot. In 1979 we built a 3-chamber climbing kiln, fired with kerosene and wood (by then we had discovered casuarina, grown locally as a fuel crop).

Traveling through rural Massachusetts in 1984, we came across the Joyous Spring Pottery and Michael Marcus surrounded by a sea of Bizenware. Jeff Shapiro was on a scaffold building the chimney to a new Bizen-style kiln. Marcus and Shapiro had both apprenticed in Bizen. The 'woodfire aesthetic' in the USA? In India? Returning to Pondicherry, we did build a 70 cft wood-fired car kiln. Still glazing nearly all of the production,

Deborah found that wood ash added richness—a warmth and depth—that other fuels could not approach.

Fast-forward to 2006. The Verge Conference in Brisbane. I was struck by Australia's proximity to India on the Indian Ocean "rim," evidently once contiguous plates of the Pangaeian supercontinent. Plate tectonics aside, Indian students/artists generally look to the UK, USA and more recently Japan for broadening their ceramic experience. At Verge, Deborah and I met Peter Thompson, potter from Kuranda in North Queensland. Peter, a self-proclaimed "toothless rustic" and a wicked iconoclast, had studied in China. We liked his pots, fired in an anagama, and his sprawling home and studio built from recycled anything. Peter came to Pondicherry for a 3-month residency. We tore down our old 3-chamber kiln and with the same brick built a rather unconventional anagama on the old foundation. Much of the work in this show is not anagama-fired. All is wood-fired. The addition of the anagama is very recent; we have had only four firings, yet the direction is clear. Indian potters, though generally unaware of Daruma and his Indian roots, are ripe for the return of the bug-eyed monk. At the china shop, this remains to be seen.

Inspired by Sengai's famous Zen painting of the circle, square and triangle, Antra Sinha seeks "simplicity, surety and stability" in "root forms." The Tetrarc, now her signature piece, resulted from pinching a small ball of clay between the thumbs and forefingers of her opposing hands. Antra scaled up the tetrarc to 18 inches and is now bravely attempting a five-foot version for the new Hyatt Hotel in Chennai.

Antra welcomes letting go of control, collaborating with the fire, which she sees as enlarging her as a maker. There is certainly great skill in setting and firing an anagama for optimum results. But there is simply no way to accurately predict the outcome. This is a partnership with nature at a primal level, and I think a shared value with many woodfirers.

With a sure sense of form and a background as a painter, Aarti Vir exploits clay's potential to combine two and three dimensions. Her work reflects her life. Inspiration comes from surrounding circumstance: learning, pausing, making, firing, traveling, seeing, connecting. The dots are inspired by the Aboriginal art she saw in 2008. "They move, first one way, then another, dancing along, forwards or looping back, rarely in a linear march ahead, but

always in motion." Aarti Vir now fires in a 20 cft kiln to 1300 C with wood, then salts.

Secure-Insecure and Walls Fall are part of a series exploring "the irony of human life; of trying to make it physically secure—of 'securing' an ephemeral life; of the strangeness and futility of borders and fences, trying to contain the irrepressible."

Rakhee Kane's work for this show is born from her travels in rural Rajasthan and Gujarat. On her re-contextualized traditional forms, the layered and varied texture of crusted, melted and ashy surfaces achieved in the anagama depicts her strong emotional experience of the village, bridging the traditional and the contemporary. Rakhee's sense of humor and her great singing voice keep the spirit up during long firings.

"Less is a bore"(1) for potter/architect Adil Writer, born and raised in the Mumbai cacophony—teeming life set against the swelter of several thousand years of history. His Treasure Boxes exhibit more than a hint of Bollywood exuberance in the multi-layered treatment of both form and surface. He is not inspired by his milieu; he embodies it. Adil Writer is too busy making to reflect/rationalize. He loves what fire and ash can do to a piece, but he will not sacrifice an enticing splash of Cerdec red on the altar of minimalism or purity of process.

"Ashwini Bhat's enormous (1.4m h) ceramic piece called Queen, on view at this year's Indian Art Summit, exhibits tremendous presence and power."(2) Here, untitled, is a maquette for the much larger Queen which is now installed in the sculpture garden of the new Hyatt Hotel in Chennai. The bell-shaped base grounds the form and balances the crescent above, inspired by the Harappan headdress for women. Cat's Cradle, named after the string game, is play—"forming a block of solid clay without too many moves or too many tools and without precautions."

Veena Chandran's large untitled jar is a balance between her training as a ceramic artist and her work as an architect. The scale and form suggest her architectural background, but the plasticity of clay has tempered the rigidity of her thought process. Slabs of heavily grogged clay were stretched and pressed into a plaster mold of a large thrown form, then partially covered with a shino glaze and wood-fired. Opening the kiln, seeing the result, "I felt

a new-found freedom. I felt a long-dormant volcano had exploded within me."

Deborah Smith is a devoted functional potter. Three flared vases. Two are layered with wax, slip and glaze over a stoneware body and fired in a 70 cft wood-fired car kiln. The third is anagama-fired. At a recent lecture on contemporary art in India, Deborah had the temerity to ask, "Is there a place for beauty in contemporary art?" The answer, essentially: there is no room for intellectual discourse on beauty because 'beauty is in the eye of the beholder.' In a pithy whispered aside, I heard, "until there is no beauty left."

I have worked off-and-on with environmental themes since the 1960's. The two pieces for this show, All the King's Horses... and Rio are part of a group of American icons made in 2010. In 1991, at the Rio conference on global warming, George H.W. Bush famously pronounced that "the American lifestyle is not up for negotiation." Ironic, now that India and China are rapidly developing American consumption patterns and the 'adversary' is our own planet. Bush's words, translated into Hindi and Chinese, are stamped along with the English original into the pieces of this series.

Deborah and I left the USA for India in 1970. Our own dotted journey brings us again to Australia, this time with six Indian artists and Daruma.

One legend has it that Bodhidharma inspired a tea movement that gave rise to the astringent green froth called matcha in Japan. The British commercialized tea in India and created the popular Earl Grey. Tea has been used in India since Vedic times, when it was known for its medicinal properties. Today in India, chai is a cloying brew of steeped black leaf, sugar and a lot of milk and, depending on place, a variety of spices—cinnamon, clove, cardamom, ginger.

What will India add to the anagama palette?

Ray Meeker

Pondicherry

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(1) Robert Venturi

(2) Aditya Dev Sood, The Sunday Guardian, Jan 30, 2011

