

the red dot

adil writer's journey with an icon



The red marking on Adil Writer's recent works can hardly be called a "dot." First appearing on his "pillar rocks" and other votive forms shown at his first solo show in Bangalore in 2005, refractory red daubs have become a signature of sorts for this Indian ceramic artist.

This is not the carefully placed red spot that decorates the proud forehead of an Indian woman. Writer's red dots originate in his Parsi childhood in Bombay. "Ever since I can remember, the tika has been part of the celebration made in my house, showing up at every happy occasion. I remember growing up liking a big red tika on my head - we call it a tilo in our Parsi - Gujarati - and Mom telling me to stay still so she could smear it well onto my forehead. Then she'd take a fistful of raw rice and dab it, in one go, on top of the fresh red paste. The more the rice that stuck to my forehead, the richer would I become. So you can imagine moms - Parsi moms - going at it on their kiddies' faces!"

Writer grew up to earn a master's degree in architecture from the University of Houston in the USA and worked for ten years as architect and interior designer for a high-profile Bombay firm. Then one day a close friend and co-worker showed him an application for a course in pottery in Pondicherry on India's southeast coast. Writer filled out the form. After two years of training with Ray Meeker at The Golden Bridge Pottery, Writer moved from Pondicherry to the nearby international community of Auroville, where for six years now he has been working at his new calling. Writer says, "I became a potter but one never stops being an architect, no?"

"If one takes off the scale factor, what do we have left," poses Writer, "a big pot or a small building?" He immediately connected to Meeker's fired houses. And, Writer was "blown away" by Antonio Gaudi's integration of ceramics and architecture in Barcelona.



FOUR MONOLITHS, STONEWARE, 11" HT.



ANAGAMA PILLAR VASE, STONEWARE, 24" HT.

For two years, every day, on the one-lane road that leads to Golden Bridge, Writer passed by a little forest shrine that hosts a number of rustic outdoor tableaux: Shiva's trident standing alone; building bricks at the base of a tree, smeared with yellow turmeric paste and dotted with red kumkum; fabric-wrapped idols with freshly placed offerings; oil-soaked stone images; little terracotta horses colorfully painted. With his urban eyes opened to these striking visuals, so frequent in the rural South, Writer photographed everywhere he went.

While he was still a student, a "ritualistic agenda" began to appear in Writer's claywork. Beginning with the simple flower vase and certain Zoroastrian symbols glazed in celadons, before long Writer was working on his own interpretation of the bowl used by Aztec priests to hold the hearts of sacrificial victims. To the essential form of a shallow bowl, about 8" in diameter, intended by Writer for water and flowers, he added a surrounding channel with little spouts to hold the wicks for an oil lamp. Writer called these "element bowls," delighting in the "piety of combining water, clay, fire, oil."

Now in his own studio, he picked up a piece of granite fencepost lying around in the bushes nearby and made a mold of it in order to achieve in his claywork the chiseled texture of the hand-cut stone. The resulting slip-cast forms were a series of narrow, upright clay pillars, about 24" tall and somewhat wonky, which offered inviting blanks for embellishment. Writer decorated the pillars with symbols from the vernacular shrines: the three-pronged trident of the god Shiva, a combination of chillies and lime for warding off demons, handwritten inscriptions from auspicious texts, and bold smears of dry red stain. One pillar even had a computer mouse climbing up it - playful symbol of contemporary values. The pillars were fired to cone ten in reduction, glazed variously in matts and glosses in everything from black to pale blue celadon.

Created as works of art about worship, the "pillar rocks" were not intended to be objects of worship in themselves. Yet they achieve a mysterious aura, which has inspired at least one person to start placing



FAROHAR IMPRESSION-1, STONEWARE, 8" HT.

FAROHAR TREASURE BOX. STONEWARE, 4" HT.



incense and little floral offerings at a pillar's base. The rough red daubs and streaks and smudges on these works mimic the red dots of kumkum that all over India acknowledge the presence of the divine in the anointed object. As punctuation marks in a sacred paraphrase, they clarify the artist's intention to express a feeling that is wholly positive.

In the airy heights of his upstairs studio, surrounded by trees, Writer says, "Somewhere in my subconscious, I connect the aesthetic of the red tilo with happy times. I get a lift when I smear it on pre-firing and a high when it shows up post-firing." Since the pillar rock series, Writer's tilo has shown up on large platters, on tea bowls, on "gypsy bowls" inscribed all the way around with psychedelic or sublime quotations, on wall plaques and even on his pottery's bread-and-butter production wares. Reactions from colleagues and others have not always been positive. One ardent admirer of Writer's work called the thick red tikas "horrendous," reminding her of her days in Bombay, where, in many neighborhoods, every wall would be covered with the marks of red paan spittle. A group of foreign potters who saw images of Writer's work earlier this year in New Delhi asked him why he had "this gun-shot-wound" image on his works.

Most recently the "element bowl" has been revived, now with a lid, in response to an



invitation to submit an urn for a funerary show. There is an effort to make them “more sleek and less voodoo” than their progenitors. The outer channel, that earlier functioned as an oil lamp, has been closed over into a donut surrounding the central jar. Texture is achieved on the outer form by chattering the short white clay or by impressing designs with metal stamps which are themselves ritual objects, used by Vaishnavite devotees in south India for marking their bodies with sandalwood paste or even sometimes for branding. Rubbed oxides define the different areas of the dry surface contour. Writer’s red dot is now found inside the form, an element of surprise upon opening the lid. An untidy vermilion mound in the lid’s glossy concavity is a “focal point,” says Writer, “which one stumbles on unexpectedly”-a focal point linking the physical and spiritual worlds, in its very messiness full of energy, vibrancy, presence.

The Parsi tilo was traditionally made, not of vermilion, but of ash, from the fire temple or from the hearth. Writer’s red dot, thus, traditionally born of fire, can be seen in the urn series to symbolize a “fire within”-a fiery presence in the man himself. Writer is a man of energy and vibrancy, who ignites his surroundings with his own exuberance. Six years ago, when he joined Chinmayi, Anamika and Krishnamoorthy at Mandala Pottery in Auroville’s community of Dana, he fired up the production, introducing innovative and lucrative products such as wall plaques and murals and mirror surrounds. And he sought ways to increase the subcontracting of bisque of simpler items to village entrepreneurs, thereby creating time for all four potters to pursue their own individual artwork alongside the shared running of the pottery.

Now, as his next work, Writer envisages a 22” diameter trio of concentric rings glazed celadon, marked with a Zoroastrian tilo, drawing the viewer into a center where all things are purified in the presence of prayer and fire.

Deborah Smith

Deborah Smith, in 1971, co-founded with Ray Meeker the Golden Bridge Pottery in Pondicherry, South India. Today she runs the production side of the pottery’s activities, producing a varied line of functional stoneware with fifteen employees.

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