

MATERIAL GIRLS

ART

The artists to invest in now have one thing in common: A love for clay
By Rahul Kumar

Ceramics has been at the centre stage of a tug of war between art and craft for decades. It's a tough, unforgiving medium, requiring tedious work and extensive infrastructure. But it continues to infatuate ceramists worldwide, who feel empowered by its malleability. As a practitioner myself, I know how the surface of my piece picks up every touch and push. A work of clay recites the story of its birth like no other. A lot has changed for ceramics, particularly in India: Several commercial galleries regularly show ceramic art, and clay works have been included in significant platforms,

like art fairs. As I prepare to complete my own project for the first Indian Ceramic Triennale, aptly titled *Breaking Ground*, scheduled from August 31 to November 18 at the Jawahar Kala Kendra in Jaipur, I talk to seven women ceramists. While some of them use clay to create works of art, others make functional objects. Art, design, or craft, each has a unique practice and a distinct approach with the medium that, at one level is the record keeper of archaeology and history of human civilisation and at the other, sits comfortably on a pedestal.



(From left) Lubna Chowdhary; *Tableaux 1*; *Blueprint* (detail).



manual processes while incorporating industrial and technological interventions. This allows for a fresh perspective and improvisation to change results of the 'handmade'. "My sculptural work is produced by hand but also utilises a vocabulary of forms and textures, moulded from industrially-produced everyday and found objects. If I use industrial tile modules in a project, these are adapted by hand-glazing or water-jet cutting," explains Chowdhary.

LUBNA CHOWDHARY

"My work is characterised by the use of abstract geometric forms and intense glaze colour."

Lubna Chowdhury, born in Tanzania to Pakistani parents, came to England in 1970. She works primarily with ceramics to create sculptural objects and site-specific installations. Her work assimilates ideas from Eastern and Western worlds, forging relationships between disparate entities, patterns, and visual references while examining the relationships and dependencies between them. She completed her masters in ceramics from the Royal College of Art, London; received the Paolozzi Travel Award to travel to India in 1990; and was shortlisted for the Jerwood Applied Arts Prize in Ceramics in 2001. She has completed artist residencies at Camden Arts Centre London and more recently at the Victoria and Albert Museum in 2017.

"As a British-Asian, I have spent my life negotiating the elements of my hybrid cultural identity and my work has always sought to create a new language, defying categorisations, often juxtaposing the familiar and the unrecognisable," she says.

For her, the production of the work is embedded in her hands, head, and eye, as much as in her heart. She employs

Her work always references and engages with a complex juxtaposition of cultures, resulting in hybrid vocabularies. Her current work, in the realm of architectural ceramics, gives her an opportunity to work outside the confines of the gallery and create accessible public art work, integrated into the built environment. Large-scale commissions include the six-mts frieze for Terence Conran's Alcazar restaurant in Paris and at various locations within the city of London. (She is currently working on three public commissions in London.) Her pieces are also part of significant collections including Leicester City Museum, Nottingham Castle Museum, and Abingdon Museum, Oxfordshire.

The contextual research, the aesthetic and practical requirements of each installation project provide a continuing source of stimulation and have allowed her to respond to real factors and histories of the place. The work finds its place in the street, the home, or public and commercial spaces, thus becoming accessible to diverse audiences and eventually becoming part of an incidental everyday experience. There is an active interplay within the iconography of the elements. These are sometimes metaphorical and sometimes make reference to real objects, and they serve to communicate a more personal narrative in the work. ►



SHIRLEY BHATNAGAR

"I never left my childhood behind, just toys have been replaced with clay."



(From left) Shirley Bhatnagar; *Lady in White*; *Laaton ka Bhoot*; *Tenmoku Swirl*.

Shirley Bhatnagar studied design at the National Institute of Design, Ahmedabad, graduating in 1999. Now a studio artist, she also teaches as a visiting faculty member in design schools, including the Indian Institute of Crafts and Design, Jaipur and National Institute of Design, Ahmedabad. Her works are best described as objects at the intersection of craft and art, primarily inspired by humour, cinema, and popular culture. "I enjoy the collective, imaginative, and the protected space created through my work, and also the entertainment

I derive from ceramic sculpture and the stories that I weave around them," says Bhatnagar. The sense of play entwined with illustrations forms the backbone of her practice. While the works are simple, almost childlike, the process to create and distil it from a complex idea is challenging. Bhatnagar has exhibited through solo shows at venues like Alliance Française in New Delhi, and has also done various private commissions. She is part of the upcoming Indian Ceramic Triennale scheduled in Jaipur.

ISHANI KHOSLA PHOTOGRAPHY

Bazaar HOT LIST

(From left)
Glazed
stoneware
pot and cube;
Sushma Anand.



SUSHMA ANAND

"Print-making became my first love, only to be pushed to the second place once I found clay!"

SUSHMA ANAND STUDIED ART IN CHENNAI, but continued to take classes to expose herself to other media and disciplines within the visual arts. One such workshop led her to learn ceramics at Golden Bridge Pottery, Puducherry. "I have always been fascinated with clay. I am told I used to eat mud as a child and make statues with wet mud in the backyard. For me, the three-dimensional is more engaging than two-dimensional expressions," says Anand.

She had been introduced to print-making during her bachelor's programme at Stella Maris College, and decided to combine the two forms—no one else in India seemed to focus on 'printing on clay'. And blending the two allowed for endless possibilities. Anand, who has shown at group shows across India, uses text, maps, and vintage photographs, sometimes of her own family members, in her works. She also makes her own ink with ceramic pigments and uses techniques like screen-printing and photolithography to transfer images on wet clay, which is then fired and glazed.

BHAIRAVI NAIK

"An MBA with a flourishing corporate job, I decided to step aside after a 17-year stint to be a potter."

(From left) Pottery in production; finished pieces.



As a child, Rachna Parasher bought handmade pottery using all her pocket money. She went on to learn the technique and developed her skill as a potter. In the 35 years that she's been practicing pottery, she has developed a signature style to glaze her works.

"Partially-glazed pots became my style, but it was an involuntary direction. I developed a skin problem on my hands. As a result, my dermatologist told me to minimise direct contact with glaze material. Instead of dipping the ware into glaze, I started pouring my glazes on parts of the pot so that it did not touch my hands," says Parasher, a five-time winner of the All India Fine Arts and Crafts Society's national award and recipient of the Senior Research Fellowship from the Government of India. She also teaches, as a way to remain connected to her studio, since she needs to abstain from clay in certain months for health reasons.

Her works have few embellishments to it. The simple forms are juxtaposed with strong strokes of glaze, sometimes with planned accidents. Her philosophy, which she credits to a Dutch potter whom she met in Delhi in her early days as a ceramist, is that the clay pot will outlive our lives by many years. So fire only the work you are proud of.

RACHNA PARASHER

"I make functional pots and my practice is one of reverence and simplicity—that reflects in my work."



(From top) Rachna Parasher; a platter featuring a landscape of glaze; a pot with bamboo handles.

BHAIRAVI NAIK MET Rohit Kulkarni, her business partner, in a studio in Mumbai, where she used to practice. They realised they both wanted to make exquisite handmade ceramics a part of everyday life. They quit full-time jobs, Naik then a senior executive with an advertisement agency and Kulkarni a leading marketer, started Curators of Clay in 2014, and moved to a village on the outskirts of Pune.

They design and produce 'art for everyday use'. They have customised tableware and serviceware for Kala Ghoda Café and Masque in Mumbai, Café 108 in Pune, and for the *MasterChef India* series. "I am intrigued and inspired by the relationship people form with an extremely tactile medium like clay," says Naik.



(From top) Dipalee Daroz; Perception 7 stoneware; Perception 2.

DIPALEE DAROZ

"My forms are born out of formlessness; in essence, they can be termed the distilled reality of my experiences."

DIPALEE DAROZ COMPLETED HER MASTERS IN PAINTING but pursued ceramics as her medium of expression. She is the recipient of the National Scholarship for Ceramics, and a Crafts Museum grant to document traditional black pottery of Azamgarh, Uttar Pradesh, and is a Charles Wallace fellow.

As the creator, as well as the viewer, she seeks to approach the form in a way that lends itself to imagination and ambiguity. Daroz's process of creating is intuitive. She begins her sculptures on an empty space, without pre-conceived thoughts of method or treatment. From this 'ground-zero', she adds elements and layers, creating dynamic dimensions, literally playing with the negative and positive spaces that are created.

"I do not hesitate to draw inspiration from my past works. They become a catalyst to create new works," says Daroz, who will participate in the Indian Ceramic Triennale in Jaipur. She relies on instinct rather than external, existing visual elements, although there are occasional references to man-made objects. At the core of her practice, it is the form that plays the most important part. She is particularly fascinated by the alchemic processes of nature. The objects she creates, therefore, operate in the interplay of a paradox, that of abstraction and natural.



(From left) Jyotsna Bhatt; reduction fired stoneware; gas fired stoneware; wood fired stoneware.

JYOTSNA BHATT, A TRAINED SCULPTOR, treats her pottery as sculptures, but with the flexibility and plasticity that clay offers. After making simple and often geometric forms like spheres and cylinders that are usually thrown on the wheel, she cuts and joins, twists and tilts, stretches and pushes them until the final form is visually and aesthetically satisfying.

Her most coveted works is a series of animal forms. The cats, birds, squirrels, and frogs that she creates have a unique charm and character. The lively and comic renditions have a lasting appeal, and they invite the viewers into the curious world of these creatures. Bhatt has shown in group shows in India and abroad and has held 11 solo exhibitions

JYOTSNA BHATT

"I sculpt my pots and exploit to the fullest what the medium of clay offers."

across India in the past five decades. Over the years, she has also contributed to the education of ceramic arts through teaching assignments at the Faculty of Fine Arts at the MS University in Baroda and as part of the examination jury at the National Institute of Design, Ahmedabad.

"The functionality of my work is not really essential to me. But, when it does not perturb the intended formal quality, I associate functionality also," she says. This intent is at the core for Bhatt, even for the final glazing and firing process. "The glazes chosen are such that they enhance the forms. But at times I leave my works unglazed so the wood fired 'open clay body' can add to the character of the work." ■