



# ARTS ILLUSTRATED

*Natal*

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### *Editor's note*

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It was a rainy Sunday afternoon, a rarity in water-starved Madras. The room, a small one with divans in the corner, recliners at the back, bean bags, cane and wooden square stools strewn around, was full. It was a Pop Philosophy class – Episode 5 to give it the full Star Wars effect – by Warhorse, a group of young, dynamic change-makers trying to revitalise the space of education and learning. This particular episode of Pop Philosophy (the series was about finding connections between philosophy and pop culture) was whimsically titled 'Ai-Ai-O' – it was on artificial intelligence and the questions it raised about ethics, morality, and, well, humanity, while we are at it.

I was drawn into this world of science-fiction-meets-reality, of human-like robots and robot-like thoughts, of impossible ideas becoming possible futures, and of a time where everything can be simulated, even our senses.

It seemed like serendipity, that I was there in this man-made world (a whole new meaning to that phrase now) with this issue of Tactile Art fermenting in my head. Were we looking at this idea of 'sense perception' from a soon-to-be-obsolete platform or did it just up that urgency quotient on memories, ancient like the earth, that reside inside our skin, in our bones, in our blood? And more importantly, did it even belong to us?

We looked at this aspect of tactility, and therefore its manifestation in art, through myriad lenses – through nostalgia, movement, visual suggestions, through the politics of identity, the power of legacy, the promise of technology, and even the subtlety of music. And through words, of course. In each of our stories, the individual has collided with the collective in unpredictable ways, like asteroids briefly stepping out of their orbits, showing us unexpected beauty in the destruction of platitudes we often surround ourselves with, and a tenderness with which to arm ourselves for the future we are heading towards.

This issue of AI (the irony does not escape me) is like that assiduous earthworm going in and out, in and out, the entire physicality of its being making the soil soft and moist, so ideas can be planted better.



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### *Cover Artist*

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When I started my journey with clay, I found it rewarding to make pots people could use. The anatomy of a bowl, its size, proportions and points of transitions allowed for endless discovery of balance and rhythm. Gradually, as I focused more on the form and character of the pot, utility and function took a back seat. My work became more sculptural. I started to 'reinvent' things from nature with my own visual language. The works are often a delicate balance between wheel-thrown components and slab-constructed additives. Developing these two methods simultaneously allowed a fresh creative approach that promotes exhibiting the contrast of the medium – wheel-thrown representing symmetry and rigidity; and hand-built components showing the organic and fluid nature of the clay.

For the cover of this issue of Arts Illustrated, I have used the terracotta clay fired to 1020 degree centigrade. I have brushed stains and white clays, as well as used gold-leaf on the surface. My process of creation manifests a kind of behaviour that is a potent mix of the ritualistic, intuitive and spontaneous. It involves the unconventional use of ordinary objects and motifs. The process becomes evident in the art work itself. I have referenced familiar, yet mundane, domestic objects, which are repurposed in the overall rendition. The ultimate aim is the dematerialisation of the form... 'nirguna' or the attribute-less. The clay object has picked each dent and slap, creating undulations and cracks, creating an experience open to be interpreted. Is it a microscopic detail of something organic, or is it a spatial view of a landscape? Is it a sculpture, or is it a painting? It asks to be felt, giving a glimpse into how I created the piece, albeit a fraction of it.



*Rahul Kumar*



Jagannath Panda, *The Structure of Arid Terrain-2*, Acrylic, Fabric, Glue on Canvas, 114" x 78", 2017. Image Courtesy of Vadehra Art Gallery, New Delhi.



## Touch & Go

Several contemporary artists are redefining materiality in art by going beyond the form and structure to give us multisensory experiences that invite and involve as much as they create and recreate meanings that defy and narratives that linger

RAHUL KUMAR

Material is the handmaiden for any creator. Its sole purpose is to allow the physical manifestation of thoughts. Brick and mortar for an architect, wood and iron for a sculptor, and clay for a potter. In contemporary practices, artists have broken the barriers in the way they use material. Having seen prominent works on display at some of the recent art fairs and biennales, I realised that the 'concept' has taken a far greater priority over media and process. It seems as though material itself has a much-reduced entity of its own, and, therefore, often the inherent qualities of the media as well as the processes are lost, sometimes consciously.

A critical aspiration for practitioners who innovate with materials is an increased sense experience, one that goes beyond the traditional visual interaction.

This also allows for combining the perception and experience into one. A work of art may be interactive (allowing the viewer to deduce a variety of meanings from the same work) or participative (where the viewer completes the work). In either case, the audience has access to greater information.

As a ceramist, the primary material I work with is clay. I form clay with my own hands, rather than depending on moulds and tools. There is no escaping a complete and submerged involvement while I am in the studio. The process allows me to have a greater connect with my creation. The clay surface catches every single push and scratch, and, literally, even my finger prints. I personally believe that it is immensely enriching for my viewers to also have that

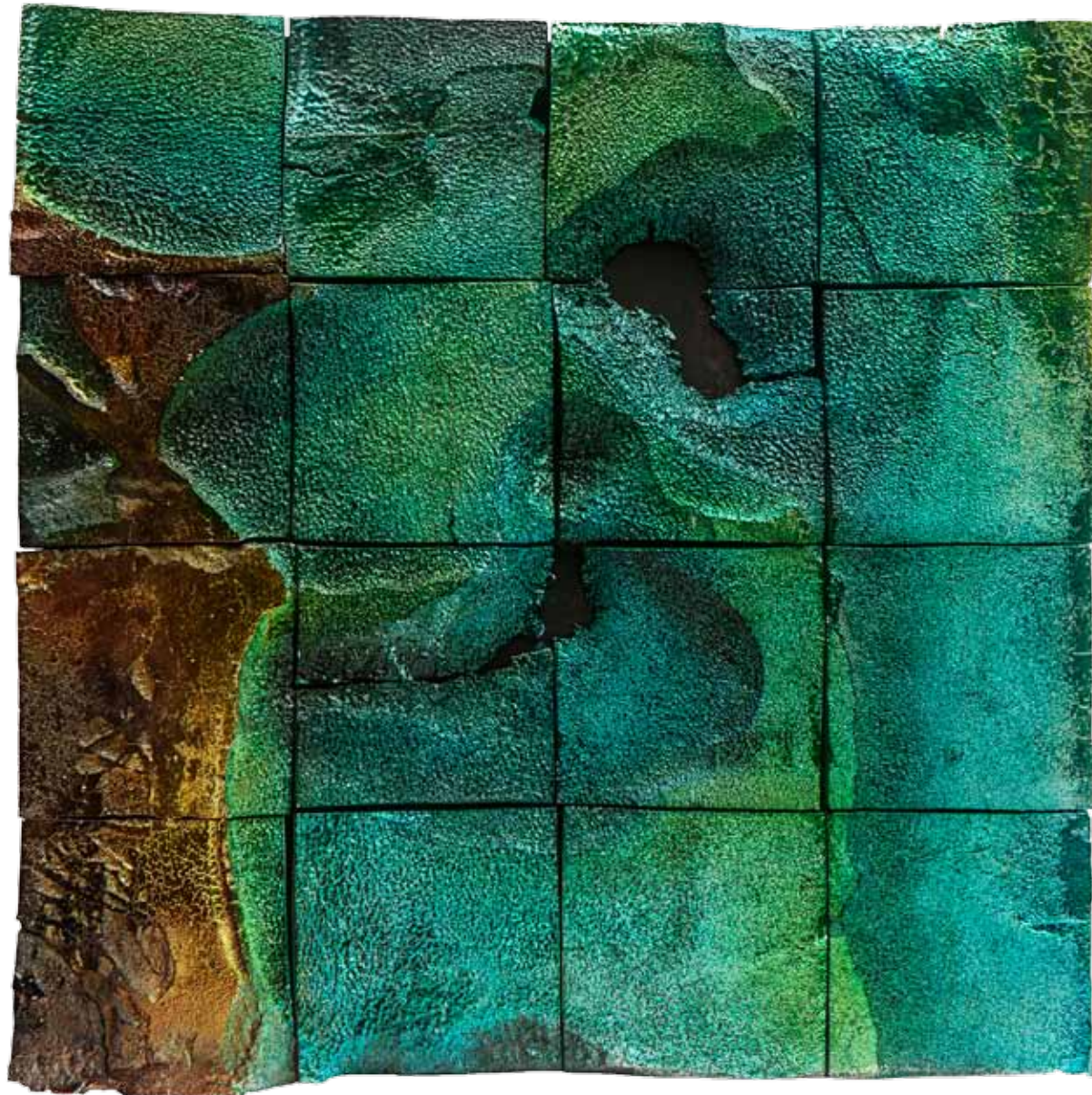
experience, rather than just 'seeing' and perceiving the idea. And, therefore, I encourage the audience to touch the work, feel the surface, its undulations and crevasses, textures and rhythm.

According to views emerging in neuroscience, the main function of 'consciousness' to exist is to combine all sensory inputs into a single reality for a better experience. Apparently, the brain keeps only a fragment of reality and it is almost always slightly out of sync. This is primarily because the sensory information arrives both at different times and at different areas of the brain. Therefore, allowing other senses to work in tandem adds as a complex yet critical support mechanism. Much of this cannot be defined precisely but it certainly forms a continuum, a journey.

### Clay is Where the Art Is

For PR Daroz, aesthetics defines his choice of material. While clay remains at the core, he adds organic and inorganic media to achieve the desired texture and form. 'In 2004, while driving past a sea-shore, I saw rocks that have weathered over the centuries. I was fascinated by the very character of these formations. But it took me ten years to develop this in my work,' he says. He cuts, burns and sculpts sponge

sheets before dipping them in liquid clay. Once fired, the sponge burns away and the clay remains. In yet another work, he has added thermocol balls to clay, giving an interesting dimension to the surface. According to Daroz, ceramic work brings the viewer closer. Other forms of art like paintings throw them away. Even the blind can enjoy clay. It is the hollowness that creates a desire to put oneself in the work.



PR Daroz, **Untitled**, Work in Progress. Image Courtesy of the artist.

PR Daroz, **Untitled**, Stoneware clay, 36" x 36", 2016. Image Courtesy of the artist.

### Fabric of Memories

Jagannath Panda uses textile on canvas, with the aim of creating curiosity to touch. He says, 'You wear textile and use it as furniture linen. The same material that you may know, have memories of, is suddenly presented in a completely different context.' It is exciting for him to have his audience being tempted to feel the pieces of cloth on his paintings. His wall sculptures, on the other hand, include found objects. 'There is a great sense to "manage" these sculptures. In the

future, I want to enable my audience with an interactive or even a performative piece, where in a restricted way they will be allowed to make amendments to the work,' he says.

### What an Idea, Sirji

Material may be incidental to some practices. Such artists have a wide palette and for them anything that works for an idea is what they employ. 'The idea is always my reason for the choice of material,' says Kumaresan Selvaraj. 'I have used iron to

depict the strength of human beings, which is inserted with thin discs of paper to denote the microcosm of thoughts.' Visually the multicoloured paper discs break the monotony of colour and texture. The work creates a sense of surprise and curiosity. Even in his sculptures with stacked paper the element of surprise is inevitable. 'I welcome my audience to touch my work. It conveys the aspect of layers and only substantiates the ideology,' he adds.



Kumaresan Selvaraj, **Number of layers on my surface**, Iron and Paper, 10" x 77" each, 2016. Image Courtesy of the artist and Exhibit 320, New Delhi.

## Breaking Barriers

GR Iranna has challenged himself with experiments in new media since his days at art school. 'When everyone around me used the conventional canvas, I used tarpaulin! It gave me the desired dimension and surface for my works,' he says. He has also used cement on paper and mixed earth with charcoal...broken all the rules. He believes that medium sometimes supports the idea and at other times it is at the core of the idea. His body of work made using ash has deep connections with the traditions and scriptures of the Vedas. *Vibhuti*, when put on the forehead every morning, has multiple connotations and is a constant reminder of impermanence and rebirth. Mix this with a sandalwood

formation burnt at the display and the entire room was filled with the smoke and smell of the incense. 'That smell has a spiritual memory. On the one hand, you are reading text from scriptures, which incidentally is slowly converting into ash, and on the other the smell mentally transports you to maybe a temple,' he claims. When Iranna placed an enormous egg in a small room, his objective was to create a womb. It created a sense of amazement, but was suffocating. Frustrating. Provoking. People could not even view the complete form at one go and the room was filled with the smell of ash. They were encouraged to touch the surface, which led to two things – their hands became white with ash and some of it fell to the

ground, creating a circle around the form, a sort of an aura. 'Multiple senses were activated in that space, and my idea was to provide a complete and harmonious experience of the very concept of rebirth,' he says.



GR Iranna, **Form and Formless**, Metal, Ash, 102" x 120", 2016. Images Courtesy of the artist and Gallery Espace, New Delhi.

GR Iranna, **Ether is all that is**, 30" x 96" x 12", Wood, Steel, Sandal Wood powder, and ash, 2016. Images Courtesy of the artist and Gallery Espace, New Delhi.

## Ace Venturer

Saba Hassan likes to call nature as her collaborator. For her relief works she adds sand and organic material to her paint. 'I once left a work to dry out in the open, but it rained at night. The canvas was completely soaked in water. I thought to myself that nature is giving me a hand, so why say no? And, sure enough, the canvas curled up like an old parchment looking like a beautiful lunar landscape,' she says. Her work with burning books is completely experiential. It goes beyond the visual. At a conceptual level, it questions the validity of text and social prejudices that are inherited. The visual of a book burning, the heat and crackling sound of the flames, the smell of smoke – all evoke a sense of silent violence.

## People Hearing without Listening

The way Nandita Kumar thinks and creates has emerged from her experiences of living across the world. 'I believe that the immediate experiences are rich with implicit meanings that guide conceptualisation, and that may not become explicit later,' she says. This has led her to explore the elemental processes through which we construct meaning from our experiences. Nandita often creates sensory narratives through the medium of sound, video and even performances. 'Through my installations and interactive sculptures which seamlessly integrate new media and materiality, I envision creating work that propels individuals towards progressive consciousness by connecting the

self, body, community and ecology. This is achieved through the process of immersive storytelling by using technology, sound and the conscious use of imagery. By creating these mind states, I strongly feel that a data overloaded generation can experience an ideal state where the viewer is open to perceiving the concept, data and narrative creatively. Simply stating, sound is a touch from a distance, which can subtly navigate itself through the body into the depth of your subconscious,' she explains.



Nandita Kumar, **eLEMent EARTH (lightsun-movement reactive sound installation)**, Glass bottle, Wood, Acrylic sheets, Wire, Solar cells, Battery, Sensors, Copper, PCB Comp, 40 cm x 60 cm (h), 2012. Image Courtesy of the artist.

Nandita Kumar, **pOLymORphic hUMansCApE (interactive video installation in a bottle)**, Copper, Acrylic, PCB components, Raspberry Pi, Sensor, LCD, 50cm diameter and height 60cm, 2013. Image Courtesy of the artist.

