



ARTS ILLUSTRATED

Natal

Editor's note

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



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



Potter Magic

How would one describe the sentiment of sipping coffee from a wheel-thrown goblet acquired 44 years ago? It is naturally beyond words for doctors Asha and Raj Kubba. She, a dermatopathologist, and her husband, a noted dermatologist, are avid collectors of ceramic art from India and abroad. Their collection, housed across three locations – their homes in India and the United Kingdom, and their clinic in South Delhi – boasts of one of the most well-represented practices of the art in the country. In fact, their residence in West Delhi looks more like a museum built to display ceramics, with the Kubbas only reclaiming and borrowing bits of it to live and work in!

RAHUL KUMAR

Photographs by Shantanu Prakash

Studio pottery was a means to enrich our daily lives and rituals

We were in the United Kingdom, at a local craft gallery, when we stumbled upon these four exquisite goblets by a European artist who later settled in Wales. We did not drink wine then, but thought coffee would taste just as well in them! We had this innate desire to improve common things and our daily lives with beauty; enrich rituals like cooking and having tea and coffee. English handmade pottery was very affordable then and it worked well for us since we had limited resources and were just setting up our home. Bone China or Melamine did not appeal to our palette. The weekly Cambridge Farmer's Market became our favourite source for the country-style cook pots.

We were intrigued by the complete lack of studio ceramic practices in India

Henry Rothschild was an influential art dealer in the United Kingdom. Sometime in the late 1970s, he started showing

crafts and ceramics. At one of his much-coveted annual shows at the Kettle's Yard Gallery at Cambridge University, we saw works of Lucie Rie and Hans Coper. It was he who fuelled the fire that was lit with the goblets. We read about clay practices in India and realised that it never got patronage, even from royalty, probably because clay pots were meant to be used and discarded. This discovery of no support for ceramic art in India and our experience of the contemporary English ceramics catalysed the idea of collecting in a more systematic manner.

Subconsciously, our decisions revolved around clay art...even our holiday destinations!

It was an unquenchable fire to discover clay art. We learnt a great deal when we moved to Canada. We would take holidays at destinations which had practitioners of the art, and this was often not even a conscious decision. We were very inquisitive about non-functional clay objects.

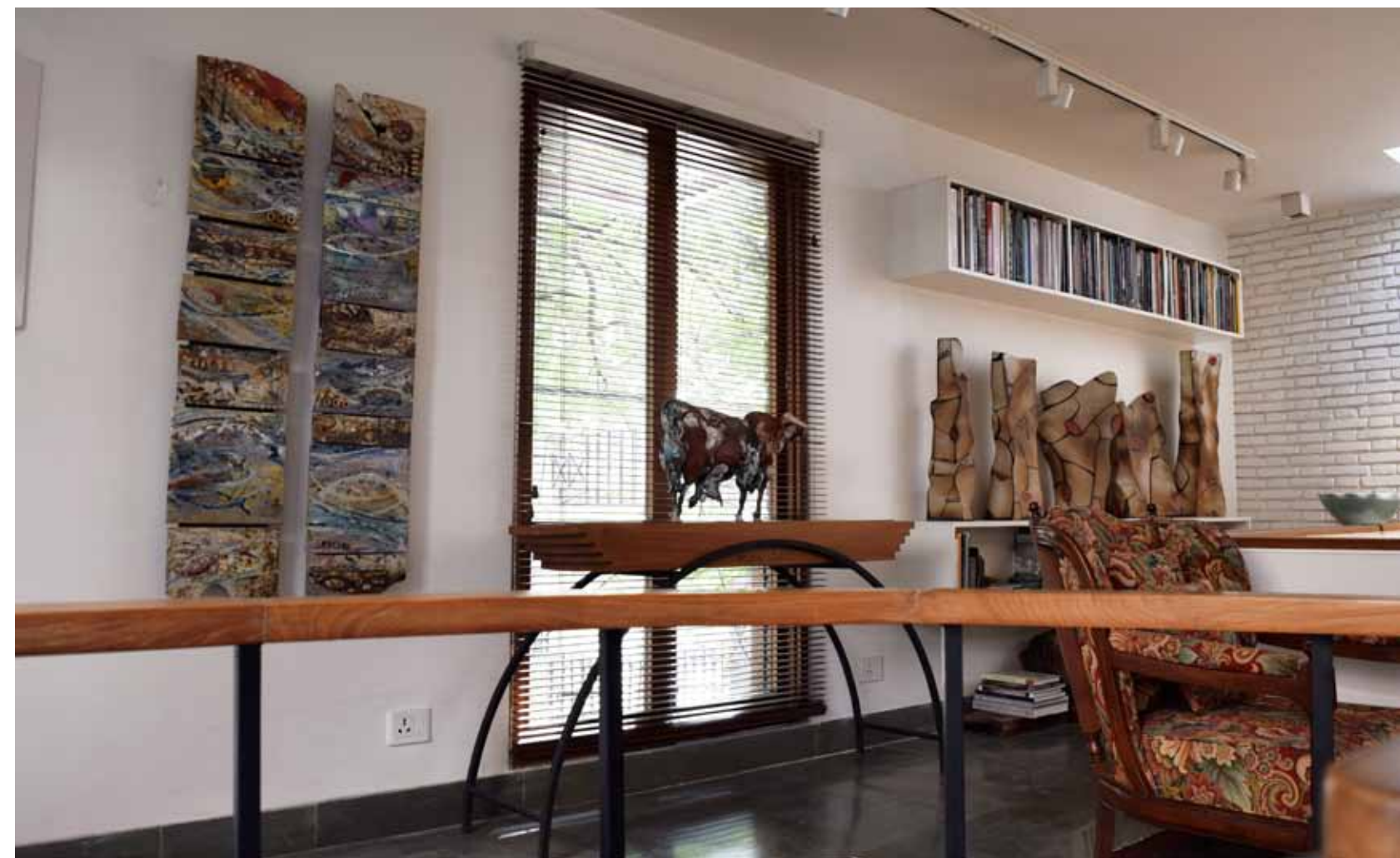
We observed and started to consciously notice what we liked. While we continued to collect functional works since we could not afford expensive art then, our journey was steamed with this constant research.

Ceramic scholarship became an important aspect for our process of selection

We own about 300 books on contemporary ceramics. Our buying has evolved as has the clay practice in India. We rarely take impulsive decisions. There is logic in how we decide to acquire works, and that is based on our extensive and continued study of the subject. We visit museums religiously. We visit shows, socialise with artists, and also visit studios. Asha and I often disagree on selection – she prefers works that display beauty and I tilt towards originality and technique. But we always debate and arrive at a consensus for works with bigger tag prices.

Ceramic is very tactile and evokes emotions different from other art forms

Clay objects are three-dimensional. There is a face and a back, an inner and outer space. You almost always want to hold and feel the work. I paint myself, so I know the precise difference in thought process and approach. If you don't understand clay, this subtle aspect will be totally missed. It's very different from collecting other forms of art. Also, we are aware that ceramic work is eternal. There is no wear and tear and it will stay forever, literally, if you don't break it. Display of the works is another critical aspect. This notion begins right when view the work; I almost decide its placement when I make the buy-decision. Small format or miniature works are systematically grouped in a 'family' to enhance the impact and not make them insignificant. So far, only a very small portion of what we own is stored away, but some of our table tops have started to look like a shop!





We have cognizance of the importance and role we play as collectors

Many people wonder if one can judge by seeing a work of art if the artist will go far. I say with utmost confidence that I can now judge this for ceramic art. There are three phases of evolution for an artist. Initially, the works are under-priced for the quality of work, and then there is parity. But towards the sunset years, there is discordance because prices remain high, but quality of work significantly drops. For ceramics, this gets accentuated since the medium is physically demanding. While it is a gamble, my strategy is to catch the artists in the first category, and to follow through the chronology in Phase 2 of their progression. We are very conscious of the fact that we are playing a part in making careers by encouraging ceramic artists. Many are products of their circumstances but others are driven by their ideas. It is the latter who are trail blazers. They sacrifice, but eventually succeed, leaving a deeper footprint.

Now a significant energy is being invested by us to decide the future of our collection

As we continue to dive deeper, an important thought remains in the forefront – what are we going to do with all the art we have acquired? We hope to make a museum but simultaneously need to develop a Plan B of selecting an existing museum to donate to. We certainly hope to never break up the collection into smaller subsets and gift it away; but we are exploring all this and hope to conclude within our lifetimes.



A simple unassuming bowl on our table is one that has given most joy to us

If there is an earthquake and I could run with just one work, all the large-scale works would be out of the question. But a bowl by Lydia Mehta, which probably has little commercial value, is one I will save first. It's always on our table and every now and then we float a flower in it. If I could, I will save the four goblets, with which the journey began...44 years ago.



Asha and Raj Kubba.

