

# Divinity of the Discarded

Through his clay works, Rahul Kumar confronts creation and destruction

By Noor Anand Chawla



Rahul Kumar at Exhibit 320

AT 16, WHILE WATCHING a potter at work at the Crafts Emporium in Delhi, Rahul Kumar was entranced with the idea of “solid clay creating a void and something that carries space”. A few years later, he declared his intention to pursue pottery as a profession. Though supportive of his talent, his parents pushed him toward a more traditional path in life. In time, he attained both an MBA and an MFA and climbed the corporate ladder while simultaneously practicing his craft. These varying life experiences or “tensions” as he describes them, have shaped his trajectory as a ceramist over two decades. His art, therefore, is a product of dichotomies—the traditional and the modern, the practical and the abstract, the erudite and the commonplace, and the imbibed and the imagined.

*The Untold Resides Somewhere:* *Assembling Fragments*, his ongoing solo exhibition of recent works in clay, is an apt representation of these dichotomies. What does it mean to preserve the discarded? The torn, the shattered, the broken. Do shards tell a story? Can gibberish communicate—are few of the questions the artist mentions in his exhibit statement. Walking through the show, he explains further, “Broken fragments are meant to be discarded or thrown out. One only assembles something of value. I realised the irony of this while creating these works over a number of years. They were not made to fit into this concept, but they all came together seamlessly.”

Delhi-based Kumar, 47, has exhibited his work in India and abroad, with nine solo shows. Though clay has always been the focal point of his work, he often combines this medium creatively with other ones. After leaving the trappings of his corporate career in his late 30s, having promised himself to do so before turning 40, he ventured into other art-related fields like curation and art journalism, both as a writer and editor.

At first, Kumar did not distinguish between the craft of pottery through which vessels are made and using clay as a material to create art. Yet, the more he practiced his own craft, the more he was

able to question the shackles imposed on it by purists. “I would create something on the wheel but immediately try and alter or violate it because I had this innate desire to put something of myself in the work. That was the beginning of my art practice in clay where I was expressing myself through my work in a very rudimentary way,” he says.

As a result, Kumar revels in breaking the stereotypes cast on him with every collection. He recalls an international exhibition organised at the India Habitat Centre in Delhi a few years ago, where he was placed next to Ray Meeker, a renowned American Indian ceramist. Concerned that his work would be overshadowed by Meeker’s, which was known for being overtly expressive in form, finish and scale, Kumar decided to create tiny pieces that demanded the detailed attention of the viewer. Titled *Astronomically Small*, this series laid the foundation for his love of oxymoronic titles as well as his drive to challenge how people viewed his work.

Thereafter, to shake off the idea that he made only miniature pots, he pitched a large installation of vessels while applying for the India Foundation for the Arts grant, which were displayed as part of the curated projects at the India Art Fair.

● *Sticks 1 and Protect 2* by Rahul Kumar



The work was later acquired by the Kiran Nadar Museum of Art. Now, Kumar has arrived at a comfortable median in terms of scale. He works alone in his studio, and the scale of the works is determined by his ability to produce them without help. Therefore, he prefers to create smaller works or those that can be combined together to make works on a larger scale.

Kumar was also keen to experiment with form. “For the initial years of my artistic practice, I was still interested in the form of the vessel. It can be very difficult for practitioners of certain kinds of art, like ceramists and perhaps print-makers, to break the mould. We get so bogged down with what we have learnt of the technique, because we have taken time to master it and feel committed to it, even though it no longer challenges us. It becomes difficult to break out of it,” he says.

Yet, with his ongoing exhibition of works, he has certainly broken away from the mould. One sees it in his series titled *Contain* in which he innovatively uses clay and stoneware to create misshapen cardboard boxes in earthy tones and textures. These serve as receptacles of discarded fragments of paper and other debris. Looking at their display on a shrine-like platform of ash brick,



“PURISTS WOULD CONSIDER CRACKS IN THE CLAY A BIG MISTAKE, BUT I LOVE THE CRACKS—THEY ADD TO MY NARRATIVE. IF I’VE LEFT THEM IN THE WORK, IT IS DELIBERATE. THIS IS HOW I’VE LIBERATED MYSELF FROM A TRADITIONAL PRACTICE” **Rahul Kumar** artist

one feels an eerie sense of loss, and the effort to preserve the importance once attached to these torn sheafs of paper. The artist adds, “Collecting and holding on to things that should be thrown away is such an intrinsic part of our lives. Cardboard boxes, in particular, signify transitions—of packing up and moving on—but they are also used for deep storage. They protect and they contain.”

One also sees boxes, stuffed with torn scraps, bursting at the seams whilst attempting to contain their precious contents, in *Boxed*. Here, Kumar creates three-dimensional containers roughly the size of a tissue box which are marred with cracks and burns. “Purists would consider cracks in the clay a big mistake, but I love the cracks—they add to my narrative. If I disapproved of them, I would reject them or try to change them. If I’ve left them in the work, it is deliberate. This is how I’ve liberated myself from a traditional practice,” says Kumar.

**I**N *MATRIX*, A DISTINCTIVE series to which an entire section of the gallery is devoted, 42 squares made with black orb-like structures adorn the floor. Constructed in stoneware clay, each square is created by squishing together freshly made pots on a wheel. Together they give the appearance of wreckage that is “seemingly placed in order but crushed and introverted”. A commonality between *Boxed* and *Matrix* is the hint of gold leaf used judiciously to signify the precious nature of their cargo.

“This series is completely different from anything I’ve done before but it wasn’t envisioned as a single series. I made the first piece around seven years ago, and I kept making different pieces over time. I didn’t know how to bring them together in a theme, but through conversations with my mentor and friend Roobina Karode, I was able to shape the idea for it,” says Kumar. A collector of beautiful things, and a self-confessed hoarder, he finds it difficult to discard objects, so they remain in his home for years. This fact along with



Boxed 4

a number of external influences shaped his ideas as he created these seemingly disjointed works.

The differing professional roles Kumar plays also influence his art. Exposure to architecture through his role as an editor of an art, design and architecture publication, plays out in the series called *Remains*, which mimics blueprints of sites yet to take shape, or “perhaps an aftermath of what was.” Through undulating forms filled with cracks and crevasses, Kumar breathes life to their flat clay surfaces. In *Assemblage*, small pieces of pierced and differently coloured clay are clumped together, imitating architectural elements like walls and windows. They are displayed on a stark black strip painted on a wall, making for an arresting image and an illusion of the scale of the work being larger than it actually is.

Though much of his work in this exhibition breaks the norm, Kumar doesn’t discard the traditional form of the vessel completely. It finds its way in the almost textbook reference to a potter’s tool in *Protect*, where he places burnt and torn fragments into a potter’s wheel’s thrown form. Perhaps it is his attempt to preserve and cherish the kernel of his craft, just as he seeks to preserve numerous other fragments of his life.

Kumar also explores abstract concepts through *Stacked* and *Sticks*, which consist of small blocks of clay pieced together randomly or in grids for the viewer to find their own meaning—just as sometimes things are collected in a haphazard manner while at other times, they follow a particular order, placed one on top of another.

A large section of the exhibition is influenced by text and the implied

meanings of words. Through a literal placement of writing on the wall, Kumar’s *I Have a Secret to Tell* highlights the importance of text in communication. Familiar-looking yet entirely concocted characters raise the question of what it means to say things while leaving much unsaid.

Text also plays a big role in Kumar’s experimental clay-on-paper works titled *Pages from my Diary*. Here, he innovatively uses various kinds of clay to coat papers that contain text and embellishes them with other visual elements created with ceramic pigments. The text is visible but rendered completely illegible through his stylistic process because “the idea is not to read it”. For some of these pieces, Kumar wrote with his eyes closed in Hindi (a language he is familiar with) and unfamiliar ones like Bangla, Arabic and an ancient text he recently came across. The idea was to capture whatever flowed from him in the act of creating the work.

“It is about communicating by not communicating... of preserving by letting go, because the idea of preserving something that has no intrinsic value is ridiculous. Why would you keep something like this in your home?” he asks. Visually representing this query is the striking untitled piece made with broken shards of pottery strung together on three industrial wires, even as the massive pile of debris they were picked from rests on the floor. Kumar felt that in reassembling these delicate broken pieces, he defined the essence of *The Untold Resides Somewhere*.

He shares, “They once had a complete form, and when they broke into shards, the form changed. Just the act of stringing these broken pieces together was dangerous because they have the potential to wound one quite badly. But I wanted to show what it means to hold something so dangerous and violent, so deeply in our memory and not let it go. Why do we find it so hard to just move on?” ■

The Untold Resides Somewhere: Assembling Fragments by Rahul Kumar runs at Exhibit 320, New Delhi, till April 28