

EZ

PLATFORM • IV • 2023 •

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The Fight
Fintan Magee
Gallery XXL

THE SOIL OF OUR FIERCE, FRAZZLED SOUL

THE UNTOLD RESIDES SOMEWHERE



It is on an unexpectedly rainy day that I step out, and the breeze drifts me into the bylanes of Mehrauli in New Delhi. It is the kind of day that is already inspired for art. One that only gets more inspiring as you step inside the gallery – outside, vetiver wafts after the season's first rain, and the fresh foliage sways in its perfume. Inside, earth peels its layers, kilned and fired, yet raw like spring.

the untold resides somewhere between the jagged edges and steady composure of Rahul Kumar's conceptual experiments in clay, but his show by that name doesn't have you scrambling for the unsaid. Adrift the aisles, it comes to you itself – imperfect, multitudinous, open to infinitesimal interpretations in abstraction. The works are subjective scatterings – the parts greater, in inquiry,

Left: Rahul Kumar

خداوند یکتا و یگانه است

than the sum of the whole. He rips the glaze off his past practice, he breaks and smashes perfect forms, he bares naked the questions and trapped dreams through cryptic diaries and inscrutable insignia. It is not the shiny curves of prosperous pottery you see here – it is clay hardened with the softness of soul, with the porousness of fragility and vulnerability. It is when one is truly formed that one realises there are spaces ever to evolve. And in that course, one may speak a language clear only to oneself, and challenge the world to its understanding.

“I was cutting out pieces from a clay slab for a work. When I was done, the ‘negative’ of what remained intrigued me. It seemed like an alien text. I believe in ‘signs’...and so I began to ‘read’ it. Was the universe talking to me through this text, I wondered. I retained those pieces and that was the genesis of ‘I have a secret to tell’, a series of clay pieces that look like gibberish. I allow accidents and happenstances like this to form my work,” the artist expresses to me.

A little verse pops up in my mind to sum up the underlying theme:

*there's the broken that's beautifully whole
the soil of our fierce, frazzled soul
clay that trickles gold but isn't set in stone –
there remains always something to hone.*

“I guess if it is natural, it has to have flaws. You will not find a perfectly straight line or a perfect sphere in nature, ever. A forest will always have the ‘brown’ and broken branches...it is our need to imagine the forest to be pristine green! I once asked a jeweller friend of mine how he tells a lab-made diamond from a naturally mined one. The answer is simple, yet it hits hard: the natural stone will always have a blemish, a flaw. If it is perfect, it took birth in a lab!

I am only responding to this human reality, and seeing it through the lens of our need to not let go. I am inquiring through this work what it means to have emotions and dreams that were not expressed, letters that

were never posted (or even written). To hold back the broken shards that have no business to be anywhere but in a trash can,” he offers.

I continue my walk through this elemental performance of the rough and the real, illuminated by deliciously delicate lighting that defines its sublimity. Carried out artfully by vis-à-vis, it evokes imagination by forming along the frames a shadow of latticed lacunae, a longing to fill itself – even as it is full of unrendered earth where it falls. It reminds one of the golden hour on an uneven hill, aglow with revelations. Softly growing life into it, but not forcing it into uncomfortable spotlight.

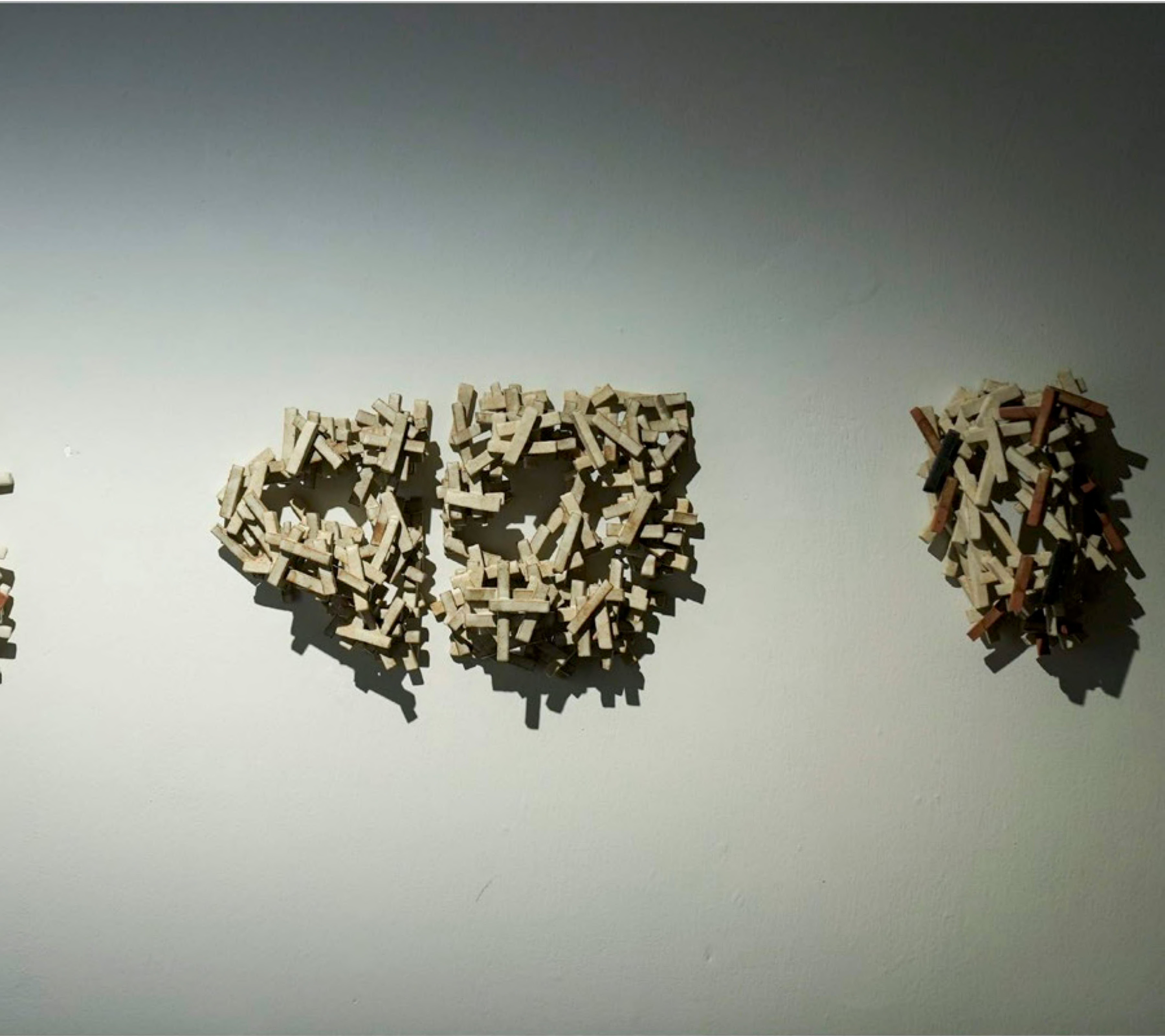
The stories are moulded inconspicuously, tucked in many a crevice and nook, in pores, pots and pans suspended by a string, awaiting myriad discoveries in the folds of obscurity. There is no chronology, only the beautiful order of the broken. The walk itself is uneven as are the textures and layers, but twisted is the structure that makes life interesting – as does living on the roughest edge. “Layers are also key to how we see this world. All that we see is a perspective and all that we hear is an opinion. And the joy is in interpreting those through the lens of lived experiences.”

The real courage, perhaps, is then not in the make-belief, but in the unmaking. The works seem to aim not at building but a bildungsroman of sorts. The process becomes the produce. It's slightly paradoxical to think that a body of work that reflects this ruinous acceptance also probes into the meaning of accepting the status quo of one's dreams and identities. In those rites of passage, there's an underlying distress, a palpable landscape of languishing.

I am particularly intrigued by a work titled *Matrix*, created by squishing freshly made pots on the wheel. “They deform and become introverted, hide. It refers to probably how we squish our emotions and dreams, lots of them over the years. There are layers to it. And shades of black. The hollow appears blackest. And a paper cast of one work shows the skin negative of it. In white.”







For someone eagerly social in other roles, it is difficult to imagine that Rahul's is a solitary studio practice. "I choose to work all by myself, with no assistance," he surprises. "As a result, it is humanly not possible to create singular large-scale pieces in clay; and so, my works are in smaller scale, that I can manage with my two hands." That said, resonance with an audience is an important part of his philosophy. "It is important for the creator to step aside and let the viewer take in the work. That is always tough. How do you keep the very context with which you have made the work away and see the object as it is presented? But I feel that it is incredibly important to do that...be in the shoes of the audience."

It can be tricky, with such a series, to know where one stops — when is a work complete, and not finished. "Finished is a scary word. I hope things are never fully resolved for me..." says the *Fulbright* scholar who was trained as a studio potter, and derives his inspiration in the medium from the likes of KG Subramanyam, Jyotsana Bhatt, PR Daroz and Peter Voulkos.

As is true for every stimulating human experience, the show leaves you asking for more. You wonder about the possibility of the exhibits walking out of the white cube and coming alive in the earthly realm of the public eye. Perhaps see them playing out in their natural habitat, in open, accessible environs, a more inclusive space, from earth to earth, where they belong. You hope also that the narrative expands to embrace more colours of the chaos and struggles of conflicting dreams and identities; glorious, unconspired colours of nature that are bold and challenging and fearless. The show also has great potential to be adapted to greater accessibility for the visually challenged in future instalments, given its rich tactile opportunity. Its deeply human character renders it effective for an educative role in mental health, and open for immersive experiments in collaboration with nature-inspired music and sonic or filmic storytelling, and an equally fluid and imperfect presentation of the diary pages outside of frames.

You leave with something that helps you celebrate the serrated over the seraphic, and realise that it is rolling in the mud that makes the journey worth it.

the untold resides somewhere is on view at Exhibit 320, New Delhi, until Apr 28, 2023. The artist's works are also displayed at the ongoing edition of *The Sculpture Park* at Madhavendra Palace, Nahargarh Fort (Jaipur). ■

Words Soumya Mukerji





Monthly Creative Capsule



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