

breathing spaces

In the Gurugram studio of Rahul Kumar, laid out on the floor are several forms of austere geometric configurations in ceramic which offer an insight into the experimental new visual language being created by him in collaboration with Delhi/Gurugram-based graphic artist, Chetnaa. Critic Philip Rawson discusses his views, in his seminal keynote address in *Contact*, (Issue 58, 1984) on the richness of the ceramic language which can exploit the possibilities of the material in a post-modern dialogue with issues that confront or comment on complexities of 21st century life. Over the past fifty years the role of the ceramic artist has undergone radical changes and practitioners now see themselves as part of a larger dialogue that places ceramic as a material into contemporary visual culture. These recent poetic statements in the new exhibition *breathing spaces* at Exhibit320 go beyond the notion of early Western modernism that functional ceramic art of oriental sensibility in the realm of the domestic was more moral and purer than other genres or that object making is the sole historical model in ceramic practice. The brave new world of contemporary clay making demonstrates that as a material, ceramic defines the artists conceptual intentions rather than as a pure modeling material thereby enriching it considerably. The material requires a long, daunting investigative period in its discipline of control and understanding of surface and method. The breaking away from known formats and modes of working such as in the case of Rahul Kumar and Chetnaa create a buoyant fresh environment and interaction which allow for a hybrid sensibility that enriches with its contribution to artistic practice.

History has proved time and again that two creative minds can sometimes be better than one. Art collaborations, often between equally creative professionals or as facilitators between groups outside the art world can result in fascinating interactions and active intervention with surprising results. Famous artistic collaborations like Pablo Picasso and photographer Gjon Mili or Andy Warhol and Jean-Michel Basquiat raise questions of how it is possible for such strong individuals to interact and cooperate to foster a new dynamic artistic language. In the collaboration between Rahul Kumar and Chetnaa, it was the geometric collages, a visual language of abstract forms and subtle use of gold highlights that was identified as the connecting correspondence of interest.

Rahul Kumar's passionate involvement with ceramics began with an early introduction through the Delhi Blue Pottery and the studio of Dipalee and PR Daroz where he honed his skills and techniques of domestic wheel-thrown stoneware glazed pottery using both gas and wood fired kilns. He was able to combine a successful graduation in business management and commerce with his artistic pursuits through an MFA in ceramics from the University of Dallas on a Fulbright scholarship in 2007. His installation in the 2015 India Art Fair – *Circle Uncircled* - was a turning point in his artistic trajectory as it brought together several elements that have brought him critical acclaim. The wheel thrown platters, with reflective bright monochromatic glazed surfaces, had a loose, fluid quality with an underlying geometric sensibility as seen through the use of the grid. In another wall work which was part of the series *Astronomically Small* the presence of grids along with organic textures in a jigsaw shape and bold colours made a dramatic impact in harmonious balance.

It was later the same year that he met Chetnaa while interviewing her for NDTV, where Rahul was anchoring for an art programme. It was at her second solo exhibition *Noir* where he was immediately struck by her linear explorations in white and black and her use of a minimal aesthetic. Her works were configurations of the concrete jungle of the city, with road maps creating matrices and patterns isolated

from their original purpose. Chetnaa was an award-winning painting graduate from the Amity School of Fine Arts, Noida and subsequently her MFA in painting was from the College of Art, Delhi. She won the prestigious Glenfiddich artist residency in Scotland in 2014 and it was here that her small format monochromatic abstractions centred on a concentrated focus on the power of the line as '*an inevitable part of our existence*' using thread, gold leaf, layered paper, pen and ink. (Artist Statement 2015 Catalogue)

Collaboration was not new to Chetnaa as she had worked on a project in 2014 with fashion designer Pratima Pandey on a combination of layered textile installations using abstract blocks of fabric involving a play of shadow and density of colour. Her work with other mediums extended to an installation using laser lights for her first sole show *Sublime Spaces*. During a woodcut workshop at Sanskriti Kendra she further experimented with a fascination for the breaking of the square format with lines and geometrical shapes. It was a serendipitous moment when both Rahul and Chetnaa discovered that they lived in proximity to each other in Gurugram and loved working in clay.

Both artists mention the thrill of the exchange of ideas and the gradual dropping away of a traditional visual language like detritus in order to seek the new through joint dialogue and experimentation. For Rahul it meant the release from the orthodox concepts of object-based domestic craft ceramics and a fresh look at the material and its possibilities. He recalls how he would never have thought of using a final engobe surface without a glaze earlier. For Chetnaa, too, working with a new material was a struggle to let go of the control for perfection of colour, texture and line that controls a paper-based work.

Their first breakthrough was with the acceptance of a project to show a collaborative wall work at the First Indian Ceramic Triennale 'Breaking Ground' at Jawahar Kala Kendra in Jaipur in 2018. *TerraGeometrix*, a wall mural of 221 pieces of irregular size, consisted of wheel-thrown and altered cylinders with slanted top surfaces on which were painted and incised patterns, radial lines and textures, in iron red, cream and blue. The design referenced converging and diverging lines with aerial views of abstract shapes signifying human habitation. The blue referenced obliquely to the city of Jaipur. The opportunity was an enormous effort for over a year, considering that there is no studio support staff and both work only twice a week together, neglecting their individual artworks. As Chetnaa mentions, "*somewhere the paper was limiting me - but with clay I could cut it...could stick it. It has endless possibilities and new areas were opening up for me that was very exciting. When I would struggle with the clay, Rahul would remind me of the nature of the material. Embrace it and one will enjoy it, he would say to me.*"

Ideas flowed. The playfulness of form, use of matte clay surface and interlocking elements are elements that return to the collaborative works in their new exhibition *breathing spaces*. Both are clear that there is no real narrative in the works from the maker's side - it is upto the perceptions of the audience to infer meanings and symbols. The duo also worked briefly in terracotta and paper clay along similar lines and shapes and eventually returned to using a high fired stoneware clay that fires a neutral buff colour with black and blue engobes. There are more parallels drawn to the paper-like quality of the thin clay slabs with their uneven deckle edges in this group of works. The paper edges resonate and enhances the links to cartographies and deconstructed urban maps and grids.

The reductive non-ornamental and non-decorative simplification and use of applied gold leaf in a minimalistic style is a strong element that integrates the current series of works creating dynamic emphasis through its controlled use. Rahul is fully conversant with the Japanese aesthetic of mending breaks in ceramic through the use of gold resin called Kintsugi. There is something rather magical about

how it transforms something broken, or in the traditional sense imperfect, and makes it more beautiful and into a work of art of its own. Instead of hiding away the repairs so that the user or viewer cannot see them, Kintsugi celebrates them and makes them into the focal point. The title works of the show *breathing spaces* series has a deckle-edged slab of clay with a painted matte black engobe slip on a smooth clay surface. There are no textures or blips on the surface so that all concentration is on the triangular lines carved through the surface showing the edge or vertices of planes. The lines score through the engobe leaving small residues of black pigment like traces of mineral vegetal matter. Often the lines are parallel and close together as in ant trails or markings left by wheel tracks in the wet earth. In *breathing space no. 4* the three edges of the square tile are broken by the surging uneven deckle edge showing irregularity. There is an arrow-shaped triangular headed gold diagonal edge that cuts into the frame whose surface breaks up with a thin fine black line like a small river tributary.

This gold edge is repeated in the works titled *broken paths* which has both black lines with raised relief in black squarish shapes and thin lines bisecting the surface making it look like a parchment of a forgotten treasure map with all lines pointing to the lode star. Rahul explained the reason why they used applied gold leaf and not ceramic fired gold lustre as the leaf had its own quality with textures and colour leaking in from the lower clay layer showing subtle protrusions embracing the geological textures and cartographies. *the golden triangle* mural of square tiles with organic protrusions like Rahul's earlier wheel thrown works, has a dynamic triangular gold form aggressively thrusting into the black space like a ray of sunlight caught on a dark floor.

Like a Hokusai wave in a format of 16 small base tiles, the series *undulations* is undoubtedly the finest collaborative effort in the duo's repertoire. One can literally see the two conversations coming together harmoniously. There is a square format with four base tiles out of which rise architectural futuristic cuboid forms in a wave with slanted edges creating a three-dimensional net effect from which a spheroid form emerges through shadow and relief giving a tsunami wavelike impression. The lack of colour references back to Chetna's use of white-on-white, using recessions and protuberances to create a futuristic cartography of landscape. It also makes use of her earlier precise geometric paper works with a large scale cut jalli in kirigami style using the play of shadow. Rahul in his earlier work *achrome* also used the unglazed porcelain clay in a white-on-white monochromatic work. In *undulations no. 2* the ripples are more spaced out, throwing relief shadows onto the fragmented cylindrical forms they endeavor to create.

crossroads is a wall hung group of ten square tiles in an irregular semi-cross formation laid out with cartographical lines boldly etched through it to create rhombus shapes. The *edited* series of white and blue interlocking shapes reminds one of lego forms or primary shape blocks but the precision with which these are made refer to the early abstract expressionist sculptures. These are made to be suspended from the ceiling. Some have gold edges on the interior face of the plane resonating again with the idea of the Kintsugi aesthetic that is involved with the life of the object made whole again after breakage but in a different avatar. This series seems to tell the viewer that in change and fragmentation there is growth and room to grow and expand.

enclosed is a group of 9 square tiles with sharp edges and an off-center yantra type of formation etched into the surface. The textured gold is asymmetrical in the composition and looks tattered and worn showing the base core of black. In the work titled *horizontals*, the white slabs of clay are meticulously cut and impressed onto the surface with a contrast to the free deckle edges of the paper-like slab. Here the mathematical lines are broader strips and resemble urban visual culture and architecture. Some seams

are jagged with the natural ripped looks of torn paper and some are cleaned with great precision. Similarly, in *notes* the base is white with small irregular earthy organic texture in patterns across the surface while being superimposed with small black shapes like architectural models of town planning

In the *organics* triptych the three slabs of clay lie with a spreading ink stain of black on white-on-white slabs which has caught variations of the firing and gained a richness of muted surface tones that the paper cut works would never have had. *organics* comes back with a tiny piece of gold leaf at the inner edge. There is a trellis-like jalli lattice of white clay linear strips on a free form black clay slab leaving its interpretation open to the viewer.

The only wheel-made work are the *rotation* platters which have serrated lines and textures inside the gold leaf on black engobe shapes that extend in a triangle or stripes of dynamism into the circular format. This is form and decoration at its most simplified. Rahul states that the removal of the layer of glaze creates drama of its own as the reflective surface is dynamic and one then reacts only to the form and the play with light sans texture. Allowing purity, simplicity and independence to take precedence was an important step in the process of the evolution of a new language.

Collaboration was an epiphany moment for both Rahul Kumar and Chetnaa, they approached their art making from diverse points of view and faced the challenge of making something new that can move the audience. They have spent reflective time on their own creative practices and created an amalgamation of insights that one encounters through the course of these new works. Their curiosity is boundless and we are privileged to glimpse what opens up their imagination and skills when a truly creative conversation from different perspectives and materials come together.

Kristine Michael
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About the author:

Kristine Michael is a ceramic artist, art educator and PhD scholar at the School of Arts and Aesthetics JNU. She is currently Curriculum Leader of Visual and Performing Arts at The British School New Delhi.