

TRADITIONS

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Golden Bridge Pottery and Contemporary Ceramics from India

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EVOLVING

NCECA 2013 Houston

urator's Note

Traditions Evolving: Golden Bridge Pottery and Contemporary Ceramics in India is the first group show on contemporary Indian ceramics to take place in the US. The Golden Bridge Pottery was founded in 1971 in Pondicherry, on the Coromandel Coast of India, by American artists Deborah Smith and Ray Meeker. Witness to the cultural shifts of an evolving modernity, this small ceramic center has had a considerable impact on contemporary Indian ceramics over the decades. Its unique place as a center for learning outside the mainstream has often been discussed among past students of Golden Bridge along with the need to acknowledge and pay tribute to the founders and their contribution to the Indian contemporary ceramic world.

Ceramics in India can only be described as pluralistic. It borrows from everywhere yet retains a connection with its roots, simultaneously drawing on the ancient while embracing a changing reality and speaking in the universal language of art and clay. This exhibition showcases a handful of artists from the many who have passed through Golden Bridge, representing the depth and breadth of work that a small pottery by the sea has sparked and nourished.

I would like to thank all the artists for participating and helping in making this show possible. Most importantly I would like to thank Sharbani Das Gupta, whose seed idea it was to show at NCECA and who has collaborated with me every step of the way. Without the numerous dialogues and discussions with Ray Meeker and Deborah Smith and their unfailing support and guidance the show would not have taken shape.

Madhvi Subrahmanian
Artist/Curator



Golden Bridge Pottery Pondicherry, India

Foreword

At the cusp of political and social transformation, India is a land of contradictions, a place where the medieval coexists with the modern and the future jostles with deep-rooted traditions. Yet traditions here seem to endure; alive, in constant flux, they define India as a place with an astounding ability to absorb and assimilate, change and grow. What happens, though, when change that took centuries now occurs in the space of a lifetime? Which traditions get preserved? Which discarded? How will the new remake the old?

In deep southern India archeologists have unearthed large fired clay burial urns made 5000 years ago. Pottery shards from the Roman Empire date trade to the 1st century BC. Shrines to the pre-Brahmanic god Ayyanaar dot the landscape. Terracotta horses, Ayyanaar's vehicle, stand up to 15 feet tall and are perhaps the largest terracotta sculptures anywhere. The increasing use of cement for these sculptures and plastic for terracotta water pots highlights the effects of technological and social change. Even so, tradition continues its link with the past through the ancient temples, street shrines and votive figures.

Pondicherry, a former French colonial outpost on the southeastern coast of India, sits squarely in this ancient region. In 1910 it became the base for the Sri Aurobindo Ashram, the home of Indian mystic Sri Aurobindo Ghose. Eventually the ashram became home to a community of two thousand devotees and a cottage industry of small-scale handcraft production units. When Deborah Smith, a young American potter with a keen interest in eastern philosophy, came to visit in 1970, she was asked if she would start a pottery. She agreed to do so if her friend Ray Meeker from California would come and build her a kiln.

Deborah had spent a year in Bizen, a region of Japan where pots are fired without glaze, allowing the wood ash its play on the surface of the work. Ray's influences lay in 1960's abstract expressionism and California funk. In the southern India of 1971 both these directions seemed irrelevant. They settled on making functional stoneware with a Japanese/American aesthetic. Pondicherry, with its idiosyncratic nature and cross-cultural history, would prove fertile ground for one more import: a Japanese-style pottery in a palm leaf shed. The Golden Bridge Pottery, or GBP, has grown to have a tremendous impact on Indian contemporary ceramics and offers an exceptional perspective on the Indian clay world—a lens through which one can trace the growth of the young field of studio ceramics in India.

Ray and Deborah first worked with apprentices from the ashram community, but as these apprentices moved on to begin their own studios, they started to train young men from neighboring villages. The pottery now engages 14 workers making more than 200 functional

forms. Each pot is measured against Deborah's high standards of simple beauty and functionality, and every stroke of the brush on the pots is made by Deborah herself, creating an extraordinary body of work over time. The GBP influence is responsible for the birth of a local tradition in functional stoneware. People come from everywhere looking for 'Pondicherry Pottery.' In the over 20 workshops one finds not only functional potters, but also studio artists creating anything from raku to porcelain in their own styles.

In 1983 Ray started a training course to cater to a growing interest in ceramics by the educated urban youth of India. Separate from the daily work of the pottery, it is geared to teaching through immersion, observation and osmosis. Students engage in every part of the process, from slaking clay and making glazes to building and firing kilns—learning the craft from the inside out.

GBP hosts workshops by artists and educators from around the world. Susan Peterson, Betty Woodman, Jim Danisch, Jeff Shapiro and Jack Troy from the US, Sandy Brown, Jane Perryman and Mike Dodd from the UK and others have each worked in their own medium. The resulting dialogue has done much to raise Indian awareness of contemporary clay practice. Many students have gone on to study abroad, joining MFA programs, or apprenticeships, workshops, residencies and conferences. A group of eight exhibited at Woodfire Tasmania in 2011. The show, very well received, announced India's presence on the international ceramic art stage.



*Betty Woodman at
the Golden Bridge Pottery*

Fueled by Ray's personal interest, a small group of artists from the South have been inspired to adapt yet another Japanese aesthetic—the Zen of wood fire in an anagama—returning to the elemental. “It is said that Bodhidharma, a Buddhist monk from Tamil Nadu



'Gateway' Ray Meeker 21 feet Wood fire stoneware

in South India, went to China in the 6th century CE and founded the Chan sect of Buddhism. By the 12th century, Daruma's legacy had reached Japan as Zen, permeating art and culture over the next several centuries. The fortuitous cracks, the subtle and the not-so-subtle crusty accumulation of unmelted wood ash and the free-run of melted ash glaze comprise, for India, a highly unlikely aesthetic. An Indian temple façade is anything but spare. Gods, demons and humans cavort in a bewildering array as complex as life itself. Gold, silver, saturated color. More is more. Indian art and culture can be highly refined, but rarely minimal."¹ Studio ceramics in India encompasses this breadth of expression in the development of its own distinct contemporary idiom. Traditions evolving.

In 2002 four artists that had met and studied at GBP came together again, sponsored by the India Foundation for the Arts, to collaborate on a bold interactive series of outdoor ceramic sculptures, placing them for three weeks on the sidewalk of a busy thoroughfare in Mumbai, a crowded city of 19 million people. For a city whose public art is usually limited to stone or metal sculptures of political leaders, this was a breakthrough intervention of a fragile medium.

The Hyatt Regency in Chennai recently commissioned work from a group of former GBP students for their poolside garden. At the hotel entrance, Ray's 21-foot-high ceramic gateway introduces a collection of ceramic art that has taken the artists well outside their comfort zones and generated interest among the makers and patrons alike in experimenting with scale and supporting ceramics as a viable medium for outdoor sculpture.

Contemporary ceramics in India is clearly pluralistic. Eclectic, it borrows from everywhere and yet maintains a connection with its own roots, bringing to the surface the primal core of a changing country while speaking in the universal language of art and clay. This exhibition showcases a handful of artists from the many who have passed through, representing the depth and breadth of work that a small pottery by the sea has sparked and nourished.

Amrita Dhawan's heavily textured and dry glazed work links erosion with ritual and landscape with time. Here she examines closely her interest in the eastern concept of circular time versus a western sense of linear time.

Aarti Vir looks at the concepts of security and insecurity. She questions the house or a border as adequate to ensure a sense of security, suggesting that security might be a state of mind subject to more nuanced parameters.

For **Adil Writer**, the ever-present street shrines and texts, past and present, directly influence his work. His rough red daubs overlaid by anagama ash are marks of a joy that he sees and relishes in everything and allude to India's innately religious culture.

Inspired by the Zen master Sengai's paintings of the circle, square and triangle, **Antra Sinha's** practice is informed by 'root forms' and the submission of her work to the will of the fire in an attempt to form a partnership with that powerful element at a primal level.

The physical body in abstract plays a role in the work of former dancer **Ashwini Bhat**. Her well-balanced bell-shaped form 'Queen' is derived from the Harappan headdress for women.

Nidhi Jalan's composite creatures explore a central theme in Indian cosmology: that every living thing contains within itself the seeds of its destruction and transformation.

Rakhee Kane looks to the vernacular architecture and landscape of Rajasthan for inspiration. Her vibrant and painterly style combines traditional and contemporary approaches to bring a vital part of rural India into the gallery.

Sharbani Das Gupta's work often addresses environmental issues. Her 'Midas Table' and its offerings of mutated fish and poisoned produce use an old story to reflect on a modern dilemma.

Drawing inspiration from austere Himalayan street shrines to urban kitsch, **Vineet Kacker** observes how simple objects are able to transcend their form when associated with faith.

Using rural Indian methods of terra sigillata and smoke-firing in her work 'Directions,' **Madhvi Subrahmanian** expresses her migratory life through the non-negotiable



Blue and white dinnerware Deborah Smith Stoneware

metaphor of the arrow: an ancient tool, a symbol of direction, a weapon, a street sign.

Ray Meeker's piece 'Gossip' is a comment on political and socio-cultural issues. Made in collaboration with rural Tamil potter T. Pazhanichamy and fired in Ray's stoneware kilns, the traditional water pots refer to dwindling water resources and the plight of countless Indian women who walk many miles for a single pot of water. The title takes gossip as a light moment of relaxation and passing the news around the well.

The Golden Bridge Pottery in a sense is **Deborah Smith's** alter ego. Together they have brought much joy to the Indian dining table. Her wonderfully painted pieces and her devotion to the beauty of the functional have quietly and subtly changed people's perception of the domestic pot.

Sharbani Das Gupta
Madhvi Subrahmanian

References:

Thirty-five Years with Indian Clay:
Ray Meeker for Ceramic Art and Perception
A Homecoming Residency:
Madhvi Subrahmanian for Neue Keramik

¹ Continental Drift—Anagama in South India:
Ray Meeker catalogue essay

Aarti Vir

*“As my life unfolds,
organically, responding to
circumstances and
changing with them, so too
does my work. Sometimes the
work addresses an interior
life, sometimes an external
concern; always it is a means
to communicate.
“Secure- insecure”, is a series
exploring the irony of
human life; of trying to make
physically secure, when the
insecurity lies in the mind; of
“securing” an ephemeral life.”*



Aarti Vir studied painting for six years before spending three years at the Golden Bridge Pottery. She returned to her hometown, Hyderabad- India in 1999 and set up her studio, making oil fired salt glazed, sometimes functional, sometimes sculptural work.

She apprenticed briefly with Micki Schloessingk in Wales and Sandy Lockwood in Australia and recently spent two months as an artist in Residence at the Gaya Ceramic Art Centre in Bali. She shows regularly in India and abroad and continues to experiment with clay. She is currently making wood fired salt glazed work.



'Secure Insecure' 11" X 5.5" X 3.5" each Stoneware.

Adil Writer

“Humble street shrines, ancient civilizations and forgotten texts inspire me. Having studied architecture in Houston, my works on show at NCECA evoke the colors and textures of the grand Southwest; their salted highlights and smudges from the anagama aesthetic acknowledge the presence of the divine in the anointed object. What I create as works of art about worship, are not intended to be objects of worship in themselves ... as punctuation marks in a sacred paraphrase, they clarify my intention to express a feeling that is wholly positive and secular, truly essential in today’s life and times.”



Adil Writer is an architecture graduate from the University of Houston, Texas and discovered clay at Golden Bridge in Pondicherry. He is a partner at Mandala Pottery in Auroville set in the forests of south India, 2012 saw Adil’s works at three group shows in Japan, importantly at museums in Gifu and Shizoka, and the Studio Gallery in Yallingup, W. Australia. Having learnt the “fired house technology” from Ray Meeker, Adil has demonstrated this and his variations of it internationally. His recent solo shows have been in Shigaraki, New Delhi, Bombay and Bangalore. He has participated in group shows in Estonia, France, Tasmania, Korea and China.



'Navagraha- nine treasure boxes' 2" x 6" x 4" Anagama fired stoneware

Amrita Dhawan

“I use the imagery of ancient textured rock to link erosion with ritual and landscape with time. On imagined walks exploring time’s terrain I discover a seamlessness between my use of pragmatic time and time as experienced by my emotional, creative and dream self. At once a cultural construct and an experienced reality, concrete and measurable yet intangible and boundless, the tapestry and texture of time inform my work.”



Amrita Dhawan was born in Bangalore, India. After training in ceramics with Mansimran and Mary Singh at the Delhi Blue Pottery, New Delhi and Ray Meeker and Deborah Smith at the Golden Bridge Pottery, Pondicherry, India, she ran a production pottery in Bangalore making wood-fired stoneware from 1984 till 1999. She was artist-in residence and teacher at Meeker and Smith’s ceramic studio in Kodaikanal, India. Now based in Bangalore, Amrita makes both functional stoneware and paperclay sculpture. She has participated in a collaborative public art installation and exhibited in solo and group shows.



'Time's Terrain' 9.5" x 9" x 8.5" Wood fired stoneware

Antra Sinha

“My work is about the discipline of facet and geometrical forms, within which joy finds an expression in the play of surface and texture. I believe that there is something beyond me which guides my work and I relinquish control, collaborating with the force of fire; the heavily ashed and reduced wood firing of the Anagama bringing completion to my pieces”



Antra Sinha graduated with a BFA& MFA from MSU, Baroda in 2002. She began learning pottery at Golden Bridge Pottery, Pondicherry in 2003, subsequently becoming a long term apprentice to Ray Meeker & an Artist-in-Residence at the pottery. She has also been an apprentice to Robert Barron and Graeme Wilkie in Australia, a presenter at Woodfire Tasmania in 2011 and most recently an Artist in Residence at Shigaraki (SCCP) Japan.



'Tetrarc' 18" x 18" x 17" Anagama fired stoneware

Ashwini Bhat

“I gather shapes from the world around me, from my travels, and journeys through books. I also look inside me for forms that arise from my experience as a dancer, seeking to rephrase that understanding of the body through a new medium of expression, the body of the clay I work with”.



Ashwini Bhat studied ceramics under Ray Meeker at Golden Bridge Pottery, Pondicherry, where she later worked as an artist-in-residence in the year 2010 and 2011. Her work has been part of the sculpture garden project at Grand Hyatt (Chennai, India, 2011) and shown her work at the India Art Summit (New Delhi, India, 2011), Woodfire Tasmania (Australia, 2011). Bhat was a visiting artist at Clayspace, Asheville, North Carolina (USA, 2012) working towards a solo show of her ceramic sculptures at the Clayspace Gallery. She has a master's degree in literature and a background in classical dance for fourteen years.



'Queen' 16" x 11" x 11" Anagama fired stoneware

Nidhi Jalan

“Each living thing contains within itself the seeds of its own destruction and transformation into the other. The tension in my work arises from the co-existence of opposing forces that both drive and resist transformation. The changes brought about by metamorphosis and evolution create a desire for a magical world in which the subjective and the objective are indistinguishable. Notions of transformation and more specifically transmogrification form the leitmotif of my work. I explore these notions by creating fantastic and enchanted worlds that inhabit the space between realities.”



Nidhi Jalan currently divides her time between New York and Calcutta. She has trained in ceramics under Ray Meeker in Pondicherry and Michel Hutin in Auroville in India. She has an MFA from Hunter College and has completed residencies at the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture (Maine) and European Ceramic Work Centre (Den Bosch, Holland). She was nominated as an emerging artist at the NCECA ((National Council on Education for the Ceramic Arts) 2010 and most recently was invited to present her work at the CAA's centennial conference in Los Angeles in February 2012.



Untitled 19"x40"x17" Stoneware

Rakhee Kane

“My recent work has focused on images, objects, colors and textures of rural India. Working under the guidance of Ray Meeker at the Golden Bridge Pottery, Pondicherry has given a distinct direction to my work. I have focused on developing forms that were inspired by rural Rajasthan, mainly its architecture and landscape. I look at the daily life objects in rural India, be it a commemorative stone under a tree outside a village or the wooden pillars of a shrine in central India. The everlasting search to understand, absorb and assimilate the forms and images of rural landscape through my work continues”



Rakhee Kane studied painting at Faculty of Fine Arts, Baroda and has a post graduate diploma from National Institute of Design in Ceramics. Her early training was with Jyotsana Bhatt before she moved to Auroville, near Pondicherry where she has also apprenticed with Ray Meeker and Deborah Smith of Golden Bridge Pottery. She has also been an artist in residence with ceramic artists like Jane Perryman and Ruthanne Tudball in United Kingdom and has participated in International Wood Firing Symposium in Dehua, China. Rakhee continues to participate in various workshops, group shows, and has a few solo shows to her credit. She has successfully curated a few ceramic shows in Auroville and Chennai, & continues her various experimental works at her studio in Auroville.



'House Form Tall' 13"x6"x6" Wood fired stoneware

Sharbani Das Gupta

“Living between India and the US makes real the need for balance in an uneven world. I use allegory to address issues that matter to me; look to the landscape of human life for inspiration and increasingly question my role in sustaining the unsustainable. I hope that art, with its ability to breach boundaries may yet the make a difference. The Native Americans say: ‘We do not inherit the earth from our ancestors; we borrow it from our children’. It is with this consciousness that I try to create, to have a voice.”



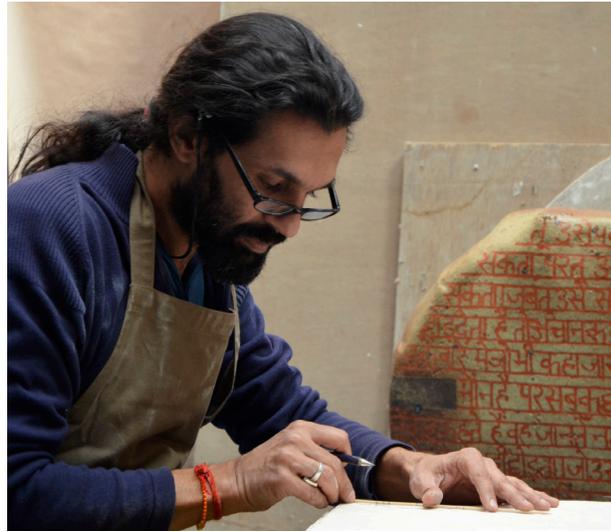
After graduating from the National Institute of Design, Sharbani Das Gupta apprenticed at the Golden Bridge Pottery in Pondicherry. In 2000 she relocated to Albuquerque where she worked as studio assistant at the porcelain studio of the University of New Mexico. She has also been a studio assistant at Penland and an Artist-in-residence at the Houston Center for Contemporary Craft and the Golden Bridge Pottery. Sharbani has exhibited internationally, presented at the NCECA, lectured at universities and been published in magazines as well as the book *The Art and Craft of Clay*. She has also written for ceramic and art magazines and journals. In 2013 she will be part of an Indian ceramic delegation invited to a residency in Fuping, China. She is also artist/curator for the show ‘Naturalization’ at NCECA 2013.



'Midas Table' Life size Porcelain/stoneware

Vineet Kacker

“I like my work to walk a path between the meditative and the playful, responding both to the sacred and the profane, and exploring their inter-changeability. In my works words and imagery that have been a part of my culture are re-contextualized into new visual works that are exploratory yet contemplative, symbolic without being derivative, accessible without being populist. My works also pay homage to the developmental phenomenon of Indian street shrines all over India, from austere Himalayan ones to kitschy urban ones, where associations of faith, often contested, have the ability to transform the meaning of ordinary objects.”



Vineet Kacker’s work is informed by his formal architectural training, and inspired by his travels in the Himalayan regions of the Indian sub-continent. After honing his skills at the Golden Bridge Pottery in Pondicherry in the early nineties, Vineet worked as an artist-in-residence at the Anderson Ranch Arts Center in Colorado, and the Northern Clay Center, Minnesota, U.S.A. He also worked at the University of Wales Institute in the U.K. as a visiting fellow. He has won several awards, notably the Charles Wallace Fellowship and the Fulbright grant. His work has been exhibited widely, and is a part of several public and private collections in India and abroad.



'Time-Timeless Tableau A' 13" x 22" x 9" Stoneware

Madhvi Subrahmanian

“Having lived in three continents and in four countries, I belong to a world where change is the only constant. Challenges of new opportunities as well as the limitations of new circumstances inspire and further my practice. Personal experiences, urban life and migratory situations inform my work while incubation, growth and movement find repeated expression.”



Madhvi Subrahmanian was trained under Ray Meeker and Deborah Smith at the Golden Bridge Pottery in Pondicherry, India. She attained her MFA from Southern Methodist University, Dallas, Texas under Peter Beasecker. Madhvi has participated in several artist-in-residence programs- such as Watershed (Maine), and The Shigaraki Ceramic Cultural Park (Japan). Her works have been published in various international magazines and in books titled Smoke firing by Jane Perryman and Contemporary Ceramics by Emmanuel Cooper. Madhvi has shown in many solo and group exhibitions around the world. Currently she lives and works in Singapore.



'Directions' 3" X 22" X 4" each Earthenware

Ray Meeker

“Forty years in India.

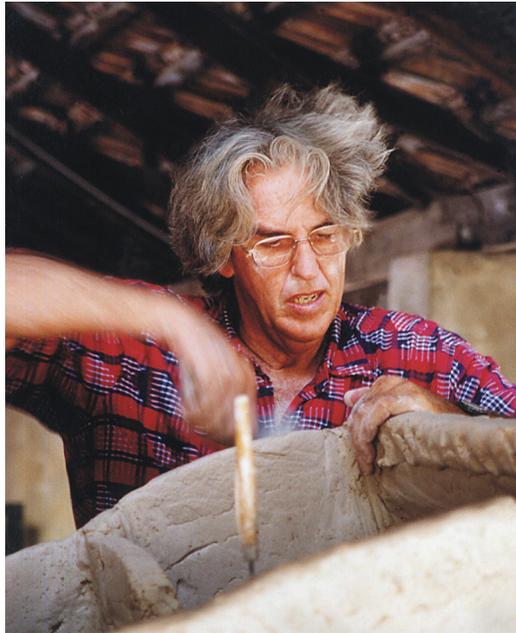
Firing clay.

Tea bowls to houses.

Now an anagama.

New work.

Still an explorer.”



Ray Meeker studied architecture and ceramics at the University of Southern California. With his wife Deborah Smith he founded the Golden Bridge Pottery in Pondicherry in 1971. While Deborah now runs the Golden Bridge Pottery production, Ray is best known as a teacher and as the “architect/potter” who pioneered “fired building” technology. More recently he has gained attention for his independent studio work, ranging widely from functional stoneware to monumental ceramic sculpture.



'Gossip' 24" x 60" dia. Ray Meeker and T Palanichamy Wood fired stoneware, rope, string, fabric

Deborah Smith

“My intent is to enhance everyday experience through handmade functional stoneware, decorated with brushed flourishes and finished with ash-bearing glazes brought to bloom at high temperature in a wood-fired kiln.”



Deborah Smith was graduated in Japanese language from Stanford University in 1966, and subsequently spent two years in Japan. She studied pottery with Araki Takako in Nishinomiya, and later was apprenticed for one year to master potter Yamamoto Toshu of Bizen. Returning to her native Los Angeles for a year of graduate study at USC, she met fellow Californian Ray Meeker in the ceramics department in 1969. The following year, on her way to India, she spent three months in Mashiko, Japan, as translator and companion to Susan Peterson during Peterson's research of her book on Hamada Shoji. Deborah Smith has resided in Pondicherry, since December 1970, where she manages the Golden Bridge Pottery which she founded, with Ray Meeker, in 1971.



'Flared Vase' 27" x 12" x 5" Wood fired stoneware

Photo Credits

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'Ayudha Puja' at Golden Bridge Pottery