

COMMON GROUND

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The purpose of Art has long been debated. The definitions and requirements of it have changed with the times. In 2024, I would contend, it is finding and nurturing a common ground. One doesn't need to belabour the fact that our world today is catastrophically fraught and fractious. Customarily, the three most reached for sources of succour at times like this, would be, Nature, Religion and Art.

Over the last couple of centuries, we have successfully desecrated Nature with our hubristic belief in the pre-eminence of our species over all others. While what still remains of it, is still an enormous wellspring of comfort for many, living as we do in the aftermath of the hottest year on record, climate anxiety is a very real source of dread. Religion, has, and continues to polarise humanity like nothing else can.

Art, on the other hand, has the ability to perhaps nudge us to some self-reflexivity; to jolt us out of complacency; to alleviate our distress; to deliver us from our isolation; to grant us redemption from our conceit and connect us to a shared purpose. I believe the Art at the second edition of the Indian Ceramics Triennale did all of the above.

Through the diversity of approaches to the medium of clay, there was a rich seam of attentiveness towards the human and the more than human; an articulation of protest against unjust structures, past and present; An acknowledgement of the fragility and ephemerality of all phenomena and an honouring of our interwoven lives, this bejewelled Indra's net, that might be a bit grimy and frayed, but not beyond restoration. If Art be a voice, a clarifying lens, a mirror, a salve, a consolation, a celebration, then the second edition of the Indian Ceramics Triennale was an impetus for artists working with clay, to articulate their perspective and be heard.

When art inscribes the protests, aspirations and fears of an often powerless populace, onto its body, it invigorates the cause. Asish Chowdhary's project, 'The Wall', is testimony to the trials and sorrows of the oppressed. It proclaims with assurance, no edifice of power is immune to upheaval, when 'common people's voices' gather like a storm! A timely reminder perhaps, to the powers that be, that the myth of power in the hands of a few and the acquiescence of the many, is ultimately illusory. Chowdhary collected clay from various sites of protest and made bricks using that clay. He then fashioned a wall with those bricks, on which he painted images, which referenced real instances of struggle and protest.

In 'By Heart', Kushala Vora addresses oppression of a more insidious quality, as she lays bare the disconnect between words and action, between that which might be professed as the high minded aim of freedom and liberty and the diametrical translation of those aims in practice. Calling out the disingenuous nature of power structures, she seems to remind those wielding them, "you can fool some of the people some of the time, and all of the people some of the time, but you cannot fool all of the people all of the time." Vora's heap of porcelain inscribed with words from the famous Tagore poem, "Where The Mind Is Without Fear", as well as one of her own, resembled a pile of dry leaves, swept up, ready for disposal. A chilling reminder of what a post truth world looks like.

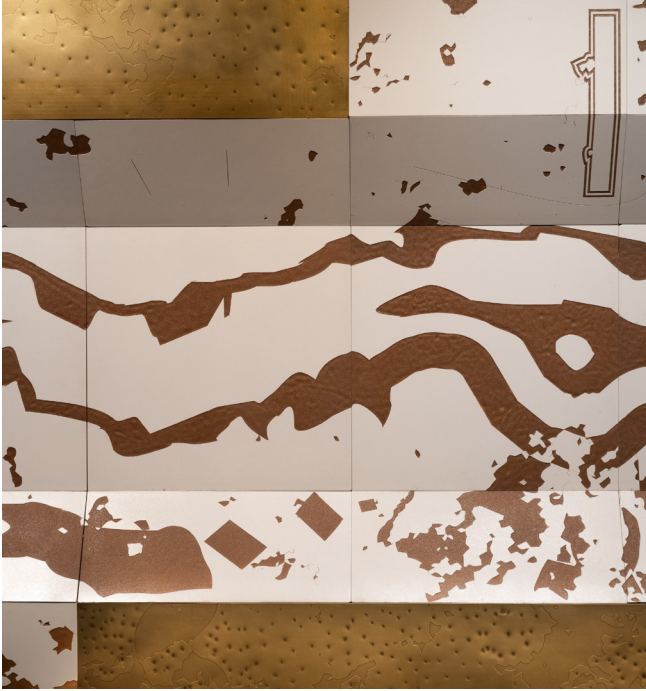
By Heart, (detail) Kushala Vora



The Wall, Asish Chowdhary



A mirror held up to society can be an immensely effective political act. To bear witness to the relentlessly arduous lives of some of the most marginalised communities and to make them visible without sentimentalising, requires an extraordinary sensitivity and courage, that Birender Kumar Yadav amply displays. In 'Re - Presented From The Traces', he documents with poignancy and empathy, the incredibly challenging lives of migrant brick kiln workers. The terracotta casts of everyday objects used by these workers, make the fragility and vulnerability of their lives excruciatingly palpable. These objects, ranging from the tools used, to their bedding and utensils are all displayed in the manner of an anthropological museum exhibit. A comment on a class riven society injured to the hardships of poorest and most vulnerable.



A Land of Silent echoes, (detail) Awdhesh Tamrakar

restorative journey. Tamrakar belongs to the Thathera community of coppersmiths and utensil makers. he uses large ceramic tiles, gilded with hammered and etched brass to depict his map of river and edifice, lost to time and tide.

If Art were a magnifying glass held up to the mainstream contemporary attitudes to urbanisation and development, we would see the 'Warning Line', in which Deepak Kumar uses an actual bird carcass, displayed in a vitrine alongside his own larger than life model of the skeletal remains of the bird. Suspended against the backdrop of an under construction building next door, visible through the floor to ceiling glass, the piece acquires an acute emotional charge. The bare bones of the soon to be, human habitation next door meets the desolate sculpture along that fault line where urban human environments encroach upon the native habitats of other species. The heedless, relentless destruction of these contiguous lives are so quotidian, so unremarkable, as to be invisible to most of us as we make our architectonic plans and build our solitary futures!

In a related vein, an exemplar of creating art to inspire change without any pedantic showmanship is the project, 'Smogware: Delhi' by Iris De Kievith and Fiona De Bell. The Smogware project is a series that 'harvests' smog dust to produce glaze for table ware. An elegant strategy to demonstrate beyond the shadow of any doubt, exactly how polluted our cities are, with well-made ceramics and luscious glazes, the project inflicts a stinging blow to any illusions we might harbour about the sustainability of our urban lifestyles.

As unprecedented crises bedevil humanity, there is a slow gathering hum of voices seeking a closer connect with the more than human. 'Mali; Jal Jungle Zameen', is an installation nurtured by earth and water, plant and mineral, burgeoning under the ministrations of its gardener, Parag Tandel, with soaring wings, fecund pods and prehistoric beings. Tandel works closely with rural communities on the western coast and central India. His installation is an enigmatic totem, using soil from the forests and a metal casting technique using the lost wax process. He makes visible the process by incorporating the usually discarded inner core and outer mould, manifesting a unity in more ways than one.

'Reflections Of Transcorporeal Feminism' is what you get, when the paths of a material design researcher with a background in structural engineering, an



Re presented From The Traces, Birender Kumar Yadav

Our sense of identity and wellbeing is often inextricably linked to geographical and cultural bonds. A loss of these ties, whether voluntary or not, becomes yet another layer in the substratum of our consciousness. Awdhesh Tamrakar's series 'A Land Of Silent Echoes', skilfully mines his personal experience of the loss of his ancestral village and community to create a sparsely poetic visual map. One part ode to an unreclaimable past, one part song of hope for a resurrection, the grief of loss thus transmuted via the creative act into a



Warning line, Deepak Kumar

Smogware / Delhi, Iris De Kievith and Fiona De Bell



environmental politics practitioner and a sculptor and researcher, cross! Lola Ben-Alon, Penmai Chongtoua and Sasha Fishman, worked with soil, clay and water (they also used amongst other things, 3D printing, burnt mosquitoes, plywood and copper) and at the epiphanous intersection of art, architecture and environmental awareness, they collaborated with the soil, clay and water, posing questions on sustainability and seeking to understand where humans belong in the continuum of life. The fountain, with its cascading basins, its goddess like figurines in niches along a mud plastered wall evokes a distinctly sacred space, a space of sustenance and contemplation.



Reflections Of Transcorporeal Feminism, Lola Ben-Alon, Penmai Chongtoua and Sasha Fishman

Our conviction in our understanding of material and embodiment is on precarious ground in Efrat Eyal's 'Attendance Check'. An installation that treads a fine line between being and nothingness! A fragmentary grid, in which individual pieces have minimal mass, but cast substantial shadows, Eyal's piece makes one pause and reflect on our discomfort with ambiguity, while questioning our conditioned certainties.



Attendance Check, (detail) Efrat Eyal

The one truth we can all be assured of, is that everything that is born, will one day die. Memento Mori, says 'The Space In Between', by Kate Roberts. The ephemeral installation amplifies profound meaning within its arabesque, delicate construction. A comment on the futility of seeking everlasting, changeless solidity in our temporal lives, the installation underscores the untenability of our grasping after hollow constructs of class, race, wealth and permanence. The one thing that binds us all, plant, animal, mineral, is the fact of the cyclical nature of life and the changing of its forms.

The projects described here, comprised only a third of the entire exhibit. To have experienced all 34, in the flesh, was stirring! Common Ground was a genuine, heartfelt endeavour to create a space for dialogue and an expression of multiple perspectives. It made common cause with artists seeking to honour, sustain, revive or reimagine traditional expressions of clay; with artists exploring the possibilities in using clay in conjunction with other media - clay with sound, clay with light, clay with technology, clay with performance; with expressions in clay that respond to deeply personal, psychological or spiritual questions; with visual experiments and thought experiments!

The curators, all practising artists, brought to the enterprise sensitivity, rigour and passion. An event of this scale would be challenging even without all the fund raising, exhibition designing and installation that they undertook, to manifest this remarkable celebration of clay in its myriad forms!

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Photography: Ronak Varma

Mali / Jal, Jungle Zameen, (detail) Parag Tandel



The Space In Between, Kate Roberts

