

AARTI VIR IN CHENNAI

Salt glazed stoneware originated along the Rhine river in Germany in around the 14th century. For centuries it has been used primarily for the production of inexpensive, vitreous domestic ware. The understated, yet rich surface quality of traditional salt glaze attracted the imagination of 20th century studio potters in the west as a medium for artistic expression. Here, in India, Aarti Vir maybe the only artist working exclusively in salt glaze.

Salt-sodium chloride-tossed into the kiln at the maturing temperature of the clay body dissociates into vapours of sodium and chlorine. The sodium combines with the silica in the clay, forming a thin glazed surface, revealing form and emphasizing the sculptural nature of a piece. Salt glaze can run from the very dry, just a blush, through the characteristic orange-peel texture to streaming rivulets of amber glass, generally associated with salt glaze fired in wood kilns.

When Aarti was in Pondicherry as a student at the Golden Bridge Pottery, she used to get up early every morning and paint. I suspect she still does. Her natural strength is in two dimensions-painting and drawing. I remember her early struggle with form. This culminated in the making of 21/2 foot tall, full bellied jars, wrestling with fifteen to twenty kilos of clay, on a kick wheel. Her tenacity has been rewarded with completion of a studio in Hyderabad, now two years old, where she is developing a unique painterly approach to salt. Aarti says, "I have chosen to salt glaze for the immediacy of decoration it allows". Slips-liquid clay bodies the consistency of cream, often coloured-are freely brushed on the wet or "leather hard" surfaces of faceted vases, or in layered swipes on the interiors of bowls. Cobalt blue, chrome and copper greens, dry high-alumina orange and an intriguing mysterious slip (titanium dioxide?) which seems to affect the texture rather than the colour, like a resist, leaving a burnished stroke in a field of orange peel texture. To her wheel and brush she has added the pipe wrench, screwdriver and cutting pliers, to keep the burners and blowers going on her powerful oil-fired kiln.

Aarti again, "the challenge of working in clay is addictive. It demands not only a sensitive, intuitive response, but a certain scientific temper as well. Getting it "all" right, from understanding the medium itself, to understanding form and function, to enhancing it with decoration or the lack of it, to grasping the process of firing the ware, is a project for a lifetime."

This is Aarti Vir's first show in Chennai. We look forward to many more.

Ray Meeker
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