

Continental Drift - Anagama in South India

Janet Mansfield

An Exhibition of Eight Indian Ceramic Artists

As the 200 delegates travelled home from Deloraine, Tasmania, Australia, after the successful Woodfire Tasmania conference in April 2011, there was a feeling among them of satisfaction and challenge; satisfaction in that they had been confirmed in their pursuit of making wood fired ceramics and wood firing gave them, individually, a way to express their artistic endeavours. The conference had offered lectures, discussions, practical and theoretical ideas to follow and many exhibitions of work to examine and deliberate on their relative merits. A practical event, the Reedy Marsh Challenge, held at the home and studio of Neil Hoffmann, organiser of the conference, had all the delegates involved, from the sourcing of the clay to firing the work in their hastily but purpose-built kilns to the presentation of vessels and serving food, inspired no doubt by the glorious surroundings of the northern Tasmanian forests. The exhibitions that were presented during the conference represented the work of delegates who themselves had come from afar: one group came from New Zealand, a group of emerging wood firers from the US, a curated show of 50 Australian wood firers, living throughout the country, just to mention a few. It was the exhibition, Continental Drift, an exhibition of wood fired pots from South India that offered delegates an exotic and unusual glimpse of ceramics that came from an unfamiliar background. It is this exhibition that this review will address, introducing some of the artists, three of whom travelled from India to Deloraine, Tasmania, for the event.

Madhulika Ghosh, a potter who is based in Sydney, initiated the exhibition of the work by Indian ceramists and it was she who was responsible for inviting the artists and arranging the works at the Deloraine Creative Art Studios. A catalogue was produced which included many of the works, portraits of artists and kilns, an introduction by Madhulika Ghosh and an essay by Ray Meeker of Pondicherry's Golden Bridge Pottery. In her introduction Madhulika Ghosh tells of her visits to Pondicherry, including one three-month stay, and how these artists impressed her with their interest in firing their works with wood and how appropriately such fuel and effects suited the ceramic works they were producing.

In his wide-ranging catalogue essay Ray Meeker takes us through the early spiritual beliefs of Asia, its history and rituals today to the excitement that the potters of the area are finding in their enthusiastic firing

of ceramics with wood as the fuel. He outlines some of the inspirations and ambitions of the potters and finds an on-going future for these ambitions. At the exhibition, statements by the artists were displayed alongside the works, giving background and ideas and reasons for their ceramics. It was interesting that many of them had come from different art disciplines to take ceramics as their now serious concern. One was a singer, another a dancer, one a landscape painter, two had been practicing architects, and they brought these varied sensibilities to their ceramic works.

Aarti Vir, trained as a painter before commencing salt-glazed ceramics and working at the Golden Bridge Pottery, embraces life fully, believing that all experiences help her learn. She likes to travel and see other cultures, understanding what they teach her.

Anil Writter, originally from Moonbi and now living in Auraville near Pondicherry trained as an architect, and one of his interests is in building houses of clay. The smaller scale objects in the Tasmanian exhibition still could be seen as containers, their rich and glossy surfaces of melted ash and minerals were aptly called Treasure Boxes and could indeed hold ideas as well as valued objects.

Antra Sinha, a graduate in Fine Arts from the University in Baroda, is passionate about wood firing, the performance and the possibilities. Her current interest is in the form of teltracs, rock forms of geometric dimensions. Enlarging the scale of these forms is one of her current interests, finding that the wood firing is especially suitable to enhance the flat planes of the clay.

Ashwini Bhat comes from a world of literature and dance. Her large-scale forms have attracted commissions in public places in India, making sculptures that are based on historical ideas – their movement and balance are impressive.

Deborah Smith is one of the founders of the Golden Bridge Pottery, establishing it with Ray Meeker in 1971. She is a firm believer in the value of functional ware. Using slip, wax-resist decoration and glaze on stoneware bodies, she has perfected a palette of raised glaze which is quite unique. Deborah's early studies in Japan have given her and her work a quiet and confident demeanour.

Rakhee Kane has a Fine Arts degree and a diploma in ceramics, both from Baroda, India. She has participated in a number of workshops internationally and feels that wood firing suits her forms, giving rich textured surfaces that have cultural significance and are strong in visual and emotional references.

Veena Chandran gave up a career as an architect to pursue pottery in 2009. She trained with

Ray Meeker and Deborah Smith at the Golden Bridge Pottery, Pondicherry, where she worked on stoneware, firing to cone 10 in a wood fired kiln. She has since established her studio in Ross, India, where she continues to experiment with different forms and techniques.

Ray Meeker, inspiring leader with Deborah Smith, of the Golden Bridge Pottery, has turned his attention to sculpture, often with a message of intent. He says that he has worked with environmental themes for the past 30 years and continues to explore and express his ideas through the medium of clay. As a philosopher and maker of clay objects he has influenced contemporary Indian ceramics and is known worldwide for this. Ray exhibits extensively throughout India and has lectured nationally and internationally. His work is represented in public and private collections and reviews about his work appear in prestigious ceramic and architectural publications.

This exhibition, a highlight of the Woodfire Tasmania conference proved a strong talking point between the delegates. The three Indian participants who came to Deloraine – Aarti, Ashwini and Antra, participating in all the events – gave the Australian and international wood firing fraternity a wider view of a culture not familiar to them. Wood firing is only one way of working with ceramic but the physicality of the process, the possibilities for enhanced aesthetic effects and the unexpected surprises that can result both from working with forms, clay and wood can be rewarding. So too are the friendships that can be established between people of different countries and ideas, working together firing kilns, all so valuable in today's world.

Dr. Janet Mansfield is ceramist and an enthusiastic wood firer. She is the current president of the ABC IAC, Geneva. She lives in Gulgong, Australia.

ILLUSTRATION -

opposite side - top row l. to r.
 - work by *Antra Sinha* - "Tetrare" - 2009
 43 x 43 x 45 cm - stoneware
 - work by *Rakhee Kane* - "Form 1" - 2009
 45 x 30 x 15 cm - brown stoneware clay
 - work by *Ashwini Bhat* - "Untitled" - 2009
 40.6 x 25 cm - stoneware clay with 15% grog
 middle row l. to r.
 - work by *Veena Chandran* - "Jar" - 2010
 d 53 cm, h 43 cm - grogged stoneware clay
 - work by *Ray Meeker* - "Rio" - 2010
 40 x 18 x 10 cm - stoneware
 bottom row - l. to r.
 - view in the exhibition
 - Madhulika Ghosh, Ashwini Bhat, Antra Sinha, Aarti Vir, baby Meher, Janet Mansfield

