

Where there is a wheel...

Aarti Vir has been spinning magic by her wheel for a decade, balancing experimental art and functional pottery. Sangeetha Devi Dundoo chats up the only potter in the country who specialises in salt glaze pottery

Photos : G. Krishnaswamy



Clay time Aarti Vir at her kick wheel and (below) at her kiln

The farmhouse is a stone's throw away from the corporate firms that characterise Madhapur. When most others get set for a day in air-conditioned environs that will be spent in front of workstations and attending meetings, Aarti Vir gets her hands muddy and dirty. The only woman potter in the country who specialises in salt glaze pottery is busy at work, all by herself. "It's just me and the pots here," she says with a smile as she offers chilled water. The water comes in a mug she has made. "That's the advantage of pottery. I get to use what I make," she says, the hint of pride evident.

Clad in a black tee and trousers, she throws on an apron and sits astride in front of the potter's wheel. It's a Japanese style kick wheel, she explains. "I prefer this kick wheel over electric wheels since the entire body is involved in making pottery," she says, kicking the wheel into motion with her right leg. She places a lump of kneaded clay over it. As the wheel gains momentum, her practiced hands shape the clay into what will eventually be a serving bowl. Reminiscing her initial days of pottery while doing her Bachelor of Fine Arts in Baroda, she says, "I thought I would never get it right. You have to be persistent. It takes a week to learn to centre the clay. The rest comes with practice."

Functional pottery

Aarti broadly categorises her work into functional tableware, decorative and experimental pottery. Her functional pottery has a loyal clientele and decorative pieces have been showcased at various art galleries. "When I began, I thought I'd only make functional pieces like mugs, cups, bowls and platters that will find buyers. As I evolved, I started making pieces that were more experimental," she says. She sticks to a pattern when she is working for an order and bends the rules for art galleries. "It's boring to bring out a factory line of products. I like it when people tell me they don't want identical looking mugs. That gives me the scope to tweak things a bit and even come out with seemingly shapeless mugs," she says. The decorative pieces are mostly made by hand. She draws her inspiration from nature. "I find textures and forms from nature intriguing."

Aarti first saw pieces of salt glaze pottery at her teachers' house in Puducherry. (After her Master of Fine Arts from University of Hyderabad, Aarti learnt pottery at Ray and Deborah's Golden Bridge Pottery). "I had never seen how salt glaze pottery is made. I read about it and experimented. There were disasters initially. The firing (once the pieces are made, they are placed on racks and fired in kilns at 1300 degrees Celsius for 24-30 hours) would go wrong. It's best to struggle with it yourself so that you never forget the lessons. Three months of hard work — of shaping the clay and glazing can go waste in those 24 hours of firing. Once you set the pots in the kiln, you have no control over them," she explains.

Aarti apprenticed with a woman potter in the UK to fine tune her skills in salt glaze pottery. "It was interesting to learn and incorporate things into my work. Instead of wood, I use oil as fuel. When the kiln is new, the amount of salt added varies. (Salt is added through a brick hole into the kiln, which then permeates through the kiln and lends its own texture to the pottery. Some clays attract salt while others repel). For the subsequent firings, the residual salt in the kiln adds to the results.

Aarti's work takes place in isolation, she observes. "It's strange. There are times I wonder if anyone cares what I am doing all alone in this place, feeling tensed or happy with my pots. When I feel the need to get away from it all, I travel." She travelled last year to a remote village in Australia ("I could see kangaroos from my window") to work with a potter for five months. While there, she also took part in a conference exclusively meant for wood fire pottery. She also learnt Spanish for three years in the hope of getting to work with a potter in Spain, who could not speak English. "I never got to go to Spain but took a liking to Spanish language."

New collection

This weekend is another testing moment for her as she readies for a session of firing. She intends to showcase her new collection at an art gallery in Delhi later this year. "As a student, I hated chemistry. As a potter, I enjoy it since I can see results. Cobalt and titanium put together does give you that green colour you read about in text books and so on," she says. This time, she plans to experiment with biscuit glazing. "It's going to be double the work. The first firing will happen in the kiln till 900 degrees and then I will glaze the pots and have a second firing. This make the pottery more durable; double firing helps thick pottery," she says.

The first showers of the monsoon have made the farmhouse a pleasant place to be in. Aarti has toiled through summer with the good old khus mats to shield her from the heat. "I love this place. I spend a few days working non-stop. There are other days when I take a break and read, until I feel the urge to work again," she says.

In the line of fire

The kiln is the place of action. "I have to be awake for 24-30 hours of the firing. It's tamasha time. My entire family is mobilised, bringing me food and dropping in to check on me. My brother knows my work. So if he is around I can take a short nap. I make copious notes of every firing and refer back to the log the next time. Pottery is physically exhausting."

As a child, Aarti loved painting and drawing and was promptly enrolled into a drawing class which she enjoyed immensely. "My dad wanted me to be an architect but I wanted something related to fine arts," she says. While doing her BFA, she got introduced to pottery, a subsidiary subject. "There were stringent rules in the campus. Even then, I used to steal clay and make small objects in my room."



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