

ASHWINI BHAT: *ORIGIN OF SPECIES*

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The Living Clay

By GLENN ADAMSON

A few years ago, Ashwini Bhat was at a residency in Appomattox, Virginia – the place where the Civil War ended. The place had a strangely apocalyptic feeling. Rain poured from the sky. She had no cell phone service. And when she waded out into the muck to dig up clay, she was attacked by mud dauber wasps (“they are interested in the same material I am,” she thought). Actually, she was very happy there. She was close, so very close, to nature. Bhat gathered things on her wet walks, filling up her jacket pockets and accumulating interesting piles on the corner of her worktable. When the wasps’ nests fell from the trees, abandoned by their former residents, she would fire them in the kiln. She found chunks of feldspar and other constituent materials of her ceramics and fused them into her sculptures. These works seemed mineral, animal and vegetable all at once.

Bhat is an unusually articulate narrator of her own journey as a sculptor. She can pick out the multiple currents of her biography, and describe how they have all flowed together: her upbringing near Kerala, in west India, where she trained in the traditional dance form of *bharatanatyam*; her initial training in ceramics with the American expatriate Ray Meeker, in Pondicherry, on the far side of the subcontinent; her time in Japan, living in the cultural capital of Kyoto; and the important role played in her creative life by her partner Forrest, who is a poet and geologist (an ideal love match for a potter!). It was this romantic relationship that drew her to California, where she currently lives and works: “he chose Petaluma, and I chose him.” Bhat has absorbed the local materials and history there with her customary omnivorousness, seeking out new clays and firing processes, and learning about the defining figures of west coast ceramic history, such as Robert Arneson, John Mason, Ron Nagle, and Peter Voukos: “heroes you are free to worship, she says, “partly because you will never make that kind of work.”

Indeed, while you can see flashes of historical precedent in her oeuvre – not just the swaggering protagonists of the California clay revolution, but also the quieter pots of the Japanese tea ceremony tradition, and a fistful of abstract sculptors ranging from Brancusi to Benglis – Bhat is clearly establishing herself as a new voice in ceramics. It is a voice that sings in several registers. She divides her work into five distinct series, three of which are entitled *The Beginning is the End*, *Garden of Earthly Delights*, and *Origin of Species*. These titles seem to chart a cosmological history in miniature, from the Biblical (“in the beginning was the Word...”) to the humanist turn of the Renaissance, embodied in Hieronymus Bosch’s famous painting, to the paradigm-shifting insights of Charles Darwin.

Bhat thinks of her various series as in continuum with one another, as different facets of a single project. Even so, each has its own identifiable idiom. Most recently Bhat has developed a new

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series, titled simply *Alive*. Though not explicitly figural, these objects have a potent animate quality – one can almost imagine them breathing. They curl into themselves, folding like soft bellies, or arch upwards like yoga practitioners into taut curves. It's not difficult to see Bhat's background in dance in these works, the way that a performer constantly shapes her own internal shapes in space ("from the head to the outstretched fingers, through the armpit – the armpit is super important"). She further brings out this choreographical sensibility in a series of photographs in which she interacts with the pieces, perching them on a shoulder or a knee.

Origin of Species, also recent, is Bhat's most creaturely series, a set of abstracted figures standing upright with protuberances suggestive of feet, ears, and antlers. They communicate strong presence with remarkable economy of means, telegraphing the idea of primordial *ur*-creatures, prior to evolutionary genetic lineages, and the divergence between humans and other beings. In addition, because they so reductive in their palette and shape, these works give the viewer a chance to appreciate the rich textures of Bhat's work – though they lack the strong polychrome of some of her other work, they are nonetheless richly colored. These are achieved over several firings (in both wood-fueled and electric kilns), with occasional doses of sandblasting or other alteration. Despite the attention she lavishes on these surfaces, they have an intuitive, even strangely inevitable air about them, as if they were (as the title implies) evolved through purely natural selection.

Bhat continues to work in other, more long-established idioms as well. *The Beginning is the End* consists of snarled coils of clay, arranged in densely knotted configurations. The stately-seeming title is actually descriptive, referring to the sculptures' internal continuity, the way their forms chase themselves around and around in endless loops, like baroque Möbius Strips. Bhat emphasizes this visual chase by giving the serpentine forms a defined, chamfered profile. This is truly drawing in three dimensions. *Garden of Earthly Delights*, by contrast, is affectingly lumpen, and draws on Funk ceramics by Arneson and his followers. These works extend Bhat's insight in Appomattox, that she could include raw material in her compositions, using it as a visual anchor. The mineral palette of the works recalls an experience that Bhat had hiking down into the Grand Canyon, in which she saw the browns, reds and yellows of her discipline arrayed in stratigraphic layers: "Every material I use in my work - it was like being in the belly of the beast. And it all happens because of a trickle of water through the rocks. Think of that!"

This image, of descending into mother earth, seems to capture something essential about Bhat's sculpture. She aims to connect with color, texture and materiality in a completely unmediated way, and then to stage that encounter for the viewer. In some ways that is a familiar idea. Traditional potters in Japan sometimes even talk about the "taste of the clay" (*tsuchi aji*), meaning not just how it feels in one's mouth, when drinking from a teabowl, say, but its character, what it seems to want. Bhat is no traditionalist – one look at her work tells you that she is actively in dialogue with the latest currents in contemporary art. But she has deep respect for her material. Clay does indeed come alive in her work, and it has much to show us – if we are ready to see it.

About GLENN ADAMSON:

Writer and Curator

Currently Senior Scholar at the Yale Center for British Art

*Former Director of Museum of Arts and Design, Head of Research at V & A and Curator at the
Chipstone Foundation, Milwaukee*