



Clay As An Unconventional Material And Language For Social Memory By Parag Tandel

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Abstract: This research paper deals with the unconventional practice of Parag Tandal, an Indian artist belonging to the Koli community of Maharashtra. He uses ceramic as a critical and conceptual material which is rooted in socio political narratives. Instead of adhering to the traditional techniques of utility, finish and permanence he uses a post ceramic aesthetic in his works and liberates the medium from disciplinary constraints by using other mediums with ceramics. This paper deals with how his practice is unconventional and is shaping the contemporary Indian ceramic discourse.

Index Terms: Parag Tandal, Contemporary Indian Ceramics, Indian Contemporary Art, Koli community, Dhokra casting, Archival Art, socially engaged Art.

Introduction:

Parag Tandal is a multidisciplinary artist based in Mumbai. He did his BFA in Sculpture from Sir J.J. School of Art, Mumbai, specializing in sculpture and MFA from Maharaja Sayajirao University, Baroda, Specializing in creative sculpture. Today his practice has developed into one that challenges conventional techniques and practices. He uses ceramics and then blends it with other materials like found objects, resin and metal etc. In his work he bridges the gap between the Koli fishing community and the Dhokra casting community. In this research paper, we will look at how he is using ceramics unconventionally to support his practice and concept.



Figure 1 Vitamin Sea, Coastal Road Project 3,
<https://thenodmag.com/content/parag-tandel-sculpture-walk-art-mumbai-2024>

1. Conceptual framework

Parag Tandel describes himself as a 'Visual auto-ethnographer'. He uses symbolic motifs as well as oral narratives to document histories that are both personal and community based in his works. His works basically focus on the histories of Koli community, the fishing community of Mumbai. His practice can be considered as a socially engaged practice focusing on archival nature of material. He then goes on to bridge the gap between the Koli community and Dhokra casters, one that belong to the coastal waters and the other that belongs to the plateau soils respectively.

2. Material Innovation

Parag Tandel uses a lot of materials with ceramics in order to support his practice. In his work, 'Vitamin Sea, Coastal Road Project 3', he used resin to evoke the feeling of fiberglass boats and sea creatures. While this work was not done strictly in clay, it does provide an insight into his material exploration. This work again explores the material memory and culture of the indigenous Koli community and portrays the delicate relationship among the sea, its living beings and the Koli community. In another work, 'Pregnant Room 2: III', Parag had used resin, thread, hairclips, rice flour rotis and pharmaceutical injection tubes to erect an installation that comments on maternal labour, female beauty rituals and uncertainty in the structure of the community. By mixing resin and organic materials he questions permanence, fragility and utility.

Now, that we have looked into his conceptual and material exploration and have established an understanding of his practice, let us now look into how he has incorporated ceramics in his works and used it unconventionally.



Figure 2 Pregnant Room 2: III,
<https://www.artblogazine.com/2012/11/my-sculptures-are-first-hand.html>



Figure 3 INTO THE BONES-20199, Brass, river clay, farm clay, termite hill clay, and rice husk, 8.7 x 7 x 2.2 inches, 2019 https://www.tarq.in/exhibitions/58/works/artworks-68503-parag-tandel-into-the-bones-20199-2019/?_preview_uid=cc3ec3c8403f4673b199920e581ed0bc&version=026b24

3. Ceramics as an Unconventional medium in Parag Tandel's Practice

Parag Tandel seldom uses ceramics to make functional vessels or objects but rather uses it in fractured forms such as ceramics shards, tiles or textures that are set in resin or are placed alongside materials such as salt, sand from the sea and organic residue. In this way, by juxtaposing ceramics with ephemeral materials, he conveys the concept of decay, mutation and evolution of marine life. In his 'Into the Bones' series he has used ceramics and treated its surface in such a way that it appears fossilized simulating the skeletal remain of the marine species that is disappearing due to pollution. This series has its roots in Tandel's time in Bastar district of Chota Nagpur plateau where the indigenous people have been struggling to protect their sacred land from state interests and mining activities. He has collaborated with Dhokra casters there to cast Kotya bones. The ribbed lines on the fish bones are representative of the mining sites of Bastar. And at places in the sculpture, Tandel left the parts of clay mold intact to juxtapose the histories of local culture who are resisting erasure and protecting their lands. Here, in this work, ceramic then becomes a medium for archival memory for both ecological and cultural concerns. Tandel uses clay unconventionally in another way as well, he uses wet clay and mangrove mud. He does not fire them, but he uses them as temporary markers of sites of ecological violence. As opposed to the fired ceramics wares, these applications of unfired clay disintegrate with time, challenging fixity and monumentality desired by the modern society.

4. Technical and Aesthetic Approach

Tandel uses ceramics as a material and as a means and not an end in his practice. He often interrupts ceramics process and incorporates cracks in his works. He also combines materials like wax, resin and hair with partially fired ceramics. All these elements do not exist in traditional ceramic practices which delve on fired and hardened end products featuring control and symmetry. In some of his experiments, Parag has used ceramics dust and crushed terracotta to depict coral bleaching on artificial reefs. He has also depicted fish gills and decomposed flesh by pouring porcelain slips over resin. Both these experiments stand in contrast with the classical beauty and notion of perfection in ceramics.

We can situate Parag's use of ceramics within post ceramic aesthetic where he does not use ceramics as it is used traditionally as a means to an end. His practice embraces mutational identity and becomes a symbol of sedimentation, a tool of remembering vanished food rituals, extinct marine biodiversity and Koli community rituals and a medium of impermanence by rejecting the use of glazed and polished surfaces and compromising utility for raw and deteriorating surfaces.

5. Unconventionality and Relevance in Contemporary Ceramics

By stating examples from Parag Tandel's practice, we have already established aspects of unconventionality in his practice. In this section we will compile everything together and compare it with the traditional or conventional ceramic practices. We will then go onto situate his practice in the contemporary ceramic discourse.

In conventional ceramic practices we witness functional vessels made from fired and vitrified clay which emphasizes on glaze or finish. This kind of practice values stability and permanence and uses ceramic as a means to an end to make standalone objects. Parag Tandel's practice challenges all these norms and uses unfired, crumbling or symbolic. Clay in forms that are fragmented and resemble fossils. He deals with ephemerality and decay and integrates ceramics with other media to create mixed media narratives. Further, his works have rough and corroded surfaces.

Take for example, his work at the Indian Ceramic Triennale, 2023. His work 'Mali, Jal Jungle Zameen' used various materials such as water, termite hill clay, farm soil, river soil, rice husk, beeswax, datura plant leaves, mild steel, Sal wood, rock coal, brass, galvanized steel, tricot threads, jute and archival ink on palm leaves to create a sculptural installation. In this work, he aims to converge Koli and Dhokra cultures that belong to coastal waters and plateau soils respectively. In the final form, Parag had kept the otherwise discarded earthen outer molds and inner cores on the brass threads and inside them as well. He has also archived folk foods in this work by collaborating with Bastar Adivasis by documenting the recipes on the palm leaves that are suspended on a circular ring available for the audience to look at. Here 'Mali' is a non-anthropocentric icon and a folk form which acts as an archive of biological, botanical and geological time revealing layers of human consumption.



Figure 4 Mali; Jal Jungle Zameen, WATER, TERMITE HILL CLAY, FARM SOIL, RIVER SOIL, RICE HUSK, BEESWAX, DATURA PLANT LEAVES, MILD STEEL, SAL WOOD, ROCK COAL, BRASS, GALVANIZED STEEL, TRICOT THREADS, JUTE, ARCHIVAL INK ON PALM LEAF, 2023
<https://www.indianceramicstriennale.com/parag-tandel>

Tandel's practice of mobilizing material for socio-political commentary situates his practice in contemporary art. His work transcends the distinction among sculpture, craft and technology. This combined with his participation in the Indian Ceramics Triennale has marked his place as one of the voices in contemporary art practices in India.

Conclusion:

Parag Tandel's use of ceramics is unconventional and radical. He does not use ceramics medium as a means to utility, he rather uses its fragile and temporary nature to convey his ideas of marginalization, disappearance and ecological crisis. With his use of various materials with ceramics like otherwise discarded molds and resin etc., his practice has opened up the boundaries of contemporary Indian Ceramic Practices. By doing so, more focus is laid on conceptual rather than material exploration of the medium. Instead of confining to the ideas of glaze, firing, symmetry and utility, the characteristics that have for long stood first in ceramics practices, he uses the mediums characteristics of fragility and temporality to convey decay and resistance. In broken, unfired and disintegrating states, his works strategically incorporate ceramics to put forth a conceptual narrative. In his work, ceramic is a 'non-object' and is rather a gesture and stands for

material politics. It carries within itself, history, vulnerability and metaphor. Therefore, his works are radical especially in context of Indian practices where ceramics stands for folk heritage and functional craft.

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