



‘An ongoing and quietly robust movement in contemporary ceramics in India has been gathering momentum in recent years.’ So wrote the curators of *Breaking Ground* in the catalogue for the inaugural Indian Ceramics Triennial, held in Jaipur in 2018. My curiosity had already been piqued by the 2015 special issue of *Art India* on ceramics, so when an invitation arrives to attend a wedding in India, I take the opportunity to learn more about the ceramics community there.

In early March I head to Pondicherry in the country’s south-east to visit Golden Bridge Pottery (GBP) – one of the crucibles of modern Indian ceramics – to meet several alumni of its apprenticeship programme at their studios in the lush vegetation of nearby Auroville, a utopian township established in the 1960s on the principles of peace and international unity.

GBP was founded in 1971 by Americans Deborah Smith and Ray Meeker, and its stoneware has become synonymous with ‘Pondicherry pottery’. Its intensive seven-month course in ceramics is unique to India and has few international comparisons. ‘It’s hard to know what the Indian contemporary ceramic world would have looked like minus the influence of

Golden Bridge, but it certainly would have been different,’ says Sharbani Das Gupta, one of the curators of last year’s triennial. ‘Ray and Deborah created a baseline against which all practitioners would assess their work in a uniquely holistic manner: a quiet and steady stream that has grown into a massive river, shaping and shaped by the land through which it flows.’

All six of the triennial’s curatorial committee have come through the ‘GBP system’. ‘Rather than a school for ceramics or an institution with mission statements and lofty ideals, Ray and Deborah *are* Golden Bridge,’ observes co-curator Madhvi Subrahmanian. ‘They lead not so much by instruction as by example: through their attention to detail, the devotion with which they approach their work, and their passion for the material, before form, function or design.’

The enduring success of GBP is remarkable enough, but understanding its influence means disentangling the intertwined cultural threads: an unlikely confluence of American pioneering spirit, Indian spirituality and Japanese ceramic traditions. Smith and Meeker met as students at the University of Southern California (USC). Meeker had studied art at Pepperdine University

near Malibu before transferring to USC for architecture, but dropped out in his fifth year and headed to the ceramics department, where he earned a Bachelor of Fine Arts in 1970. He is renowned for sculptural work on the huge scale spearheaded by Californian ceramist Peter Voulkos, and for the ‘Fired Houses’ that he built in India between 1985 and 1998.

Smith graduated from Stanford University in Japanese language, then spent two years in Japan studying pottery with the noted ceramic artist Araki Takako, before an apprenticeship with Yamamoto Toshu in Bizen Province in the south-west, known for its wood-fired, ash-glazed pottery. She also spent three months as an interpreter for ceramist Susan Peterson while the latter was researching her biography of studio potter Shōji Hamada. Smith’s time in Japan is apparent not only in her ceramics, but also in the approach to production she put in place at Golden Bridge Pottery – a methodology that has shaped the GBP students’ work.

Smith was drawn to Pondicherry by the teachings of the Indian spiritual leader Sri Aurobindo Ghose, who founded an ashram there in 1910. It now has some 2,000 devotees and runs several craft businesses. ‘As time progressed, I became overwhelmed by life’s mystery,’ she tells me. ‘I read some of Aurobindo’s letters and they really spoke to me.’ When the ashram asked her to start a pottery, she invited Meeker to come and build its kilns. GBP later became independent, though the ashram still sponsors the founders’ visas.

We meet in Pondicherry’s colonial-era White Town, in the house they bought in the 1970s when the area was down-at-heel. Now, it seems, a grand building is being turned into a hotel or boutique on every corner. Meeker and Smith gradually remodelled their home to its present airy splendour: a huge courtyard, open to the sky and rains, greets the visitor; large ceramic sculptures nestle amid tropical foliage. On the ground floor is a veritable museum of ceramics – gifts from former students and friends – while upstairs are five tall ceramic sculptures by several GBP alumni, originally exhibited in

SEEDPODS: COLLECTION CL. ANARCH GIMHAH MUSEUM, SOUTH KOREA. PHOTO SELUNG TARK KIM



Above: Deborah Smith and Ray Meeker, founders of Golden Bridge Pottery. Top left: Supriya Menon Meneghetti, *Seedpods*, 2013, sizes variable

2002 as a public art installation outside Mumbai’s National Gallery of Modern Art.

Golden Bridge Pottery, on the city’s south-western edge, was built on former agricultural land. Open-sided buildings surround a central courtyard filled with tanks for drying clay, with sacks of raw materials stacked in one corner. Casuarina, a local timber, is used for firing the *anagama* and the smaller *chinnagama*, based on traditional Japanese ‘tunnel’ kilns in which fly-ash from the wood is carried on the flames and a natural ash glaze is deposited on the pottery, yielding pieces with unique markings.

In the early days, power was unreliable and local clay hard to source, so they used non-electrical equipment and developed a stoneware body mixed from local ingredients. As early apprentices set up their own studios, GBP began training men from local villages, building up a team capable of producing a line of some 200 ceramic forms, each designed and hand-painted by Smith in her naturalistic style, fulfilling orders from India and abroad. ‘In 1971, on the Coromandel Coast of South India, neither Bizen ware nor “cutting-edge” ceramic sculpture seemed appropriate,’ says Meeker.

He began the seven-month course (recently shortened to six months) in 1983 to fill a gap, as only a handful of Indian universities offer ceramics degrees; since then, GBP has introduced up to six students a year to all stages of the ceramic process. ‘They make their own clay, slake it, dry it, wedge it, then put it on the wheel and learn to throw shapes,’ says Meeker. ‘After three months, they make a kiln load. Then we move on to more complicated projects.’

Smith has recently stopped managing the pottery’s production to write a memoir, while Meeker aims to expand GBP’s residency and workshop programmes, which have brought renowned ceramists such as Betty Woodman to Pondicherry. One hopes that a place with such a rich history will survive and, perhaps in partnership with ceramics programmes elsewhere, blossom into a new golden age.

In the meantime, I visit the studios of four alumni and see the fruits of their GBP training.

CULTURAL CROSSINGS

Ceramic artist *Janet Abrams* visits Golden Bridge Pottery, a school in Pondicherry where American pioneering spirit, Indian spirituality and Japanese design traditions converge. Portraits by *Shuchi Kapoor*

ORGANIC FORMS, SEDUCTIVE SHEENS

Supriya Menon Meneghetti

After gaining a degree in accountancy from Bangalore University, Supriya Menon Meneghetti trained as a graphic designer in the early 1990s, before realising she 'didn't want to grow old doing that'. She took GBP's seven-month course in 1994-95, learning how to handle, use and relate to clay. 'It is a powerful material,' she says, 'a drug you need to keep on doing.'

When the 2004 tsunami struck India, her studio on the ocean's edge was destroyed, so she moved to Auroville and earned a diploma in *ikebana*, the Japanese art of flower arrangement, to ensure a regular income without having to produce pottery in large batches. 'Pottery is an expensive pursuit, and I don't do mass production - I do what I like to do,' she says.

Her *ikebana* practice has started to show in her ceramic forms: recent vessels have multiple intersecting curves, whose directional turns complement the angular branches and delicate petal surfaces of her *ikebana* arrangements. Other natural processes also influence her work: she took a mould of her own belly while pregnant, and several ceramic 'bellies' with different surface treatments are set in the earth just beyond her covered patio. Inside her house are evolutions of this form, plus other organic sculptures - tall, bottle-like objects, a trio of floor-mounted 'hillocks' with intriguing perforations - whose seductive sheens result from firing in an *anagama* kiln.

Menon Meneghetti is active on the international ceramics scene, having shown work or curated exhibitions in South Korea, Italy and the UK. But her priority now is helping Deborah Smith complete her memoir, including digitising handwritten letters to her mother that recount the challenges of setting up GBP. 'Deb never wanted the limelight, but without her, none of this - the study and the knowledge all of us are using - would have happened,' she says. supriyamm.com

Right: Supriya Menon Meneghetti in her home.
Below: *Me and Me*, 2019, stoneware



HARNESSING NATURE'S RHYTHMS

Rakhee Kane

Born in the western state of Gujarat, Rakhee Kane studied painting as an undergraduate, taking pottery classes on the side. Clay eventually became her calling and she enrolled at the National Institute of Design in Ahmedabad for a course in industrial ceramics, where she produced tableware, tiles and sanitary ware. 'I learned to make different clay bodies and glazes, and how to apply them for mass production. It was great.'

She moved to Auroville after meeting her architect husband at a Golden Bridge Pottery workshop and started producing pieces in terracotta. But she soon felt restless and enrolled on the seven-month course in 2005, despite Ray Meeker's feeling that it was too basic for her. 'I wanted to learn not just about making pots but everything else related to clay: the nuances, the different languages,' she explains.

On the ground by Kane's studio are several large ceramic 'jars', their broad 'shoulders' designed to catch ash glaze deposits; some have specks of bright blue grog embedded in the clay, like lapis lazuli. Indoors are shelves loaded with handsome platters and vessels with distinctive surface textures. Nearby are test units from her Indian Ceramics Triennial piece, based on the *jali*, the traditional Indian perforated screen: it comprises a wall of hollow ceramic 'bricks' with irregular openings that sunlight can pass through. The distorted apertures are achieved by cutting holes in a clay slab then repeatedly tossing it in the way pizza dough gets thinned out by slapping it on a floured surface.

I'm reminded of the circles in Kane's ceiling: inverted terracotta bowls embedded at the centre of each unit of a concrete grid, which cast shadows like phases of the moon. Steeped both in modern industrial techniques and ancient traditions, her ceramics bear the imprint of deep attention to these fundamental natural rhythms. aavartan.wordpress.com

Above right: Rakhee Kane.
Right: *Seed Pod Forms*, 2011,
wood-fired stoneware



SEEDPODS: PHOTO IRENO GUERCI

A DELICATE BALANCING ACT

Ange Peter, Forest Pottery Studio

The artist grew up in Auroville after her parents, from Germany and Switzerland, moved there when she was two. One of GBP's earliest students, Ange Peter was drawn to Japanese ceramics by 'the balance between discipline, hard work and creative flow' that Deborah Smith's practice exemplified. Today, she works from a palm-thatched pottery, surrounded by a moat to keep out scorpions and snakes.

Peter does her own throwing, glazing and firing: 'I'm following the Japanese path: this is my life. I do it from morning to evening.' After her GBP apprenticeship, she went to Japan and found a 'very traditionalist, conservative' master. 'It was the hardest six months of my life, but I learned so much,' she says. Since then, she has specialised in *haiyu* slipware, which involves coating a clay slab in an iron slip called *tatara*, slip-trailing a surface pattern onto it, pressing the slab onto a plaster mould to flatten the

trailed design, then applying an ash glaze and wood-firing to 1,300° C. 'That's when the ash glazes give you amazing colours instead of the normal green-grey look,' she says. Depending on the trees from which the ash is derived, it may yield a black outline. When *haiyu* slipware is applied to porcelain, a technique she has pioneered, 'you get extra luminosity: everything becomes translucent'.

Peter is a driving force behind the annual Auroville International Potters' Market, and believes there's a growing interest in buying pottery in India. But she cautions about the 'beautiful, super-cheap' ceramics coming from China, Cambodia and Thailand. 'In India, there's a weavers' movement trying to keep the craft of weaving alive. But pottery doesn't have that kind of tradition.'

I ask her what the connection is between this particular place and her own philosophy of making. 'Conscious living,' she says, unhesitatingly. 'You put your energy into your work and the piece that comes out of the kiln rings with that vibration.' forest-pottery.com



Clockwise from above:
wood-fired stoneware
from Golden Fern series
with *haiyu* slipware;
Ange Peter; before and
after pieces showing
examples of ash glaze
(left) and an unglazed
slip-trailed sample





ARCHITECTURAL INFLUENCES

Adil Writer, Mandala Pottery

Originally training as an architect in Mumbai and Houston, Adil Writer returned to India to practise for a few years before enrolling in GBP's seven-month course in 1998. He is now a partner at Mandala Pottery in Auroville, founded in the 1990s by two European women; he also produces ceramic sculptures and travels to exhibitions and workshops worldwide. 'I get invited everywhere – the Far East, Middle East, Europe, Africa – but the US has never called,' he observes.

I wonder if this is because of the aesthetic Writer has pursued – the Japanese-inspired, wood-fired palette of browns and greys is out of sync with the US trend towards multicoloured surfaces and dripping glazes, as well as the growing split between experimental fine artists, and 'potters' who hew to traditional forms and methods. 'We're constantly fighting this thing of being "potters",' he says. 'When we do an exhibition, we say ceramic sculpture.' Sanskrit doesn't differentiate between art and craft: 'A *kalakar* is a blend of artist and craftsman.'

Writer covers a lot of conceptual and formal ground rather than honing a singular style – not uncommon in ceramists who have come to the medium from another field. His architectural background is evident in his palm-sized *Treasure Boxes* that split open along wire-cut jagged lines, and his *Sentinels* sculptures, which allude to the gateposts of upper-class Indian homes. He enjoys referencing forms from modern technology: for example, his piece for the Indian Ceramics Triennial – tall units made of raw clay and acrylic paint on canvas – reads from a distance like a barcode. For a future installation, *Fast Supper*, he plans to remake global fast-food packaging in clay.

Writer finds ceramics exciting – he is still sleepless before a kiln opens. 'It's like the old days, waiting for photographic negatives to be processed, anxious to find out what you'll get.' mandalapottery.com

Top: *Sweet Dreams - 1*, porcelain and stoneware paper clay, soda/wood fired. **Left:** *A Deserted Barcode*, 2018, native clays and acrylic on canvas. **Right:** Adil Writer in his studio at Mandala Pottery



PHOTOS: MARCO SAROLDI