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Vessels of Life: A Conversation with Manav Gupta

By Chitra Balasubramaniam

Manav Gupta affirms the age-old sanctity of earth and clay, assembling everyday objects made by potters from across India to create huge installations that convey hope, passion, and the journey and transience of life. Using just a few types of functional items—the diya lamp, the kullad tea cup, and the chilam smoking pipe—he succeeds in creating something contemporary yet timeless in its ability to tell a powerful story. Massed in their hundreds and thousands, these humble items gain new significance, as tradition reimaged makes an eloquent case for sustainable practices that respect the earth's resources while transforming the familiar into something completely unconventional, unexpected, and magical. —
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Chitra Balasubramaniam: Clay symbolizes earth, and pottery is one of the earliest art forms created by humanity. Both are taken for granted, yet you have persisted in working with them to create nature-inspired, site-specific installations. Why this obsession with earth and clay, as well as with water?

Manav Gupta: Nature nurtures us, and it's the greatest laboratory in which to learn. My 'Excavations in Hymns of Clay' series of large-scale installations (2013–ongoing) is the natural offshoot of a 23-year journey beginning after my first solo show in 1996. As a part of my artist statement, I wrote about 'umbilical cords of earth, water, and rainforests.' In 2018, when a new installation was being hosted by the Indian Ministry of Culture, I chose World Environment Day to mark my show at the Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts because it underlined my homage to the earth's resources as the true wealth of our planet. In 1997, I had christened this art for the earth as 'arth' from the definition of 'meaning' and 'wealth' in the Devanagari script. So, for me, choosing clay as the medium was an extension of its significance in

sustainable development. It is something that everyone across the world relates to, in the context of earth and environment.

CB: Initially, you had worked in painting and sculpture. Could you talk about your journey into the art world?

MG: As a child, I sketched banyan tree trunks; I saw poetry in the dead wood and felled logs. I used to create sculptures out of them by excavating various zoological forms. These were first exhibited at Taj Bengal in Kolkata in 1997, along with my contemporary miniatures. I joined the Academy of Fine Arts studio course, but it was my guru Shri Vasant Pandit who taught me the soul of art. I went to Presidency College in Kolkata, and then worked for a few years to help support my mother, a professor and single parent. After my sister's marriage, I took the plunge to become a practicing artist and never looked back. My first exhibition, at the Birla Academy in 1996, was unconventional — they had to install it on the lawns because there was no indoor space. Indoor galleries can be intimidating for the public, but outdoor environs are a comfortable zone to visit — people came in huge numbers. It was probably here that the seeds germinated of wanting to show my work in public places, to involve ordinary people in my work, and to do site-specific installations and people-oriented projects.

CB: When did the shift from painting to installation happen? Was the mural you made in 2010 for Airtel's headquarters in Gurgaon a turning point?

MG: Scale has always attracted me, and I like challenging myself by inventing new ways of handling a medium. The making of one-minute films as public service messages on climate change and biodiversity — a first-of-its-kind invitation from India's Ministry of Environment in 2006 — or carving out new paths in collaborative interdisciplinary processes and outreach projects beyond my earth series — led to a 'eureka' moment somewhere around 2011 as I was researching clay and pottery as organic mediums. I did a Duchamp on an earthen lamp — inverting it to transform it into a droplet of water — then laid it out as the shrinking river and the Zen globe of clay on the floor of the National Museum of Cultural History in Pretoria, at a 2013 solo show co-hosted by the Indian High Commission. The statement of inverted earthen lamps as metaphors for sustainable development got extended by public demand.

The five-story-high, 11,500-square-foot mural project at Airtel Campus played into my attraction to gigantic sizes. I had done collaborative and interdisciplinary projects before, but here, I orchestrated four distinct processes — conceptual, collaborative, site-specific, and performance. I got several employees from the 4,000-strong workforce to paint with me and engage in the lateral thinking process. The five

elements of nature — earth, water, air, space, and fire — came together in my 'Tree of Life.'

CB: Those five elements of nature are a recurrent theme in your work. What do they mean to you?

MG: Nature is my muse, and my work has always lent itself to the cause of the environment. In these clay installations, I use quintessentially Indian pottery pieces as they are. But I invented a new identity and global language for them as units of my large installations. The Vedic philosophy respects all elements; it is scientific. Ancient civilizations understood this. They were in sync with the five elements. My 'Excavations' installations dig out and espouse learning from earlier civilizations about sustainable living. The earthen lamp is part of the Indian cultural landscape. Made by poor potters, sold next to garbage dumps, on the road, these lamps are bought, placed on altars and lit as sacred; then they are discarded and unsung again — they are revered only for the short time they are used. That's how we treat the earth's resources. 'arth' is my humble wake-up call.

CB: Water inspired your series of works devoted to rivers, rain, and Zen. How did they happen?

MG: Water and rainforests were the core of my earlier work. In these works, I use one element, clay, to depict another element, water. Given the importance of water in our future, I wanted to connect the rivers of the world symbolically — the Ganga and the Thames, the Mississippi and the Nile. Reinventing pottery creates the context for an 'excavated' understanding that all early civilizations respected water. An installation from 2018 used nearly half a million units of pottery and covered over one acre. Just like rivers and rain flow, which have a mind of their own, my work finds its feet depending on the space and area. Rain embraces trees — the lungs of the city. Using these installations as the foundation, I curate interdisciplinary performances at my 'Dialogues at the Waterfront,' bringing society's stakeholders, including educational institutions, together with performances and panel discussions, in the hope that solutions might emerge.

CB: What are the Time Machine works, made from kullad cups, about?

MG: I use disposable clay cups to reinforce the message that we are all fragile and transient. We do not live even a micro or nano existence along the timeline of the universe, and yet we use the earth's resources irresponsibly, only taking without giving back. The time machine depicts the universe since its inception. It shows how insignificant each one of us is in the warp of time. As a cup of life we need to give

back to the earth in equal measure to what we take from it. In Time Machine — the sound of aum, I used a triptych of Time Machines to translate the sound of 'aum,' considered the sound of creation, with three syllables of 'a,' 'u,' and 'm' — the middle one being the largest.

CB: Where are you headed next?

MG: I am simply walking the path of infinity with a life dedicated to art. If my humble drop in the ocean can help bring about the change in thinking that is so needed in today's crass, commercialized, mechanized existence, if it can add a dab of spiritual context to the world as it takes art and culture as a vehicle of change across boundaries, it makes my artistic process that much more fulfilling.