

PASSIONATE About CLAY

Ceramics by Madhur Sen



Bright yellow doors greet you before you enter the artist's sacred space. Beyond them, red and orange cushions, ceramic bowls, more bowls and lots of sculpted animals, figures, faces and legs, yes especially legs; surround you. There is a small table in the middle of a small-sized room. 'Blink' a book about learned instinctive decision making; lies open as if the reader has just gone for a loo break. The title and cover tempt one to read a few lines. There is a comforting silence being thus ensconced. Now broken by a long, exuberant greeting from another room: Hi-i-i...!. Meet Madhur Sen: sculptor, potter, teacher and someone who has learned to communicate with mute rabbits, relate to their souls and mould this precious connection in clay.

Animals and birds have played a vital role in human existence and been interpreted in clay throughout the history of mankind. Used as lucky charms and toys, figurative forms in clay may even have preceded the making of vessels. During the seventeenth century when decorated porcelain was exported from China to Europe, popular Chinese imagery of dragons and dogs were often represented in these items. Many artists are inspired by animals and represent them in some form or another, but Madhur Sen tells her tale through sensitivity, emotion, passion and skill with an intensity that draws you into the depths of each piece. You know there is a story behind the glaze and you want to know this.

Deceptively simple, the process of creating these works is complex indeed. Inspired by master sculptors Rodin and Henry Moore, Madhur's work embodies the simplification of form as espoused by Moore without its monumental scale; and the sensuality that Rodin's works exude, without their realism. Somewhere in-between simplicity, sensuality, realism and abstraction Madhur crafts a language uniquely her own. A language that evolves through sounds and sights of living and poetry of being, supported by the voices of Eric Clapton, Pink Floyd, Rod Stewart and other music icons of the 1960's that she listens to as she works. Trained at the Delhi College of Art, Madhur was a sculptor, working in metal and stone, before she became fascinated by the wheel and turned to pottery. Typically, the sculpted form dominates her expression rather than pots thrown on the wheel.

As a potter, she is part of an ongoing tradition of pottery in India that has its roots in the Indus Valley civilization. This may be a matter of pride but it does not inhibit her quest for creating another dimension to the traditions of pottery as we have known it. As a studio potter, she is part of the legacy started by Sardar Gurcharan Singh of Delhi Blue pottery in the 1920's, which is evolving but still in its infancy compared to the monumental history and tradition of the *kumhars* in India, before them.

She does not only sculpt animals. Her faces, hands and legs are more her trademark than animals, but to hear Madhur speak about her connection with animals endears you to the goats, rabbits, tortoise and frogs she makes. It all started with Carroo, her pet rabbit. Carroo (coined by her daughter) is short for Carrot (food for rabbits). This one lived for unusually long ten years and it was not until the 9th year that Madhur decided to sculpt her. Take a look at the form. Does it look like just another rabbit? Sen has captured the essence of a rabbit, its infinitely huggable form and natural instinct to jump are well represented, replete with colour and emotion evocative of an intimate relationship; a sense of knowing coupled with a sense of play that is inimitably Madhur Sen. The rabbit emits no sound; She and Carroo communicated with each other without this and Madhur says that this rabbit sensitized her to all animals.

The musicians' heads (9" each) are inspired by an African-American banjo player that the artist observed in a live performance by Eric Clapton. She and her husband were watching a recording of this at around 12.30am, when she just had to get her hands on the clay. The two pieces were finished in a matter of about 2 hours. She just had to do it there and then. Look at the pieces? Have you ever seen anyone more *mast*? *Yeh hai* Madhur: When she is inspired there is no stopping her. Yet there are times when she will sketch for something like 9 months. Her teaching commitments and other aspects of living take over and she just sketches and then in another six months she can make another 200 pots!

In the shrouded figure Sen's portrayal of poverty and folds of fabric are engaging. She has managed to capture subtle nuances of a draped fabric which is old, worn, torn and fragile in something as plastic and impenetrable as glazed clay. The differential treatment she gives the fabric and exposed legs in terms of her choice of glaze seems appropriate

even if it disturbs and robs one of a sense of visual satisfaction. The rough treatment of the body is evocative of the roughness of a life lived in poverty on the streets of urban India, as we see each day. Upon viewing this piece one is left feeling unfulfilled. It is not a comfortable feeling. Perhaps this has something to do with the image portrayed but even so it seems to lack a depth of conviction. There is something so right about it but then it fails to sustain this feeling.

The medium of clay lends itself well to the kind of intense impetuosity that Madhur has espoused. She is successful through this in her animal series and more playful works. Clay is a deceptively malleable material which can make exacting demands on the artists' skilfulness. The power and charisma of the voice that Sen is capable of sculpting in, has just begun to reveal its potential. She has the capacity to bring forth a depth of emotion that is enviable and not misplaced in clay, but Sen has not yet come close to achieving the level of excellence of the sculptures in stone that inspire her

However, Madhur is passionate about clay. She says that for her Clay is about having a full-time relationship. Clay makes her cry. Clay talks to her. Clay is a true friend, always there for her. If she has been ruthless, it "gets back with a proper crack right there in the middle". But says Madhur, "you nurture the crack, mend it, and apply *marham-patti* and the clay puts the smile right there: back on your face!"

Gopika Nath