

A Clay Artist's

Travels

**Adil Writer
draws
inspiration
from his travels**

My wanderlust compels me to trudge across continents to places unknown, to climates unexperienced, and visit souls unvisited. And I'm not complaining. I travelled frequently in my years as an architect (having earned a master's degree in architecture from the University of Houston, Texas) but always stayed in hotels, visited architectural projects I wanted to see and came back home like a good boy.

Then, in 1998, I was bitten by the ceramic bug at the iconic Golden Bridge Pottery in Pondicherry. Subsequently I moved to the international township of Auroville, tucked away in verdant forests in south India where I have been a partner at Mandala Pottery since 2001. Clay almost made architecture a past life experience. Along with that came opportunities to travel with my work.

There is something about the international clay fraternity that opens its hearts, homes and studios

to travelling clay artists.

That said, I don't feel I have left architecture; I have simply shifted to the other side of the fence – I now collaborate with architects on large-scale mixed media murals and installations, this in addition to the tableware that Mandala Pottery is known for.

This year started with almost nothing major on the calendar. And today, I am fighting for "me" time! I just cancelled a trip to Germany, Ireland & Belgium (to a show *Bottles & Boxes*) because it overlapped with an invite to an international soda firing conference in Fuping, China, which I simply cannot miss!

I am convinced my wanderlust is genetic. I have inherited that – and my artistic genes – from my mother, who has travelled more of the world than me. She was a commercial artist, painting flower vases upside down in an era when no one quite understood such so-called "modern art". She recalls that while studying at the JJ School of Art campus in Bombay, she was pregnant with me,



*Detail of mural at
the Hermitage in Kandy,
Sri Lanka*



Ruins of Anuradhapura are one of most evocative sights in Sri Lanka

and was convinced that one day I too would study there. That was prophetic!

Sri Lanka calling

Nearly a decade ago, I received news from a Bangalore gallery that

an architect had purchased one of my *navagraha* series of nine treasure boxes. This was the beginning of a wonderful working relationship with Sri Lankan architect Channa Daswatte. Over the years, I have installed several murals and installations at his projects, the most recent one being an 18-foot long mural at the Hermitage in Kandy. The modules of this mural have been variously fired with wood, soda and gas to get the variations one sees in this mosaic. The flashes of textural lines are highlighted by soda vapour sprayed into the kiln at a certain temperature. Add to this, the blushes of rust and toast one gets from wood-firing, and the quietude of gas-fired tiles.



The reclining Buddha at the Degaldoruwa Temple outside Kandy, Sri Lanka



Looking out beyond the infinity pool at Kandalama, Sri Lanka



Bottles and Boxes for the exhibition in Belgium, September 2017

To offset the two dimensionalities of the tiles, I have added four shield forms to the collage. These forms

had been developed earlier during my collaboration with artist Laxma Goud, with whom I had a duo

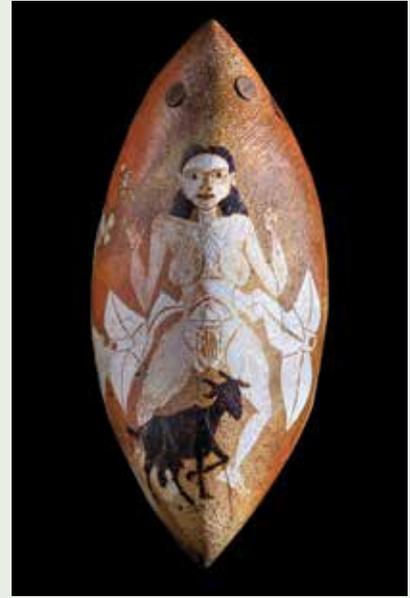
show, *In Collaboration*, at Mumbai's Pundole Art Gallery last year.

The shield forms in the mural have the crackle and hiss of a clay surface that has been slipped and stretched to its limits. This mural overlooks a large terraced dining area in Kandy, which dips into a valley cradling an enormous water body. Daswatte had wanted me to reflect the colours and feel of this outdoor setting in my palette for the mural. The resultant imagery is of a highly pixelated landscape.

Surely, life is not a holiday when one is installing a large mural in



Adil Writer at Anuradhapura, Sri Lanka.



Shield forms at *In Collaboration*, duo show with Laxma Goud.

idyllic Sri Lanka, but I manage to make time for a few days of travel and leisure. An unforgettable trip was to Anuradhapura. Driven there by my host, Channa Daswatte early one morning well before the tour buses arrived, there was magic in the air and a feeling of quietude akin to what I have experienced at the Vipassana centre in Iगतपुरी. Ancient stones and artefacts strewn around in precise disarray whispered stories untold. Add to this a host who is brimming with folklore and wit. What more can a tourist ask for!

I drew parallels between my navagraha series of treasure boxes and the *yantragala*, a grid of floor niches which was used to deposit sacred treasure at the base of a

Buddha statue at the Jetawana Monastery. Typically, the basic *yantragalas* had nine compartments and were used to intern the navaratne (nine gems). The *navagraha* sets now form a signature piece in my work, while the moonstone carvings at the base of several steps in Anuradhapura are still waiting to be manifest in clay.

Shades of Bali

Recently, I concluded a residency at the Gaya Ceramic Art Centre in Bali with a solo show 'Shades of Grey'. "Be ready for beautiful greys from the Gaya bottle kiln", I was forewarned in Auroville. Accustomed to drippy green ashen pots from the *anagamas* at Golden

Bridge Pottery in Pondicherry, I was certain I was ready for this adventure too! Someone in Ubud opined: "We live in a world of duality... of right and wrong, good and bad, sacred and profane. However, in the Hindu-Balinese scheme of things, this division is not so stark; there is a third position, the centre, which balances out life. Here, the metaphors of good and evil, of black and white, coexist with grey being the equilibrium – the grey that is called abu, which stands for either ash or a shade of grey; the grey of the magical checkered cloth known as the *poleng*, which is ever present in the nooks and corners of Ubud."

Gradually, this *poleng* aesthetic crept into my Bali series, as did the allusions to shades of grey in the ceramic books that I made at Gaya. These I made with a clay body mixed with volcanic sand off the black sand beaches of Bali.

Staying for weeks in a place far from home, coping with a different language, working in new studio spaces, firing varied kilns all essentially outside one's comfort zone, makes a residency memorable. As does working with strangers



Bali volcanic clay books



“Ubud has a tranquility that I have not experienced elsewhere.”

who soon become friends for life, who open their homes and hearts to artists visiting Gaya. Thank you Hillary Kane and Grace Njio.

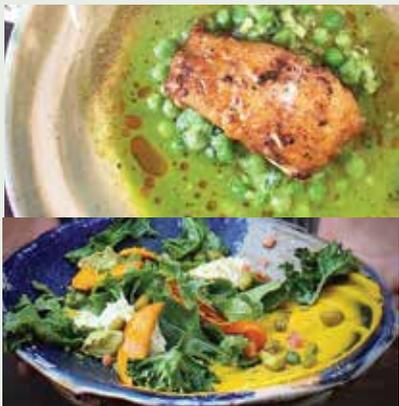
Ubud has a tranquility that I have not experienced elsewhere. Cycling through verdant paddy fields on the way to Gaya Studio or sitting quietly in ancient temple complexes, seeing a smile on arguably everyone’s face, translates into a sense of

contentment that seeps within and stays on. Soon a fresh vibe ever so subtly gets infused into my work.

And thus, I carry on living the cliché “there is inspiration everywhere.” As I lunch on a slab of the trunk of a dead tree (which serves as the poolside dining table of the Daswatte residence outside Colombo), I think about how he

made me reconsider the Mandala Pottery dictum of “we don’t make plates.” After some cajoling, we did make plates for him, and not just plates, but two large dinner sets, one in a metallic black and olive-green, and another in blue and white. This has opened a flood of orders for tableware at Mandala Studios. Today, we supply to restaurants, cafes, boutiques, hotels and shops; working with master-chefs – who are a pleasure to work with because they know what they want, while at the same time leave the aesthetic to us.

But that itself, is another culinary story and journey, for another time and space. ■



A collage of Adil Writer’s tableware plated with delicacies at Olive, Mumbai.



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