

# GATEWAYS TO THE PAST

## WHO SCULPTS THE SCULPTOR?

Adil Writer's art *is* his biography; anything written in the following pages will be supplemental but not entirely true. An artist has many beginnings, many false births before he settles on the form that suits him best, and even when he does find that form he's apt to drop it again the moment a better one comes along.

We'll begin then with the traditional narrative, the birth of a Parsi boy nearly half a century ago in what was then known as Bombay.



*"I grew up in Parsi Colony, Dadar, Bombay (yes, it's still Bombay to me, the Bombay I grew up in) in a heritage precinct of two storey buildings, most of which either faced or backed a garden. My home in Dadar has two gateposts...with (the number) 626 on one side, and (the words) "Adenwala Building" on the other. Attached to them have always been busted metal gates, which serve no purpose; we don't need these in our very safe neighbourhood."*



He studied architecture at Sir J.J. College of Architecture in Mumbai and then went on to complete his Masters in urban design in Houston, Texas, before settling for a time in San Francisco where he worked as an architect. He loved the "City" but feared creative stagnation and the gilded allure of job security; the artist bullied awake each night by the dread certainty there is simply not enough time to express all the things he wishes to. He returned to Mumbai to a good job as an architect; a safe choice in tumultuous times; but Adil had no intention of remaining "safe" for long.

And then karma took over.

Whilst holidaying in Pondicherry he agreed to help a friend, Ruby, fulfill her dream of becoming a potter. At her request he procured a much sought after application form for admission to Golden Bridge Pottery. But to his dismay Ruby lost interest in the course and the form remained unfilled. *"I told her at one point either you fill the form in or I will."*

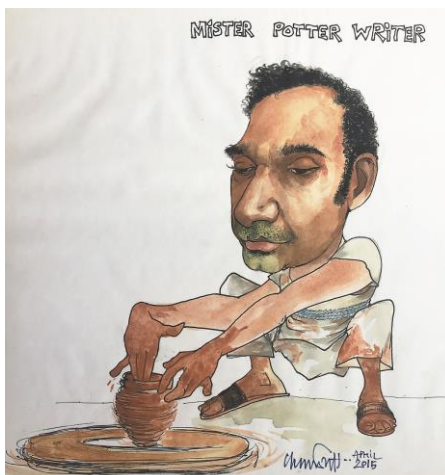
She said go ahead.

So he did.



Thus Adil came to Pondicherry in 1998 to study ceramics under Ray Meeker, an architect turned potter himself, who along with his partner, Deborah Smith, had pioneered the concept of high fired studio ceramics in Southern India. The course was for one year, Adil stayed for two, *"...he was all over the map as a student,"* Ray remembers, *'I couldn't believe he'd hang in there with ceramics.'*

Today Adil is still "hanging in there". He is a partner at Mandala Pottery in Auroville which produces an exciting line in functional tableware as well as architectural ceramic murals and installations. Here he also creates his distinctive line of studio ceramics, featured in exhibitions around the globe. Adil is also passionate about the large-scale paintings he paints in his home-atelier: *"This keeps me off the streets"*.



*Caricature by Charu Prabhu Desai, a painter who caricatures only bitter friends and better foes. Born in Panjim, lives in Auroville.*

But we're racing ahead of ourselves.

After completing his pottery course in Pondicherry Adil returned to Mumbai, this was in early-2000, but by then something had shifted inside him: *"...It didn't feel like I wanted to get back to this very good job I had...soon I moved to Auroville."*

One does not simply "move" to Auroville as Adil understates with characteristic aplomb, one packs up the past and takes an enormous leap of faith into the future.

Established in the early seventies, Auroville is an experiment in social and spiritual cohesion. Located on the south-eastern coast of India, it is a micro colony of some three thousand people from over 40 different countries, drawn from all walks of life and sharing a common dream; to rise above the grab-what-you-may mentality of the modern age while providing something of lasting value, not just to their own community but to the world at large.

At this stage it is perhaps tempting to insert our own prejudices into the narrative, by assuming that Adil moved to Auroville to get away from the rigours and incessant pressures of the rat race, but when I put this to him he laughs and tells me a rather different story.

Whilst studying in Pondicherry his cousin Camille, visiting from America, wanted to have her palm-leaf read; she'd heard of a place nearby where *nadi*-reading was still practised in the traditional way. With much persuasion Adil drove her there, with even more persuasion he handed over his own thumb impression for analysis, entertaining no hope that anything would come of it.

But he was wrong.

*"They told me everything about myself. I was not living where I was born. I was not working at a job I was trained for. And finally they told me I was going to live amongst people who came from across the seas."*

His entire life, current-past and future, gleaned from a simple thumb impression.

Not long afterwards Adil moved to Auroville to live amongst "people from across the seas".

\*

## GATEWAYS AND SENTINELS

Adil remembers with great fondness the Parsi Colony he grew up in; the buildings with low compound walls and elaborate metal grills and boundaries ending in those ineluctable gateposts, *"...Today, many of these lovely buildings have been torn down with multi storey buildings taking their place; character-less architecture.... they could be anywhere in the world."* And of course, the compound walls are gone, as are the gateposts.... all of them superfluous to the march of progress, like the last lights going out on a bygone era; the past, as he remembers it, is no more - but the artist in Adil would not allow matters to lie thus.



*“I was in Goa in January 2016 for a ceramic group show at the Cube and on my morning walks with Sonny I spotted lots of old gateposts along the country roads of Moira village. It looked like every set of gateposts indicated the character of the person/family living there. Somehow the gateposts had become the family (akin to how the owner starts looking like his dog.) Some of these gateposts even had figurative works topping them, which over the decades had to be repainted and re-plastered... so the forms became almost undecipherable, amorphous.*”



*“The first small gateposts I made immediately after my Goa trip I showed to my friend, architect Channa Daswatte of Sri Lanka, and he was very excited about the form and direction the sculptural pieces were headed in. On my recent trip to the island he drove me to Colombo 7, an old part of town. Another early morning walk with a friend, another series of gateposts; such character in them, and so universal; these could’ve been in Dadar or Bandra in Bombay, or even in Goa! Blame it on Colonialism!”*”



Adil's ceramic gateposts are fissured, arthritic, gnarled by time and glacial with age; it lends them a powerful sense of nostalgia, from a certain angle they appear solid as any other object, but a subtle shift of light, a change in mood or perspective, and suddenly they seem whimsical as dreams, you get the distinct impression you are holding memories in your hands, that they are dissolving even as you try to grasp their inherent meaning, surfaces patterned by splashes of charred indigo and veins of heliotrope, possible signs of salt water corrosion, like something rescued from the cargo hold of a sunken galleon. *"Most of these pieces are soda-fired with wood as the fuel, which lends the works this rich character and texture."*



In producing his gateposts Adil has pre-empted time, by meticulously crafting the ravages of entropy into his artefacts he has *become* time; in his hands an object ages decades, centuries, retaining only the suggestion of its original form. When viewing his gateposts it becomes clear that Adil is not as interested in form as he is in process, in corrosion and dissolution and fragmentation and rebirth; his art is an homage to memory, born of the realisation that nothing long remains untarnished; nothing long remains unchanged.

**CHIKE DELUNA**

**Goa 2017**