

SEEKING SATORI

In the way of most life-changing events, Adil Writer's road to Japan was a trick of chance. A friend's suggestion, then a few inquiries, and he was part of the prestigious resident artist programme at Shigaraki Park. One of Japan's six ancient kiln sites, Shigaraki is one of the oldest pottery centres in Japan. It is, in Writer's words, akin to a trip to Mecca.



Japan is a ceramic artist's dream come true. The land's enviable geology offers up an astounding variety of clays. Stretches of land extending no more than a few square kilometres have their own signature clay, each with its own character and idiosyncrasies. Firing ceramics in Noborigama chambered climbing kilns and Anagama cave kilns that hark back to the 5th century stretches artistic boundaries to the near impossible, offering the artist stunning potentials of form, texture and colour.



'I came to Shigaraki with definite ideas of what I would make there, but these were quickly abandoned. It is hard not to be swayed by the influence of all this history. I began by testing the endless variety of clays available, Instead of test-tiles, I made test books which ended up as an integral part of my body of work at Shigaraki Park. What started as a series of closed books evolved into open books, cutout books that doubled up as ikebana vases, and then books with windows, opening up to the sky.'



Every piece in this series of books demands to be touched. Some of the books are six inches high, others as tall as three feet. The secret hollows invite exploration, your fingers furtively stroke the gritty surfaces, and you want to bite into the chunky heft. Pages of the larger books hold smaller pieces nestling in niches, and some have tiny windows cut through. The clay pages are etched over in deliciously eerie hieroglyphics, and inscribed in vertical rows of an arcane script.



What does it say, I ask.
I have no idea, Writer says gleefully, I invented the script!



Traditional Shigaraki-ware is an homage to the *wabi sabi* aesthetic that surrenders to transience and imperfection, and has been described as a flawed beauty that celebrates the inescapable truth that 'nothing lasts, nothing is finished, and nothing is perfect.'*



Shigarakiware ceramics have contours that are irregular, gritty textures you want to touch, watery glazes that shift with the light. Quartz sparkles off the surface, colours dance across the spectrum, the artist leaves hints of ownership through a few chance fingerprints pressed into the clay. Writer says, 'In a matter of days, my work looked different to my eyes. I have often noticed this: a new environment immerses my aesthetic, makes me want to dirty my hands in its privacies..... every place breathes itself into the work, whether it's a friend's studio in some remote corner of the globe, or a residency such as this – different clays, different glazes, kilns, firing techniques.



A different language, different weather. Have you ever tried to throw clay on a wheel in freezing temperatures? Oh the comfort of a bowl of hot water next to the wheel! Eating off chipped handmade

tableware, the dimpled sake pourers, kitchen counters laden with strange berry-studded sauces, the kaki fruit dangling a hairbreadth out of reach, green leaves turning gold, autumn turning into winter, snow on the last day of my visit. When there's Japan all around, there's beauty all around.



'When you're working like this, outside your comfort zone, it's almost as if the work doesn't have a choice. It is fresh, unrehearsed. I mean, why would I go to different corners of the world and make pieces that I make in my own studio in Auroville, no?'



THE TAO OF TEA

"Tea is nought but this;
First you heat the water,
Then you make the tea.
Then you drink it properly.
That is all you need to know".
- Sen Rikyu (1552 - 1591)

The evolution of Shigarakiware echoes ancient Japanese customs, and the traditional tea ceremony perfectly exemplifies this mirroring. Shigaraki ceramics is an intrinsic part of this historical ritual, and these choreographed traditions of the tea ceremony are reflected in ceramics, starkly utilitarian and gloriously misshapen, a serendipitous meeting of clay, kiln, the artist's vision and the predictably unpredictable firing accidents. Writer's interpretation of this aesthetic similarly shuns conventions of prettiness, opting instead for a rough grace, unapologetically stark.



The cups, trays, platters and pourers are a study in asymmetry, because, as Writer says, ' Throughout history, symmetry is a disease we haven't been able to shrug off.' Writer crafts what he calls 'this mad mix of clays' into perfectly misshapen cups, sake pourers and platters that seem right out of a monk's banquet offered up by Gaudi.



At the end of his three-month residency, Writer had a solo show at the SCCP Gallery in Shigaraki, called *himitsu to uso*, (.....SECRETS & LIES). 'The title created a few problems. A Japanese friend whispered to him that in Japan, no one has secrets, no one lies. I don't buy that! Some in the audience tried to decipher the inscriptions on the books. They were quite indignant to learn these were letters I had invented, ...my homage, to the beautiful Japanese script.'



As one looks around at the works made in Japan, one notices a sudden aesthetic shift in the blue and white vases, the earthy solidness liquefying into a flowing femininity - tall, slender, sinuous with fluid lines that seem to move with the wind. 'The blue & white vases are possibly the quietest works I have ever made,' says Writer, 'a friend did ikebana arrangements in a few of these and they took on a life of their own.'



'The treasure boxes I made at Shigaraki feel very grounded and respectful of Japan. Try as I might, I cannot capture the quietude of these vases and boxes at my studio back home.'



Shigaraki Park requires each resident artist to create two large ceramic works for their sculpture garden, which holds a formidable collection of works by internationally reputed artists. 'Initially I toyed with the idea of large calligraphed porcelain panels, but ended up creating two large stoneware clay book shrines. The two large books I made for the permanent collection started out as extremely heavy pieces of clay. I refused to take the easy way out and make them hollow, they *wanted* to be solid. With extremely helpful and knowledgeable studio assistants, translators and colleagues, these were bisqued, then, gas-fired, and now sit in the sculpture garden. A very satisfying project.'



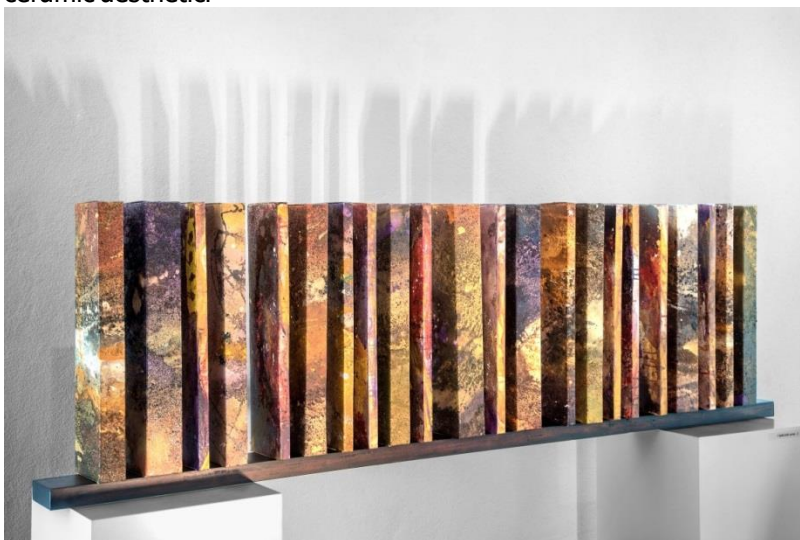
Writer's **buckets**, initially made for the International Bucket Show in Chennai, contrasted refreshingly against other stylised and conceptualised works in that show. His collection of quaint and curiously etched buckets, straightforward, unconvoluted, has a story to tell. 'I kept it simple. I made a mould from an old, beat-up aluminium bucket, and used it as a 3-D canvas by sketching on the surface.'



'These pieces take me back to college days, travelling on the 7am fast train to V.T. I engraved the makeshift toilets on the railway tracks - butt & bucket, butt and bucket - on these pieces. This visual is so engraved in a train-going Mumbaikar's psyche that those in Chennai from Mumbai immediately caught on and stared in hushed reverence, privy to a secret only we shared. '



The **BARCODE** series is a set of acrylic-on-canvas paintings. The visual changes intriguingly, depending on the viewer's vantage point. 'I wanted to position the canvas, usually immutably fixed on a wall, as an object instead of a crucifix. Perspective is everything: viewed just so, the visual arranges itself into a barcode, the textures of this, my "sand-series", bring my painted medium closer to my ceramic aesthetic.'



Crafted from fine Far Eastern porcelain folded into a groggy Australian sculpture clay, some installations from the **NAVAGRAHA** series are inspired by ancient Indian astrology, which holds that human lives are influenced by the nine major celestial bodies.



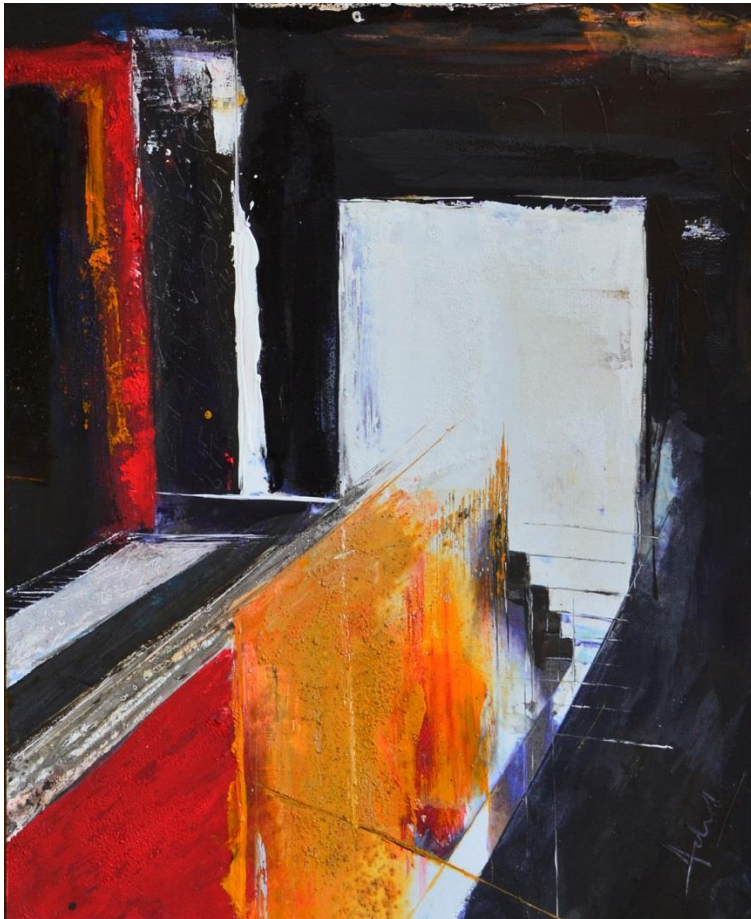
Navagraha translates as 'nine planets' and every piece in this collection is an assemblage of nine ceramic boxes, each corresponding to one of the celestial houses that radiates cosmic energy. 'A Navagraha is typically a single cube with the sun at its centre, surrounded by the other planets, no two of which are allowed face each other.



The Navagraha series emerged out of my fascination with clay objects in multiples: the single treasure box has evolved into a set of nine, or sets of four, the four-poster series, where each curvilinear edge fits perfectly into the contours of its neighbours, settling into a pleasing compactness that seems to paraphrase Yeats, suggesting that things fall apart, but the centre holds.



PAINTING for me is a what-I-see-is-what-I-get medium. I have been painting, I am told, since I was three. Painting frees me from the confines of a restricted palette of clays, glazes and cone ten firings. Although I am drawn to painting the human face and figure, my aesthetic veers most naturally towards the abstract, maybe even Impressionism. I paint architectural imagery and am greatly inspired by Escher's impossibly tessellated constructions and explorations of infinity, very evident in the "Shadows Of Our Lives" series.'



The **CRUSADE** Series is one combining ceramics and the painted surface in which I attempt to bridge the gap between art and craft. In India, clay work is still looked upon as a humble craft, not nearly as worthy as painting. My crusade is to try and bring the two mediums together, inviting a tactile interaction with art. I want the viewer to touch, feel, experience the surfaces!



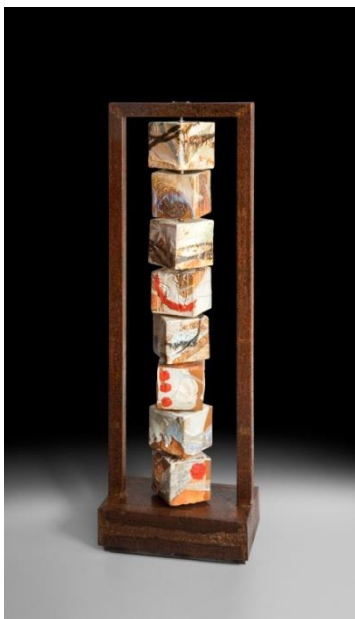
Writer's paintings which form the **SHODO** series are deeply impactful: starkly confident in their minimalism. Inspired by the traditional Japanese style of painting that incorporates bold strokes of calligraphy, they are almost like 'writing' a painting.



He started the Shodo series soon after his return from Shigaraki, and hasn't stopped. Interestingly, the



Zen concept of *enso*, or the circle of enlightenment, which is a central feature of traditional Shodo art, has often found its way into Writer's painting and ceramic work over the years even before he reached Japan.



**Out of the paths of the morning star they came -
The sun-eyed children of a marvellous dawn -
The messengers of the Incommunicable,
The architects of immortality.**
- from *Savitri*, by Sri Aurobindo.



PREMONITIONS is a series of acrylic on canvas installations, some wall mounted, many free-standing. So also are the interactive, ceramic installations, from the **ARCHITECTS OF IMMORTALITY** series, where Writer's incorporation of strongly textured ceramic ingredients lends these pieces a tactile, touch-me character. Many are inscribed with text from Sri Aurobindo's *Savitri*, a work that strikes a chord with Writer. 'To my mind, a painting can be an object in itself, break out of two-dimensional boundaries, stand free and tall, and claim its space.'



For the viewer, Seeking Satori is a challenging installation / exhibition. It is gleefully iconoclastic, questioning much of what commonly passes as the rules of art. In this latest collection, Writer proves himself a master of the aesthetic rules that he breaks with consummate confidence, offering up a sometimes disturbing - but always riveting - visual feast.

*Avan Jesia is the author of **Tower**, a novel published by Penguin India. She teaches English and has a Master's degree in Clinical Psychology. She lives in Bombay.*

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