

« INTERVIEW MADHAVI KOLTE

BUILDING WITH CLAY

As someone who is involved with the environment, **Madhavi Kolte** draws inspiration from her surroundings. **Trisha Ghoroi** speaks to her about her recent exhibition of intriguing sculptures

As children, we have all played with clay, whether it is just for fun (making animal figures) or crafting something for a school project. But, our musings with the material might be considered truly childish because there are people who create clay art that is beyond mesmerising. Because clay is so malleable, it is an inspired medium and there are several techniques and forms using the material. Madhavi Kolte has chosen a free-flowing technique called coiling, which involves adding layer upon layer to create stunning structures. Her pieces look elemental and natural — much like termite structures. She tells us that coiling helps her feel close to the earth and connect with her surroundings, and that she is inspired by anthills. We caught up with the artist to talk about her art, which was on display recently at Jehangir Art Gallery. Here are excerpts from the conversation.

■ **How did you get acquainted with the technique of coiling?**

I have experimented with all types of techniques of building with clay. But, coiling was my most preferred. For an artist, at some point after a lot of experimentation, it becomes apparent which style or method of working is compatible with one's thoughts. In my case, the inner urge to live in sync with my surroundings and my strong will to co-exist with nature has brought out these fluid, organic forms. And, no technique other than coiling would bring out this expression to the fullest.

■ **Tell us about your experience with other techniques of building clay.**

Other than coiling, I practised and experimented with pinching, slab building and scooping. I tried my hand at the wheel too. But, I found all of these techniques very stagnant and rigid. They did not bring the expression of rhythm into my work. For a while, I also enjoyed making busts. I carved them out of a lump of clay, but later, I resorted to the technique of coiling here too. I think it is the willingness to blend into my surroundings that led me to the technique. I want my forms to be fluid, organic and have a subtle presence.

■ **We like how you compare coiling with ripples in the water. Tell us a little more about this.**

My whole thought process during creation is to be in sync with my surroundings or to merge with my surroundings. I have compared them with ripples in water because of the way ripples emerge and then merge into the water body, without leaving behind a trace of their former existence. It is my spiritual belief that what arises must pass away too. This is the law of nature. That is why I prefer my sculptures to have a subtle but strong, resonating presence — just like ripples in the water. When they emerge, their presence is so beautiful, but at the same time, they merge into the surrounding waters and disappear bringing peace.

■ **Tell us about how you derive inspiration from anthills and make art out of it.**

Having delved deeply into our environmental problems, I am always exploring the existence of all living beings



>> Inspired by anthills, Madhavi Kolte's coiled clay sculptures look surreal and earthy



— about how they co-exist with nature and we don't! Anthills have been very significant to me. The fact that such tiny, seemingly insignificant creatures work so industriously and in solidarity to create their homes using such tiny bits of soil should serve as a lesson for humans. They build not a palace, but a home for themselves and their fellow ants. They have structures that are not overbearing like ours, but ones that blend well into their surroundings. They maintain a strong sense of belonging towards their community and work

towards a collective benefit. Man's individual insatiable greed has led us to the verge of extinction. In a situation where we have reached a point of no return, it is only these creatures who can teach us the way out of it.

Anthills from around the world have intrigued me. Their organic, subtle but strong, voluminous presence has had a big impression on me. Unlike other ceramic works, I refuse to use any kind of glaze treatment on my forms as the true colour of earth is vital to bringing out my expression and my state of mind — the mental state of serenity and blending with the environment. There is a strong sense of stability in these structures and this is what we need to learn from them. If humans can learn something from them, they could put in an honest, collective effort and turn the tables for our current situation.

■ **If someone wants to explore the technique of coiling, where should they start? What tips would you give them?**

There are several ceramic studios open to the public. It is about exploring the various methods of using clay. Choosing the technique to build with clay is very specific to the personality of the artist working in the medium of clay. It is like a photocopy of your mind. A budding artist doesn't need to think that they should focus only on coiling. They must select the technique that best suits their way of thinking and gives them complete satisfaction with the outcome.

■ **What would you have people take away from your art? How do you think your art should be viewed?**

There is no such thing as a complete understanding of art. Even striking a vibe with the visual is enough. I have experienced this very often in my studio — right from my maid to little children and even delivery personnel; they simply do not have words to express their appreciation, but they surely are completely in awe of my work. This gives me such a deep sense of satisfaction. My communication is complete at this point itself. After gazing for a while, they sense a lot of nature and get a figurative feel of my work. But, they don't require deep explanation to understand it. They are just so happy by its sight!