

Playing with clay

The work of ceramists Shazia Zuberi and Saman Shamsie reveals distinct qualities as they try to discover an independent form, comments **Qudus Mirza**

The Bazaar in Baku from the Association of Ceramists in the establishment of Azerbaijan.
Octavio Paz, writing about the 16th-century Spanish poet

It would be interesting to investigate a system of hierarchy established within the visual arts also. In the history of art, a few genres are considered superior compared to others. This can be realised through studying the discourse on art and analysing the art texts. But, on a simplistic level, we follow a certain code in order to delineate various expressions. That (unconsciously) compels us to put painting at the top, followed by sculpture, print-making, drawing, photography... and ceramics (and crafts) at the end.

This sort of classification is neither natural nor neutral. It reflects our belief and habits of rating some higher than others. Painting and sculpture are granted a higher status than the other modes of expressions. The reason for ranking painting high and ceramics low lies in the concepts of technique, skill and utility. It depends on the extent of manual labour employed in the execution of a work, the possibility of reproducing it, and its function as a decorative object or a useful piece.

The art of painting is given a special significance, since it does not have a strong functional aspect, generates unique pieces and not necessarily requires immense manual work. Whereas photography, ceramics, or print-making is considered a minor task, having lesser profundity. Prejudice of this nature can be experienced on numerous levels, in the academic discussions on art as well as among artists and students.

In this regard, ceramics have a particular place in culture. Throughout history pots were made for multiple purposes, and were decorated as well, responding to the impulse of man to introduce the elements of beauty in every object. Due to their domestic use, decorative value and relation to 'human scale' (having a specific size for the usage by human beings) these have always been branded as craft. A number of professionals in the modern times have chosen to express their creative self through this medium. They manufacture them in various sizes and exclusively for aesthetic intention.

Saman Shamsie and Shazia Zuberi are amongst artists with a bias for ceramics. Trained at the same college, they have been regularly working in their studio and frequently showing at different venues. Their recent exhibition — from April 24 to May 4 — is at show at the Art Gallery in Islamabad.

The work of these two artists is different, yet it is similar in nature. Both of them aim to transform the normal state/status of a ceramic pot — bowl, plate or kettle — into something extra. Other common characteristics are: the form of a leaf and application of similar colours. Saman tries to shape her pieces as from leaves and Shazia erects a leaf like a figure in her three-dimensional work.

In terms of appearance and meaning of the work, both ceramists reveal distinct qualities. Each person tries to discover an independent form. Shamsie adopts a certain subject with a range of glazes and textures. Most of her pieces are variations on the form of an open bud or seem like clusters of leaves. The floral motif reappears in her other works as well where it is drawn on platters. However, here these are applied just for the sake of decoration.

The plant represents signifies the female imagery shared by many women artists. The stage of unopened petals or a bud is an evolved stage of the shell, a visual



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substance Saman often uses. The shell also suggests the female symbol. But in the context of ceramics, it is the construction which resembles the vessel; as both are essentially containers.

A feature that distinguishes the works of two participants of this show is the difference of their concerns. Saman Shamsie focuses on more formal issues, while Shazia Zuberi addresses the notions of hierarchy through her work. She constantly converts her pottery into sculptural forms with painterly images and surfaces. Most of her work comprises free-standing objects and baked slabs in square, rectangular and irregular forms, with the edges slightly turned inward to bear a plate/bowl like character. The main motif of human figure — on these outer surfaces — creates the two separate categories.

The sculptural pieces are conceived as an amalgamation of bottle and human body. These figures are constructed with detachable top parts, substituting for the human heads — in the fashion of bottle caps. Apart from configuring the form of ceramic pieces into the body, their painterly surfaces also portray human elements. On her the pieces, similar type of images are drawn next to geometric shapes.

Shazia utilizes a richly palette ranging from blacks and browns to blues and turquoise. Both the representation of figures in simplified manner and the choice of earthy colours are echoes of the primitive cave paintings. This effect is achieved



Human elements in pottery: Shazia Zuberi

ed by employing the multiple layers of glazes and a variety of textures.

The construction of her ceramic objects of human body in the work of Shazia has to be interpreted as the artist's way of asserting and acknowledging pottery as a noble form of art. In comparison to the paintings and sculptures — brought on the walls or put on pedestals — the forms of primary art objects are constructed by human hands. In them are traditionally made for, and managed through the human touch — the glazing process. Hence the relationship between the human elements and the art of pottery is a direct affair.

Shazia Zuberi aims to change the way of an ordinary functional pot into a form that stands in order to give it a higher aesthetic status. She is not interested in the material value, but in the way of achieving the aesthetic value and utilitarian nature of the pot. She is not interested in the material value, but in the way of achieving the aesthetic value and utilitarian nature of the pot. She is not interested in the material value, but in the way of achieving the aesthetic value and utilitarian nature of the pot.

