

A Tribe of Clay

*Ceramic Sculptures by Shazia Zuberi
at Momart 8th September, 1999*



Contemporary ceramics has lent clay a new status as a medium of creative expression. Shazia Zuberi, as one of the few ceramists working with a figurative vocabulary in Pakistan is in the process of pushing the boundaries of the medium, still further in to the realm of personal expression.

It was while studying Economics at Allegheny College in the United States that she got an opportunity to work with clay. This put her in touch with her calling and led to a career in ceramics.

This Islamabad based artist was introduced in Karachi at the group show 'The Language of Flames' at VM Gallery last year. In her earlier work Shazia showed a distinct preference for organic textures and forms. From her kiln came shapes that emulated curling leaves and seedpods and a humanoid figure with Cycladic flatness and a wedge shaped head. Shazia has used this figure as a point of departure for her current collection. Informed by the expressive potential of the human body, the ceramist has used sculpted forms as the bearer of her conceptual concerns.

The sensitivity acquired during her years of intensive training as an exponent of Kathak and Bharatnathayam, has been transferred to pliable clay. Built with finely blended coils her figures are animated even in their stillness.

Each figure is gifted with individualized features and yet shares the common characteristics like a tribe of clay. They stand two to three feet tall on a wooden base. Sometimes assembled from a two to three pieces that fit snugly like angular bones of a vertebra. The head, which has been reduced to a small detachable pebble, sits on a cavity that serves as a neck. This deep fissure in the front torso also allows a glimpse into the hollow structure. Without visible limbs, this shrouded body seems to curl inward, with a projecting backbone. Almost in repose as it readies to unfurl gracefully to silent music.

Focused on the moment of stillness in dance, it creates a feeling of anticipation. Like an interlude in Kathak, when energetic footwork is followed by calm. Music and movement are replaced by a moment of introspective space.

The diminished size of the head becomes allegorical of the conflict between mind and body as Shazia reflects on societal attitudes and mans self-perception. With the balance tilted towards physical allure as the age of materialism celebrates surface appeal. As people live by the philosophy of 'use and discard' centered on expediency, too impatient for spiritual reflection.



Shazia Zuberi: Photograph by Aysha Villani

The discord born by this imbalance is articulated by the clay figures. Through graffiti that scars the surface with groves and linear images coloured in a medley of polychromatic matte and glossy glazes in sharp contrast with the smoothly glazed interior.

Each member of Shazia Zuberi's tribe of clay is a totemic symbol of twentieth century man, torn between the duality of his actions that make both the perpetuator and helpless victim of this age ■

Nilofur Farrukh.



tribe of clay

Saman Shamsie and Shazia Zuberi take ceramic art in Pakistan a step further, writes Niilofur Farrukh. Photographs by Farah Mahbub



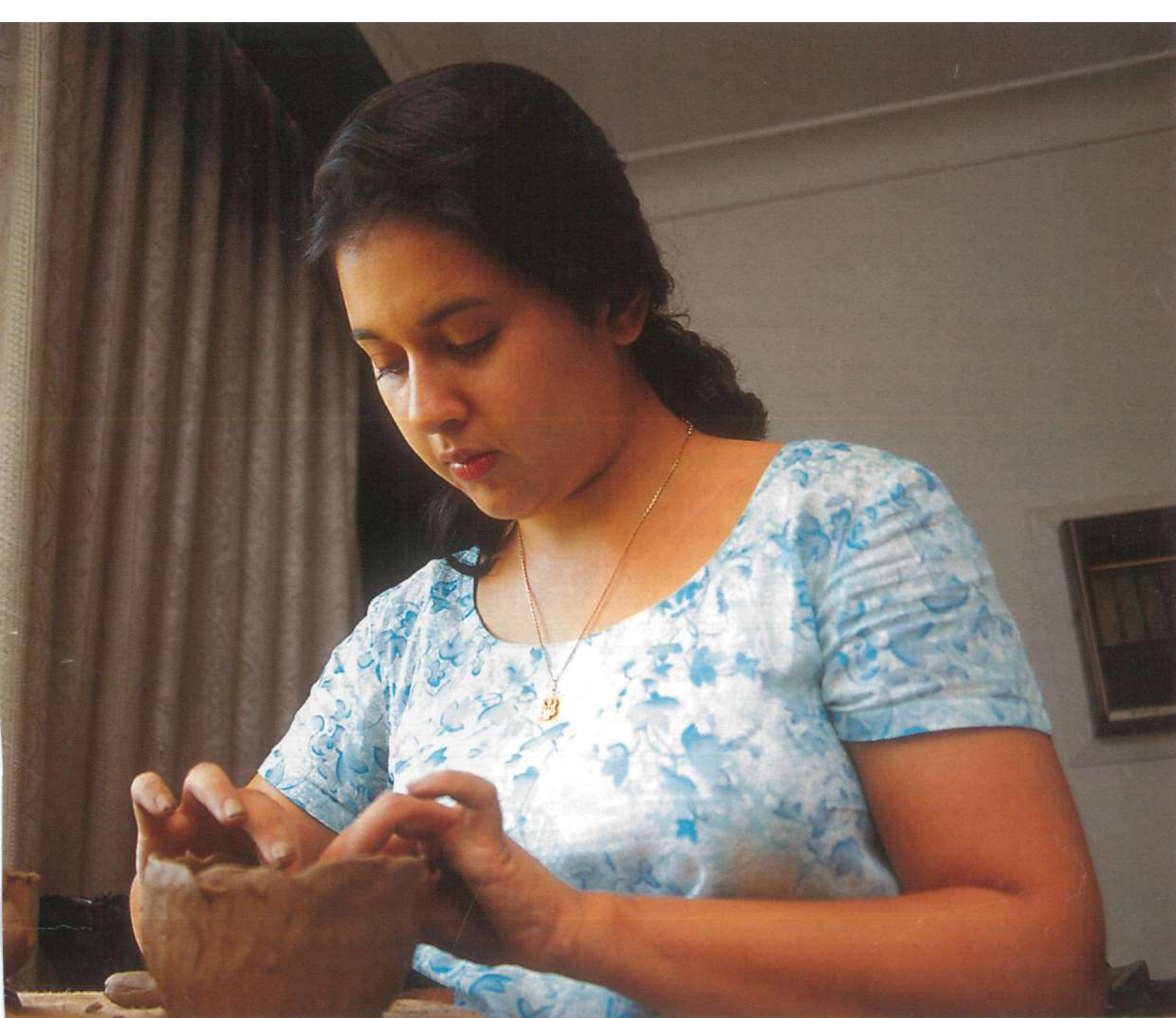
In the individualised expression of young ceramists Saman Shamsie and Shazia Zuberi, clay finds a contemporary interpretation. While one prefers to experiment within the vessel tradition and seeks inspiration from a fusion of contemporary and indigenous surface patterning, the other sculpts forms vitalised by the rhythm of the human body.

Brought up in different parts of Pakistan, Saman and Shazia met in the ceramics studio of Allegheny College in the USA, where a mutual passion for clay led to friendship. Today, they share a studio in Karachi, Artists' Collective, where two other painters and one potter interact with them.

Spurred on by critique and encouragement in

a non-competitive environment and introduced at a solo show at the prestigious Indus Gallery in 1996, Saman Shamsie gradually gained recognition for her well-crafted and skillfully glazed ceramics. Her preference is the "pinch and coil method", which she expertly manipulates to build fine walls around a central cavity. Like many newcomers her first body of work was the harvest of an early exploration. "My goal was to fully explore the classical form and create variations from it," says Saman who was disappointed by the response of visitors to the show who failed to appreciate subtle changes to the classical vessel she had introduced.

The gently rippled surface of her forms were exuberantly glazed in terracotta, browns and blues to create a



dappled effect reminiscent of deposits of lapis and turquoise untouched by the miner's chisel. Perhaps it's her confident use of glazes that has given people the impression that her main interest lies in glazing, whereas the potter feels that it is the challenge of the form that she enjoys the most. Not wanting to rely on pre-prepared recipes, among Saman's first tasks was to explore the locally available raw material for glazes and set up her own kiln to minimise production hurdles.

In *Haring in Harappa*, the show that followed a year later, the emphasis shifted to surface decoration. Looking both at the Harappan petroglyphs and the outlined forms of pop artist Haring, Saman's experiments brought together similarities in creative expression separated by four millennia. Her initial inspiration came from looking at the work of Jordanian ceramist Al Zoebi who extensively employs ancient imagery. Saman's iconography focused on flat, sans detail icons that decorated the surface like shadows. Using techniques like wax resist, scrapping and scratching they were reproduced under a thick mono-

Shazia Zuberi (facing page, top) and her art (facing page, below); Saman Shamsie (above) and her deft creations (below)



chrome coat. On finished pots, this glaze framed the images in bas-relief.

Last year, with a view to expanding her repertoire, Saman spent six weeks in France to learn surface decoration techniques at the Institute of Ceramics at Sevres. Presently, in her studio one can see two distinct styles emerging. One is her exploration of the spiral form found in nature. This has evolved into abstract bulbous shapes. Sometimes glazed on the interior and outside with subtle tones, this continuity of colour leads the eye from the obvious to the obscure.

Interested in indigenous ornamental slipware and glazing methods employed in *kashigari* (designed glazeware) and folk pottery, Saman is presently adapting it to decorative motifs on wide platters. She also combines arabesque and floral sprays in relief on the wide flat surface transforming this functional shape into a purely expressive form.

Karachitte Saman belongs to a family of creative individuals. Her mother, Muneeza Shamsie, is a well-known writer on literary and cultural affairs and Kamila Shamsie, Saman's younger sibling has a novel to her credit, which had made her one of the very few young novelists from Pakistan to be published in the UK. With a home environment conducive to her choice of career, most obstacles Saman has faced are related to societal attitudes.

In her experience, clay as a medium of expression faces prejudice globally. She feels a sculptor working with metal and other material gets more importance than a ceramist's work whose medium classifies the work either as craft or low art. Greater emphasis is laid on the functional aspect of pots rather than creativity; this affects sale and inhibits the artist's will to experiment.

Shazia Zuberi grew up in Islamabad where her mother, painter Mobina Zuberi, runs a gallery. Since an early age she had the privilege to be exposed to the works of senior ceramists such as Mian Salahuddin and Sheherezade. Her choice of a major in economics took her to Allegheny College but an opportunity to work with clay put her in touch with her calling.

Shazia's first love was classical dance and from the age of eleven she trained in *kathak* and *bharat-nathayam*. This sensitised her to the expressive language of the

human body and many of Shazia's earlier drawings were a portrayal of supple limbs folded and stretched to envelop the pictorial space. The human form appears both as a motif and as a shape in her ceramics.

It began as early as her thesis work in the early 1990s when she first made tall, humanoid shapes using all her glazing skills to give them a weathered surface. As a gift to the forest, these first figures were set up among the trees near her college. *The Language of Flames* was her debut show in Karachi and she shared the VM Gallery with a group of five ceramists.

Shazia favoured organic textures that she wove into forms emulating concave autumn leaves and seedpods, the faceless figure included in her display attracted interest for its creative potential. Dominated by figures, her latest collection will establish her as one of the few ceramists that work with a figurative vocabulary in Pakistan.

Shazia's oeuvre (left) and Saman's subtle changes to the classical form (above)





Forms inspired by vessels and platters are deeply textured on the interior and patterned with female forms on the outside. Her glazing is never monochromatic but meticulously mottled and blended to complement the rugged finish. At close quarters, Shazia's anthropoids reveal distinct features but, like a tribe of clay, are united by many common characteristics. Solidly attached to wooden bases they stand roughly two to three feet tall and have been assembled from pieces that fit together like a vertebra. With limbs folded inward, they seem to resemble a curled leaf waiting to unfurl to its full potential. Moving away from her earlier works, the body is more angular. The head, previously attached to the body, has now been reduced to a small detachable oval pebble that fits into a cavity that serves as a neck. According to the artist, this detachment is emblematic of the conflict between body and mind.

The fissure in the torso opens like the front of a garment to accommodate the head and, at the same time, allows a glimpse inside the hollow body. In sharp contrast to the roughness of the outer shell is the evenly glazed coil-built interior wall. Shazia contrasts textures of raw and earthy weathering on the exterior with monochrome smoothness within to reinforce the contradictions within the man she uses as her muse.

The ceramist does not use the limbs like a dancer to denote rhythm but the stillness of her figures and the projecting and receding folds of the body that form their own pulse. Almost like *kathak* interludes, when energetic footwork is followed by a pause; a calmness in all dance forms, that emanates unreleased energy; that moment of repose that allows the dancers to get "centered" before returning to the flow of the music.

The clay people of

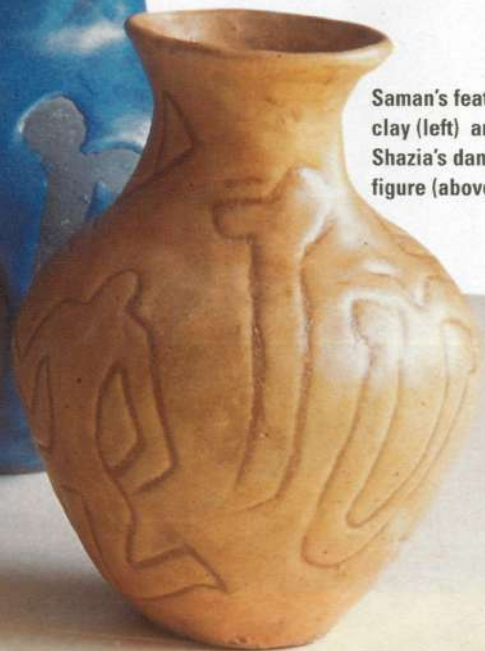
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Shazia's oeuvre embody the concerns and conflicts of her world and at the same time charts new territories of expression with this ancient medium. The field of ceramics in Pakistan is still at its embryonic stage with only a few practicing ceramists. In the absence of institutional support pioneers such as Mian Salahuddin, Kohari, Sheherezade, Dabir and Tilat, they have relied heavily on personal resources for survival and growth. Unlike most other branches of the plastic arts, contemporary ceramics is dependent on a knowledge of chemistry supported by technology, essentials no art school has fully understood nor made a financial commitment towards upgrading equipment and faculty development.

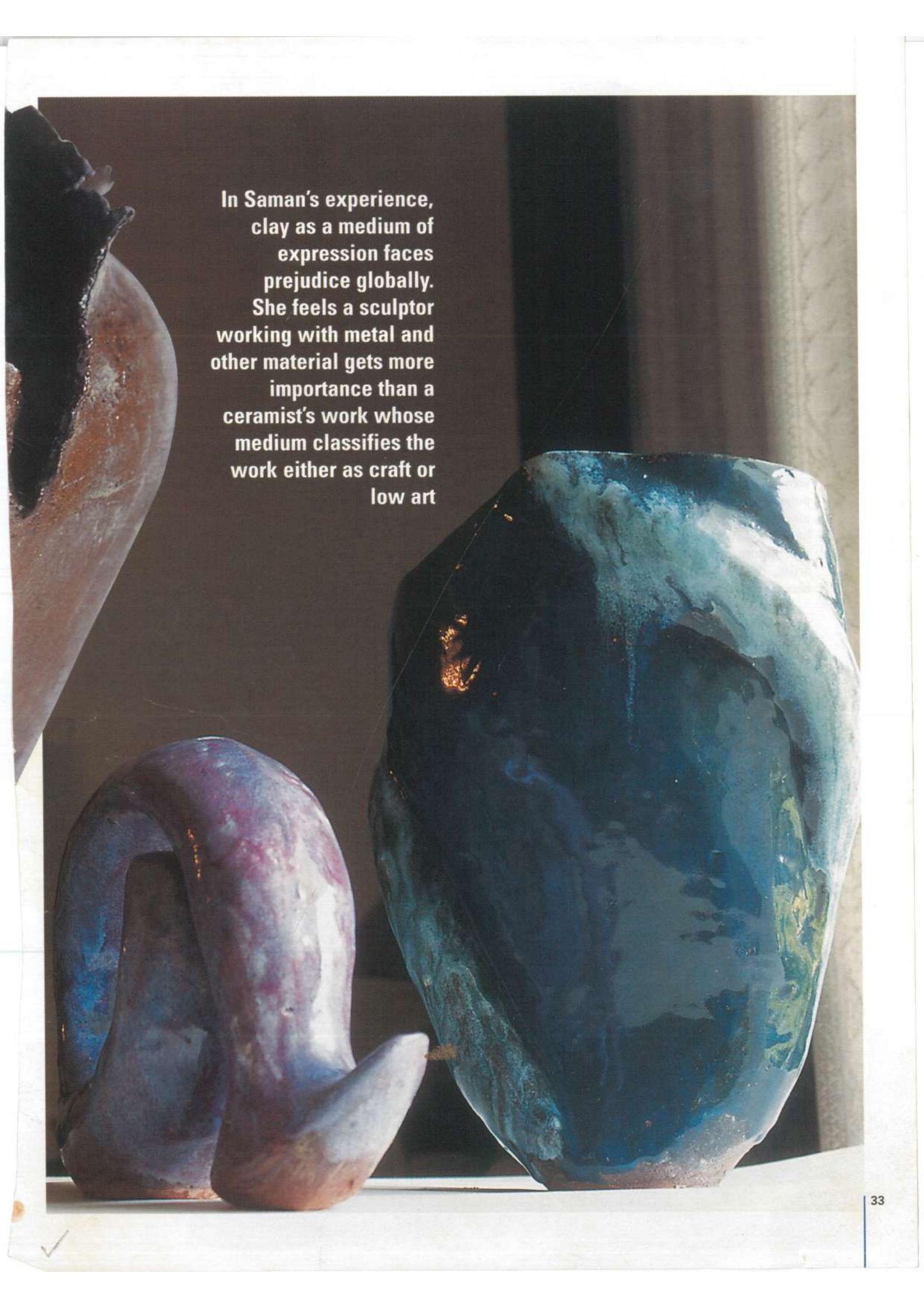
Falling into the stereotypical pattern of Eurocentric art education in the post-1947 years, no concrete steps were taken to investigate alternative practices linked to indigenous pottery on the lines of Bernard Leach's work in Japan and other countries that prioritised cultural continuity.

Shazia and Saman are alert to the need of such an interaction and keen to trade their technical know-how, particularly which pertains to the chemical hazards of firing and glazing for the privilege of learning from the conventional wisdom of four millennia; the rich legacy of the Pakistani craft potter.

Perhaps the time has come for the cultural diaspora to return to its roots; to give birth to a new synergy that unites the creative brotherhood under fresh paradigms aimed to bring down barriers of culture, class and media prejudice. Only then can an unfettered art for a new millennium be born. ■



Saman's feats of clay (left) and Shazia's dancing figure (above)



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