



The weight of stone

*Ceramic pieces sculptures by Shazia Zuberi
at Momart 30th December, 2002*



There are many ways to "sangsar" a woman, lock her in the darkness of illiteracy and take away her voice and she will be as good as dead. Shazia Zuberi ceramics remembers these women. The pebble, which is the central motif becomes her "sang" which serves both as a metaphor and aesthetic reference in this body of work.

Shazia started her career as a painter in Islamabad but switched to ceramics and her work was first seen at VM Gallery several years ago. Since then, almost as if she has found her medium, Shazia has diligently experimented with glazes and building skills.

In developing a language that reflects her social concerns, she began by concentrating on the human form. Built from interlocking pieces the only movement in these erect bodies came from the folds of the shroud. Her 'story pots' ornamented with narratives were often populated by women characters that seemed

to have stepped out of her earlier paintings. In the present collection she has added a new emblem, the pebble. The ceramic forms are inspired by the rounded flat rock. Speckled and scratched or smoothly glazed it becomes a constant reminder of its timeless use as an instrument of repression.

In the hands of the pre-historic man, one stroke could split pebble to provide flits for spear-heads and domestic tools. These physical characteristics find their way in Shazia's pots and the textural interplay creates surprises within the forms. Some bulbous pots enclose the space in its hollow body others open it up like an unfurling leaf or bark. The outer surface acts as a canvas where the images of her protagonists act out a drama of their marginalized existence.

Nilofur Farrukh

Shazia Zuberi's earlier tall ceramics often exposed the mere hint of a mysterious dark inner space within. This dialogue between the inside and the outside of the vessel has carried a reference to the human body and to the process of change that it has withstood in relation to the environmental and social factors in which it has existed. The interaction with clay has been based on the context of the marginalized female in the social milieu of rural Pakistan. The work has carried an interlocking dialogue between the painted imagery and form as it related to the dictations of her medium, in terms of low temperature fired glossy and matte glazing techniques and of subtle textural nuances. Based on an earthy palette, much of her work has evolved from her dialogue with the many factors in the rough terrain of northern Pakistan.

Although many of Shazia's peers have not hesitated to tread on 'pre-mapped' routes set before them by external pressures or factors, leaving little chance for self-discovery, this ceramist, who started off originally as a painter, has initially been able to root herself into a vocabulary very much her own by remaining true to her inner sensibility. This attribute could be the source of strength for her if it is carried into the future, and not allowed to be overridden by the pressures of the market. While pressures of a different nature may



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By Amra Ali

face artists working in painting, sculpture or in mixed media, a ceramist always remains in danger of not exploring the integral qualities of her medium and of making hobby pieces that look good only in the drawing room.

The figurative image that became an idiom of interrogation can be glimpsed in her new body of ceramics showing currently at Karachi's Momart gallery. Her spaces have blossomed open to reveal a multitude of glazes in brilliant hues and with a consistency much thicker than before. While she was using the local red terracotta before, the new work in white clay has been done after her move to Dubai. This clay can withstand much higher temperatures and has therefore produced different results in terms of glazes, something that has opened exciting avenues of exploration for the ceramist. Each glaze, however, brings with it possibilities in diverse directions in which the work could develop, and it is also the point where the strength of some of the more successful experiments has been diluted. This particular exhibition could be seen as an important transitional phase, but essential as it is to explore new avenues, it might be critical for an artist's growth to expose much less when the internal debate is still in the process of transforma-



tion. An artist, even the most successful of them, needs to go through it.

The shift to white clay has punctuated a shift in the overall sensibility of the surfaces and forms. Some of the smaller circular pieces in burning reds and cool yellows leave a trace of the potter's wheel, and tend to link back to a more traditional approach to pot making. There are also ventures in flatter platter shapes in dry charcoals and silvery

greys. The pebble stone form, however, is an element that pulls the work towards a direction that links it to an ongoing concern of the female condition and could very well be the beginning of a new journey in terms of form, material and imagery. The weight of stone, as this exhibition is titled, finds its origin in the recent cases of abuse against women in the Punjab. The pebble shape becomes a metaphor for the centuries old abuse inflicted on women, and for that matter on animals in the rugged feudal landscape of our rural areas. Shazia's vessels seem to present a strong physical exterior, marked by the constant inflicting of the stone. This imagery and that of the human hand becomes accentuated in two of the pieces, and could be interpreted also as being the hand of the artist. The artist has chosen to mould clay as would a sculptor or a painter, an element that helps evolve an individualistic approach to the medium of clay.

Standing amidst transition and uncertainty, it is for Shazia to cultivate her individual sensibility without letting it get fragmented by the demands set before her medium.

A dialogue between the inside and the outside: four exquisite examples of the artist's work