

*Kritika Soni's handcrafted
ceramics reflect her philosophy
of finding beauty in imperfection*

the Art of Ageing



'For the walls. One Tear at a Time'



*Latest work done at the Residency at New Harmony Clay
Project, USA. Slab work, Raku clay, Electric kiln, cone 6*

What took you from textile design to working with clay?

KS: Clay happened to me quite accidentally, when I was pursuing an MA in Textile Design at Chelsea College of Arts (London, UK). I had never touched that material until then. I was working towards my final project and building a collection of garments based on the concept of sustainability and slow design, when I had a thought of incorporating ceramics into it to further support my thesis. The idea definitely excited me but at the same time it was very daunting. After discussing it with my faculty, I was encouraged to experiment and try it out. I landed at the ceramic studio in my college, having the clarity of *what* I wanted to achieve but with no knowledge of *how* to. Fortunately, I was very patiently helped with the basic technicalities of dealing with the material and it turned out to be a great addition to my project.

That exposure definitely left a lasting impression on me – it played on my mind even after I returned to India after completing my Master's. I started taking weekend pottery classes alongside my full time job as a textile designer and I fell in love with clay even more. I realized that if I wanted to better myself at that medium, it required my full 100% focus. So, in 2016 I took a leap of faith, quit my job and moved to ceramics full time. Since then there has been no looking back. I have no regrets about switching my career and I am a happy ceramist today.

What impact did a formal design education have on your career?

KS: My design education has been the backbone of my creative practice. It has shaped my understanding of a good design esthetic and exposed me to various methods and techniques of following thorough a design process. It has definitely instrumental in enhancing my ability to think new ideas and to convert those ideas into something concrete.

My experience of studying at Chelsea was a stepping stone to landing a career in ceramics! I came across Wabi Sabi, a Japanese philosophy of life, at the time of working on my final project, and it remains the basis of my ceramic practice even today. With my background in textile design, I continue to work with textures and patterns, using fabric impressions on clay, as a way of bringing the two contrasting mediums together through juxtaposition and layering. I enjoy merging the soft and the tactile quality of textiles with the strong and tough feel of ceramics.

What's the story behind Kara Sabi?

KS: I started my ceramic journey under the name 'Kara Sabi' in 2016. Having had no formal education in ceramics, I wasn't confident of running an independent studio and felt it was best to work out of a community art studio run by the Lalit Kala

Akademi until I got the hang of things. It has been a great experience so far but now I feel I'm ready to have a studio of my own.

The name 'Kara Sabi' comes from the Japanese language: *Kara* means 'from' while *Sabi* comes from Wabi Sabi. *Kara Sabi* means something derived from Wabi Sabi. Kara Sabi is an expression of finding beauty in the imperfect through handcrafted ceramics. It draws inspiration from the Japanese philosophy of Wabi Sabi that honors all things old, worn, weathered, imperfect and impermanent. Its intent is to find beauty within the imperfections of life and accept peacefully the natural cycle of growth and decay. We live in a world that can often seem obsessed with perfection - the perfect job, car, home, etc. But by embracing imperfection, we can surely be

happier. This doesn't mean buying products that are sub-par or faulty - completely the opposite. Handcrafted products are often more sustainable, luxurious and unique than manufactured goods. This is because more time, energy and passion go into the final design and the materials are often richer and more durable. Through Kara Sabi, I attempt to present the beauty of handmade in its rustic form.

Each piece is individually handcrafted to be cherished for its inconsistencies and flaws, and thus asks the user to find beauty in its

imperfections. The esthetic is characterized by a minimal and a subtle color palette highlighting asymmetry, creases and joints. I intentionally like to leave the edges uneven/unfinished. I like my pieces to retain that handmade quality so they stand apart.

What inspires you?

KS: The beauty in ageing and natural decay forms the basis of my inspiration. I am drawn to architectural ruins, weathered walls, fading wood, peeling paint and anything that bears the mark of time. Life is organic and I like to preserve that quality in my work as well. I use ceramics to make surfaces that are a raw reflection of the way nature works - that expresses that ageing is inevitable and hence should be embraced. Though esthetically pleasing, my pieces are suggestive of passage of time and deterioration, encouraging personal interpretations from the viewer. They seek out imperfection, exposing the wear and tear in design, to look like they are disintegrating or in a state of flux.

Describe your creative process.

KS: The biggest factor that guides my work is spontaneity. I tend to work in stages that begin from the sketches and doodles of ideas that I have. Intuition and inspiration have a large part to play in my creative process, often forcing me to work without a larger scheme in place, where my initial ideas evolve a fair bit as I work on my piece. It is rare for me to plan out an entire finished product in advance and then begin to execute it. The manner in which I go about surfacing my pieces is very spontaneous. There is a clear amount of serendipity involved in the manner in which I work!

Because I work with textural found objects, the placement and usage of patterns and textures is completely unplanned. No two pieces will ever be the same. For every piece I make, the decisions - ranging from



Left & Right: Latest work done at the Residency at New Harmony Clay Project, USA. Slab work, Raku clay, Electric kiln, cone 6





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breaking away from a geometric form into something rustic, to adding textures and then adding layers of colors - are all made at that moment. It is almost like my hands and my mind are in a perfect sync and things fall in place without me consciously directing it. This keeps the whole process very exciting because even I don't know in the beginning how exactly the piece will finish. It keeps becoming clearer in stages. Some days when the sync is off, it shows in my work. I don't like anything I make on such days.

Share your experience of exhibiting your work.

KS: I have done one gallery show and a series of pop-ups in India and the response each time was very positive. People have been very appreciative of my work and it's a nice feeling. Having said that, I know I have a long way to go and get better at what I do. I have just begun! I haven't yet exhibited internationally though an exhibition is scheduled for January 2020 in Indiana, USA. It's going to be an exhibition of work created at my last artist residency at the New Harmony Clay Project there. The art scene is more evolved in the West. People are very supportive of artists and are willing to push their budget to buy something that appeals to them more gladly than here. Art is truly appreciated and ceramics has a lot of takers there. In that respect, the Indian ceramic scene comparatively is quite slow but that is changing and evolving for sure.

How do you balance creativity with the commercial side of it?

KS: I'm still learning how to balance the two and figuring it out over time and experience. It is important to know the audience you're catering to at a given point. For example, I make more functional pieces when I am exhibiting at a pop-up and I would allow myself to get more creative and do more art pieces when I exhibit at a gallery. There are ways to express yourself as a designer while still offering your consumer the commerciality needed to drive sales. It is critical to understand that while being creative is excellent, you shouldn't necessarily follow through on every idea. At the end of the day, you want to have good sales! Your

audience will tell you what the right balance is. It is your responsibility to take that feedback and translate it into something your customer can't refuse to buy.

Has it been a challenging journey so far?

KS: I have accepted that challenges are a part of the journey so I am learning to work around them. Working with Wabi Sabi as your inspiration can sometimes be challenging. To bring your own personality and design language intertwined with that philosophy is challenging. It is very easy to get carried away 'beautifying' your designs. To know when to stop and find that balance of it being minimal but not bare is very critical. To make something rustic yet desirable is tricky because if it's not done right, it can fail to leave an impression.

Another challenge is producing pieces in big numbers. I normally make ceramics in small batches. Because of the nature of my practice,

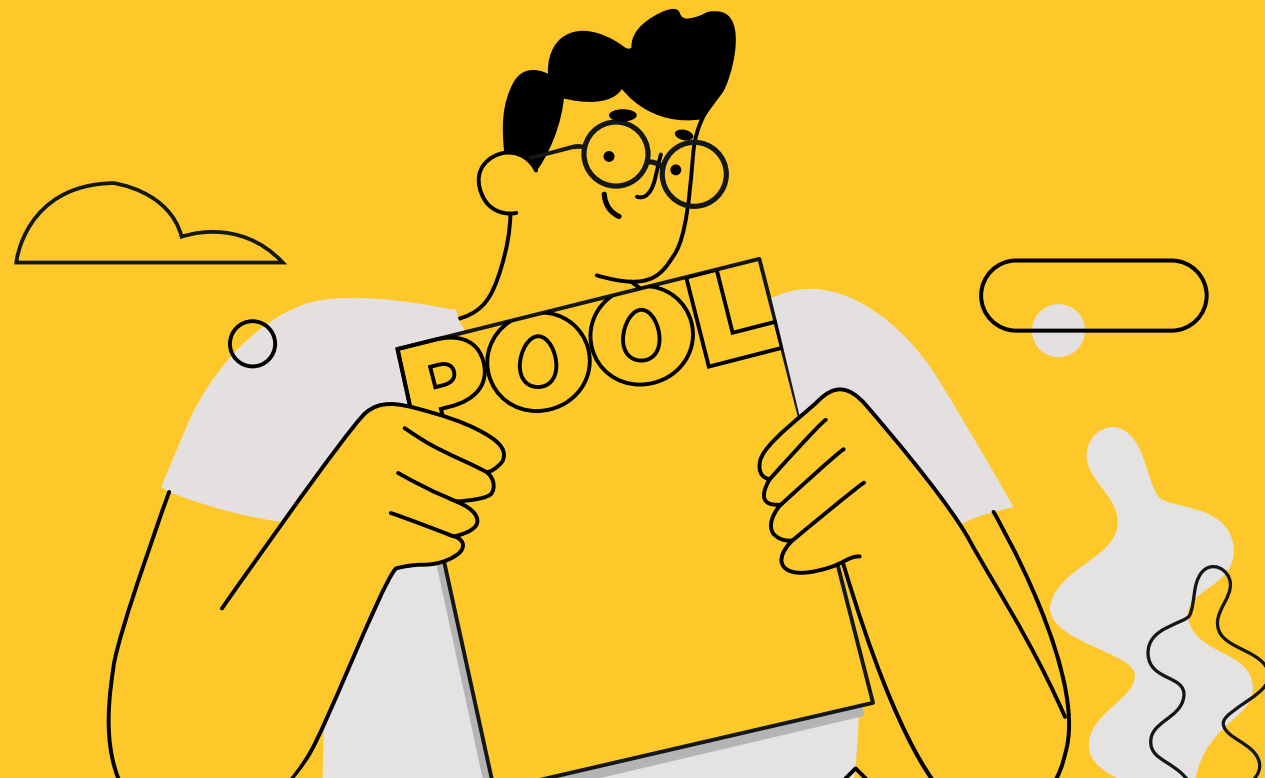
Older work before the residency. Slabwork. Stoneware, Electric kiln, cone 6



Latest work done at the Residency at New Harmony Clay Project, USA. Slab work, Raku clay, Electric kiln, cone 6

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every piece of mine is a one-off. Everything is hand built, so it's hard to compete with brands that are mass producing in terms of pricing or quantity. Handcrafted is still undervalued in our country, probably because there is so much of it here. And most don't understand why a handcrafted mug is double the price of a mass produced one.

Where do you see ceramic art heading in India?

KS: I feel ceramics is finally beginning to get an image makeover in India. It isn't just looked at as a craft anymore but is also being identified as art. There is so much happening right now, with so many talented Indian ceramists getting global recognition. I also see a gradual shift happening in people's sensibilities here - from a loud and glossy esthetic to minimal and soft. The market is slowly but surely increasing - there are more takers for unique, one-off ceramics as décor options. The appreciation for slow design and hand-crafted pieces has always been big internationally but I feel India is beginning to accept it too. It is an exciting time for India as it is in its transitional phase!

What's next?

KS: I am looking to apply for more ceramic residencies for next year. It is a great way to break away from your regular practice and dedicate a set time to experiment with your work and evolve. Since I love traveling and meeting new people this format really works for me! On the home front, I am trying to connect with interior designers and architects to take on projects. I am focusing on commission work of late. I am also working on having a small set-up of my own.

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*Older work before the residency. Slabwork.
Stoneware, Electric kiln, cone 8*