



Under/ Over Looked

By Kopal Seth

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This thesis is presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Masters of Fine Arts in Ceramics, from the Department of Ceramics, at the Rhode Island School of Design, Providence, Rhode Island, USA.

by
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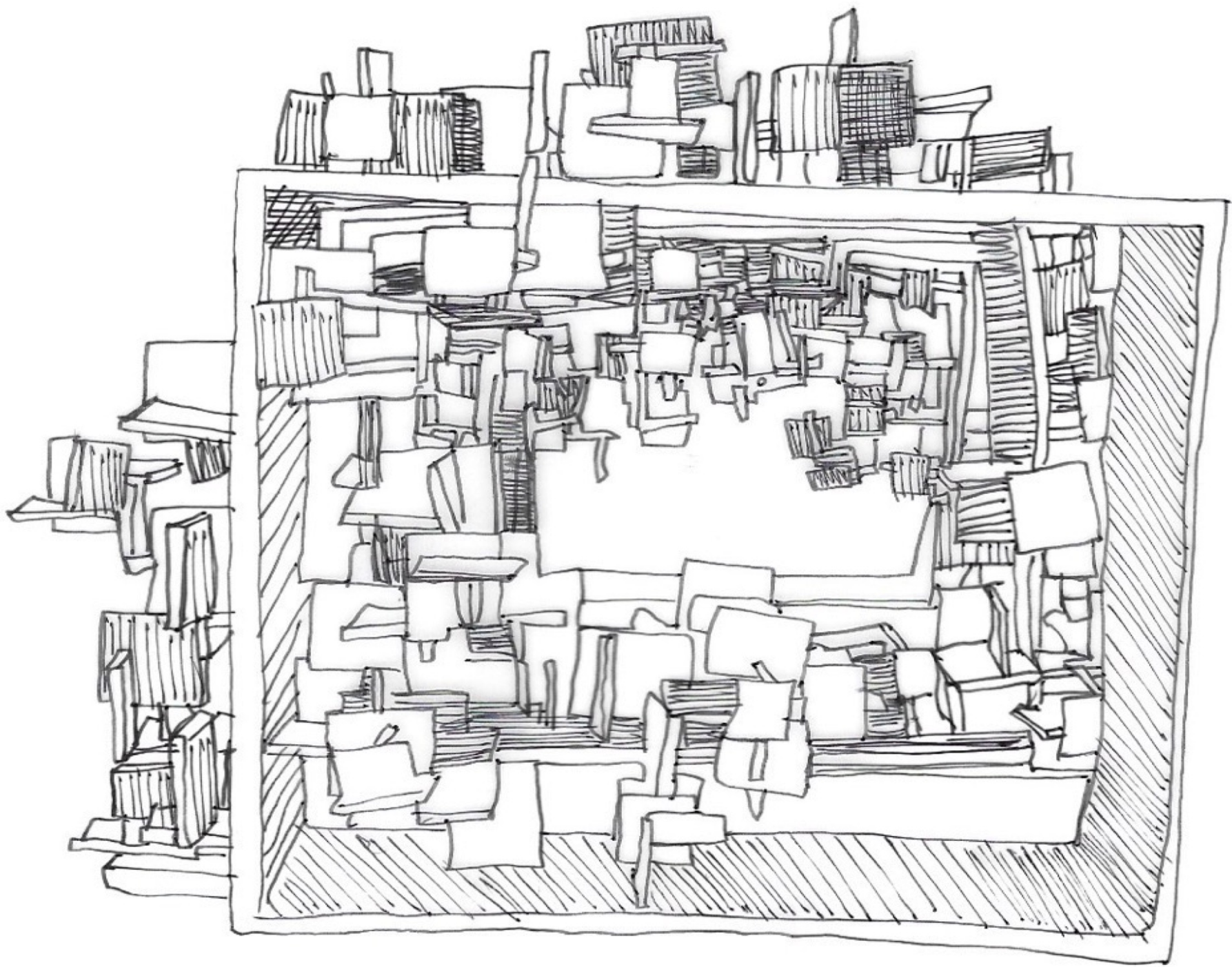
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To my family,
For believing in me and supporting me,
Even when they didn't understand me.

A c k n o w l e d g m e n t

This thesis would not have been possible without the constant support and guidance from professors Katy Schimert and Andrew Raftery. I would like to extend a special thanks to professors Lesley Baker, Anne West and our beloved tech Richard Haynes, who went out of their way to help us realize and finish our final projects in the most trying times. I would also like to thank my thesis advisors Glenn Adamson and Nicole Cherubini who have been mentors and role models to me, and the RISD ceramics community who encouraged, inspired and pushed me to work hard along this journey.



C o n t e n t :

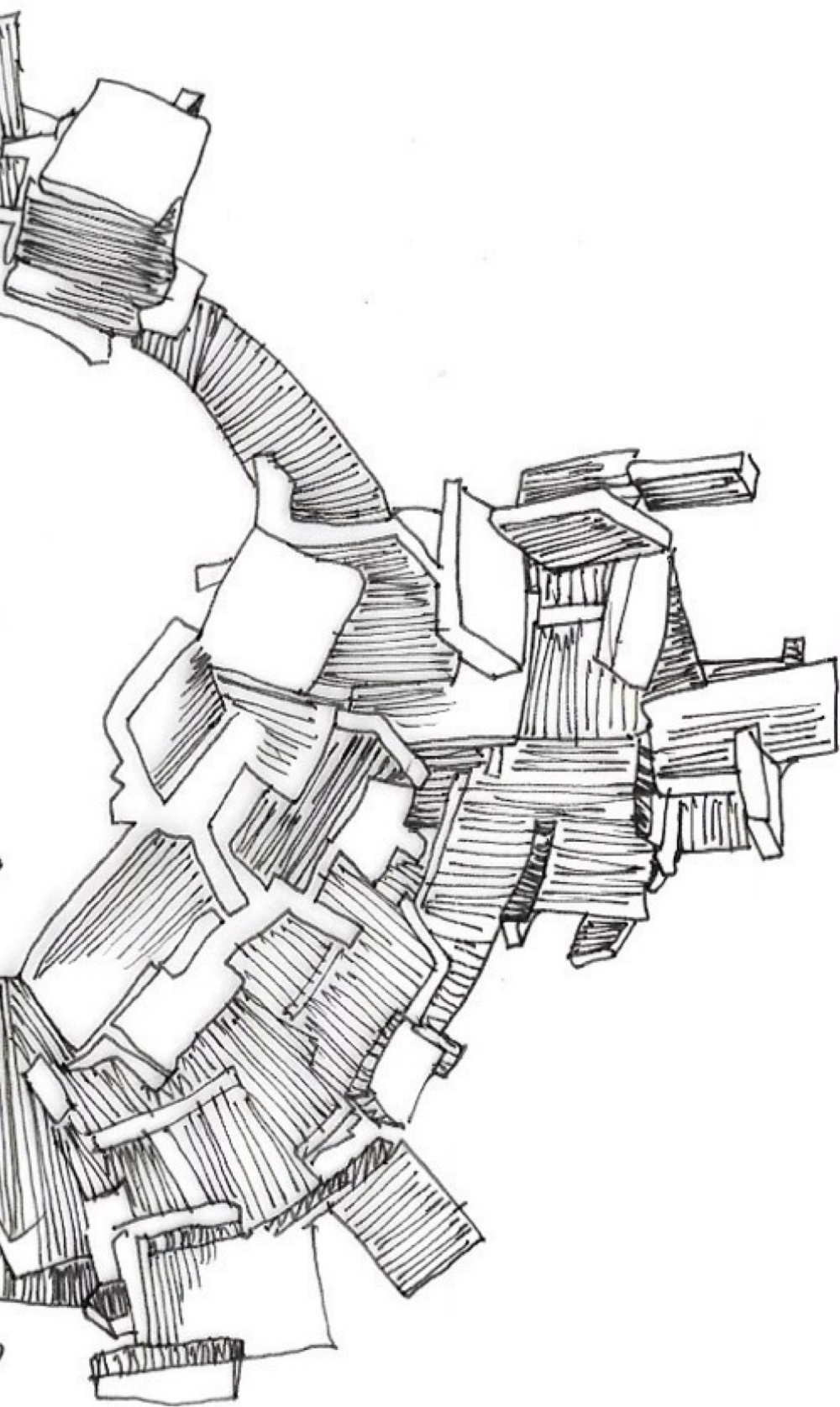
Abstract	6
A Celebration of the Mundane	8
Insignificance Redefined	12
Repositioning the Mundane & the Maker	13
Addressing Societal Taboos	16
Making	18
Creating Links for Transition	23
Work	26
Expanding the Practice	53
Disruption	61

Abstract:

Across the stages of migration, I have confronted emotional and social complexities. The farther I am from my roots, the more I want to strengthen my connection to India. Through a process of observation and reflection on every day, grows the desire to house a cultural identity within my work. Here, encounters between past, present and future layer atop history and memories.

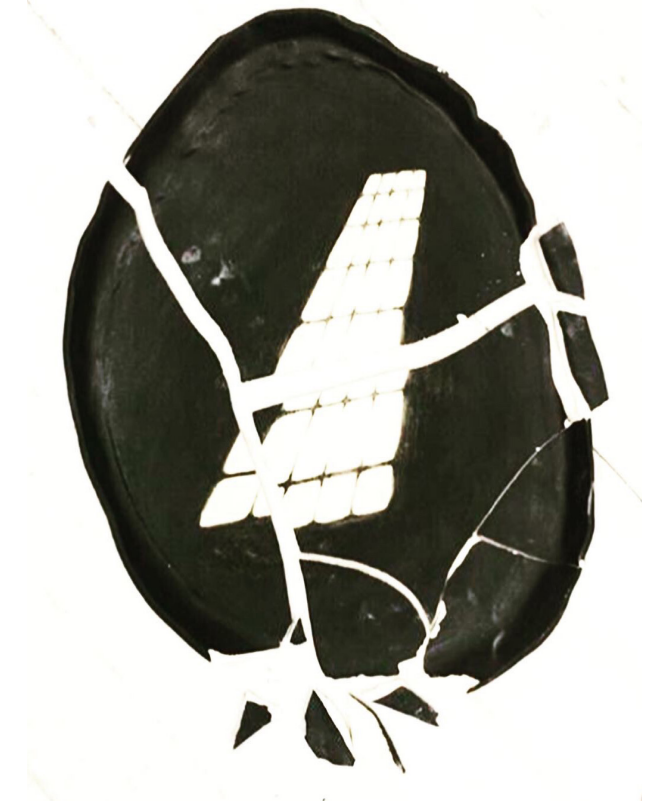
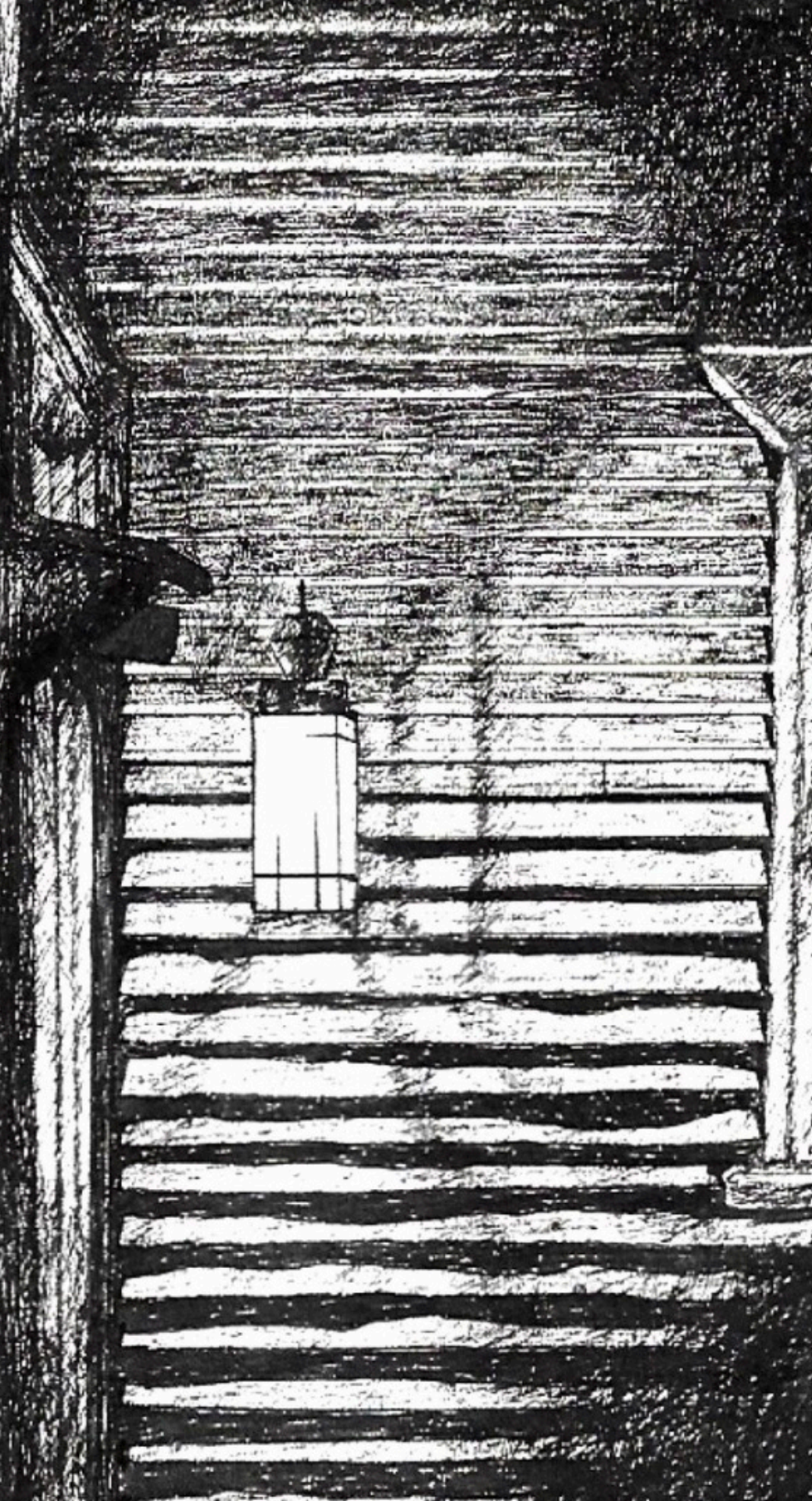
To reclaim the kindred character of the craft culture of my country, I rediscover those values that resonate within me through recontextualised forms, clay acts as my drawing tool to outline social structures, psychology, traditions and nostalgia.





From a young age, making was integral to my identity. Arts and crafts programs on TV invited opportunities to transform waste materials into sculpture. As a tradition, my grandmother, mother and I would pinch *roti* dough into *diyas* for regional festivals, arranging the oil lamps outside our balcony to invite a prosperous future. For this springtime festival of *Akshay Tritiya*, my grandmother would bring terracotta toy figures, small and large *matkas* to decorate and present. These objects carry the past for many generations — one that informs and is integral to my practice.

Under/Over Looked bundles together the turmoils associated with displacement, transition, belonging and culture. It tours the scenes of the marketplace where my work arranges gestures and chaos into form.



“Everything we associate with self-reflection is just as likely to be found in the mundane as in the exceptional.”
-Lissa Jensen

A Celebration of the Mundane

Breaking comes easy when working with clay. It's fragile, it's temperamental and yet dynamically strong. Such elements in life and in clay intrigue me. Therefore, I have learned to embrace and harness the purity within these moments of destruction. The brokenness and nothingness of these fragments that form the backdrop of our everyday life evoke poetry. These instances assert their presence as relief in my work.



Following this desire to find the poetry of the mundane, author Lissa Jensen describes the little moments she captures as her “personal haikus”. In her writings, she discusses the simple overlooked joys of life. Among these are a broken window, a vacant gas station at dusk, and the calm delight of picking ripe avocados.(1) She suggests that the power of these acts arises from their “insignificance”.

This intriguing thought resonated with me on multiple levels. Like Jensen, broken and abandoned things catch my attention and gain power, inspiring my own “personal haikus”.

A crack in the wall,
A bright light on a quiet dark street,
Shadows through a window,
Shards of ceramic.





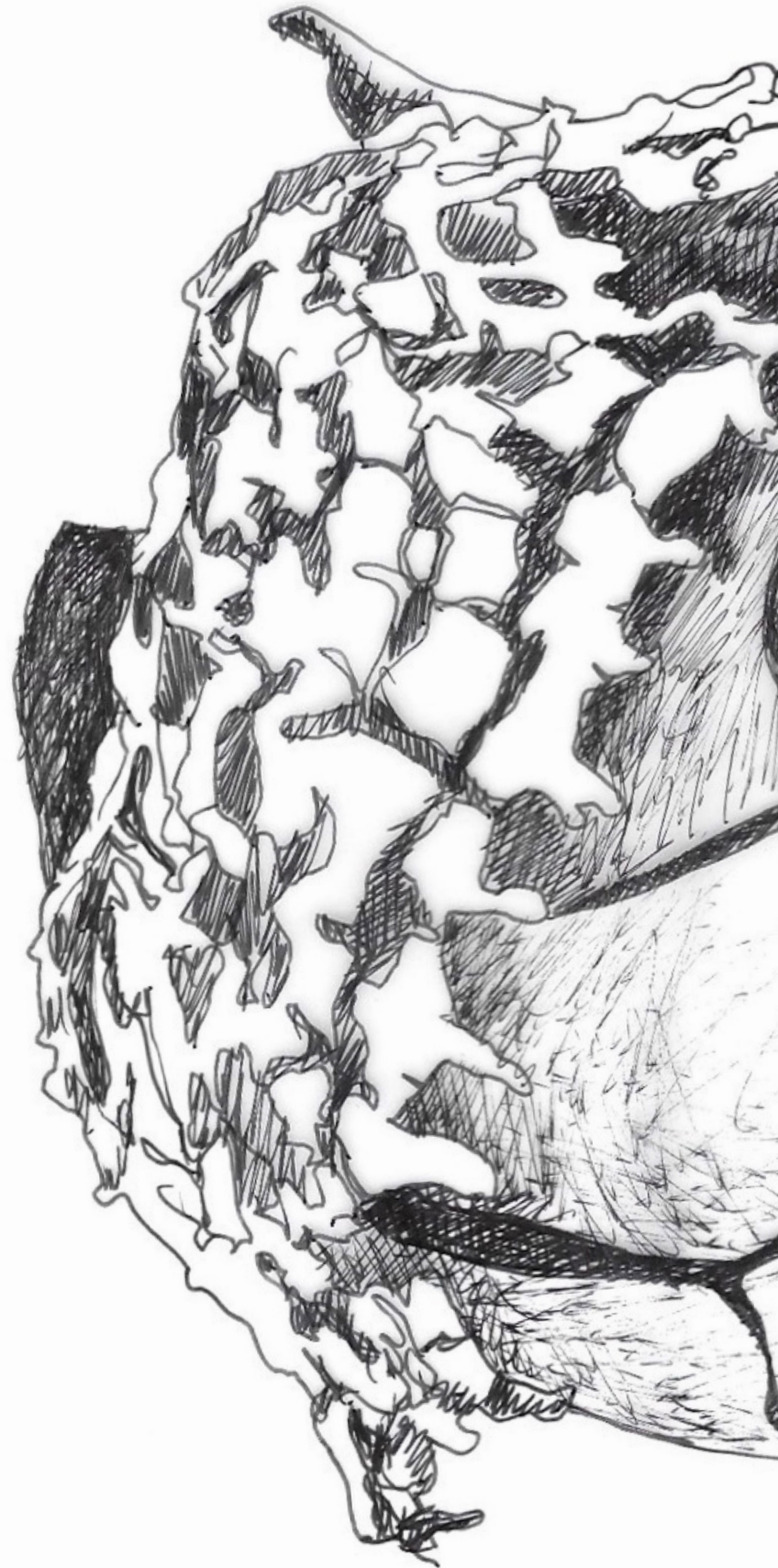
Every aspect of life in India is richly diverse, colorful and also chaotic. Our living spaces are dense, housing structures endlessly overlap and street culture thrives on a flow of humanity and a proliferation of goods. It is in this multiplicity that I derive inspiration for my work. I regularly capture with my camera aspects of this vibrant energy: juxtapositions of shapes, colors and histories. It is the instances of frugal innovations that are the most intriguing. Amongst this socio-economic diversity in my country, there are fragments of “insignificant” similarities. I am fascinated by the mundanity that connects us all seamlessly. It is the power of these apparently insignificant gestures that seizes my energies as a maker.

A study by the Harvard Business School states that “people are particularly likely to underestimate the pleasure of rediscovering ordinary, mundane experiences as opposed to extraordinary experiences. It also suggests that underestimating the pleasure of rediscovery leads to time-inconsistent choices: individuals forgo opportunities to document the present but then prefer rediscovering those moments in the future to engage in an alternative fun activity. Underestimating the value of rediscovery is linked to people’s erroneous faith in their memory of everyday events. By documenting the present, people provide themselves with the opportunity to rediscover mundane moments that may otherwise have been forgotten”.(2) It is this pleasure of rediscovery that motivates me to recreate eclectic objects.



Insignificance Redefined

As I think more carefully about notions of insignificance, of course, this bears on matters beyond aesthetics. What is deemed mundane is also associated with socio-economic class and the marginalized. Here I explore the so-called ordinary practices of the maker, the made and the weight of its labor within the society.





Repositioning the Mundane & the Maker

Reasserting a mundane form that is rich with symbolism

The majority of the Indian population follows the customs of Hinduism in some way. Historically, Hindu traditions discouraged the use of clay dinnerware as an eating surface. We commonly use leaves or stainless steel utensils, which may explain the noticeable lack of traditions of fine or luxury pottery in South Asia, in contrast to East Asia and other parts of Eurasia. Storage vessels, on the other hand, are acceptable. Large *matka* jars for the storage of water or other things form the largest part of traditional Indian pottery.⁽³⁾ Some other simple objects such as *diyas* and *kulhar* cups for tea are also commonly used disposable clay products that are part of the Indian clay traditions.





The rich history and ancient Indian pottery traditions celebrate the pottery and the potter. Pottery has been an important medium, almost exclusively for men to express their emotions and capture a visual message through shape and color. India is an agricultural country; therefore, large pots are commonly built to store water and grains. Early examples of Indian pottery can be traced back to the Indus Valley Civilization (c. 3300 – c. 1300 BCE), following which articles of pottery, earthenware and porcelain have continued through the ages.⁽⁴⁾ Furthermore, mentions of pottery and pots in our culture can also be seen in mythology and folk tales.

The significance of the *matka*, in particular, goes beyond its functions and usage. This large, rounded vessel symbolizes the womb, it represents fertility, life, the generative power of human beings and its associations with water and holy water bodies of the country.⁽⁵⁾ This regard extended to the vessel and the maker. Historically, it occupied a unique position in the craft tradition of India where it is home to more than a million potters. In ancient civilizations, a potter's place was quite an important one in society but changing society and the labor hierarchy have not been kind to the potters.

Today the caste system and hierarchy of labor in India dictate almost every aspect of social life. With each group occupying a specific place in this hierarchy, the pottery industry has been crippled and exploited for years. Growing up in a small town and coming from an agricultural family, I witnessed the marginalization first hand.

Addressing Societal Taboos:

A Shift in Power of Woman as Sole Producer

“Just because a custom is ancient, does not mean it is right.” - Swades (2004)

Ancient customs and traditions form the social foundation of a developing country like India. Patriarchy is deeply rooted and still prevalent. Therefore, generations of social conditioning has by default deemed women as helpers in this century. Pondering upon the above-quoted dialogue from one of my favorite movies, I begin to question the customs that go against humanity and hinder the development and transition of the arts and craft traditions into the modern age.

The pottery industry in India is a family trade. Also, it is male-dominated. For generations, families have practiced and perfected their clay recipes, kilns and building processes. Women of the family are usually assigned to make the clay or to load the kilns rather than participating in the making. They are rarely on the wheel, stating “It’s a man’s job”. It is still to some extent unacceptable for a woman to be involved in making an object for trade, an object which symbolizes the womb. The irony here is not lost.

The modernization of my country, as it adapts to the fast westernized standards poses an uncomfortable gap as we face job associated taboos. Historically such customs have divided, discriminated and marginalized societies and still do today.

A potter’s son with adequate skills and interest is reluctant to continue his family business and passion because it will not give him any respect in society. A woman loses her income and source of creative outlet after her husband’s passing because the society does not allow her to continue to make pots {as previously stated it is a man’s job}. These social taboos associated with making hinder the youth participation in pursuing these vocations, which is depleting our rich culture and its progress and transition into the modern age.

Relationships between crafts, status, gender and society intrigue me and motivate me to break away to forge a new path for myself and those who might follow. For example, in the western context, porcelain painting was considered a “woman’s job”. What is it that makes it a gender-specific task? As an Indian woman working in the arts and ceramics, I challenge these societal notions that cripple my society. I aim to encourage and instigate a conversation to displace social status, gender taboos associated with making and working.



Making

Smooth clay is gathered from the depths of local water bodies. It is then wedged with some hay and wood ash to make a malleable and plastic clay body. A large mound of clay is then placed in the centre of a stick turned wheel. The wheel is made from a repurposed bull cartwheel that rests on a single metal ball. The wheel is then pushed with a stick a few times and then a portion of the clay from the mound is centred and stretched into a small thick pot. It is then taken off the wheel and set aside to get leather hard. When it reaches the desired dryness it is then beaten all around with rhythmic taps to stretch, expand and thin the pot walls. This process is repeated until the pot is round and evenly thin all around. It takes about 3-4 days to finish wet building a single pot because the pot is left to dry a little after each round of thinning, stretching and expanding. The finished pots are stacked over each other to finish the drying process, and then, they are placed in a backyard pit to be fired. The expertise in pit firing comes from years of experience and ancestral knowledge. All the firing temperatures are eyeballed and so is the duration of the firing. The potter family I had the pleasure of meeting fires about 100 pots per firing out of which 85-90 pots pass the “clink” quality and strength test, and then they are sent to the market.







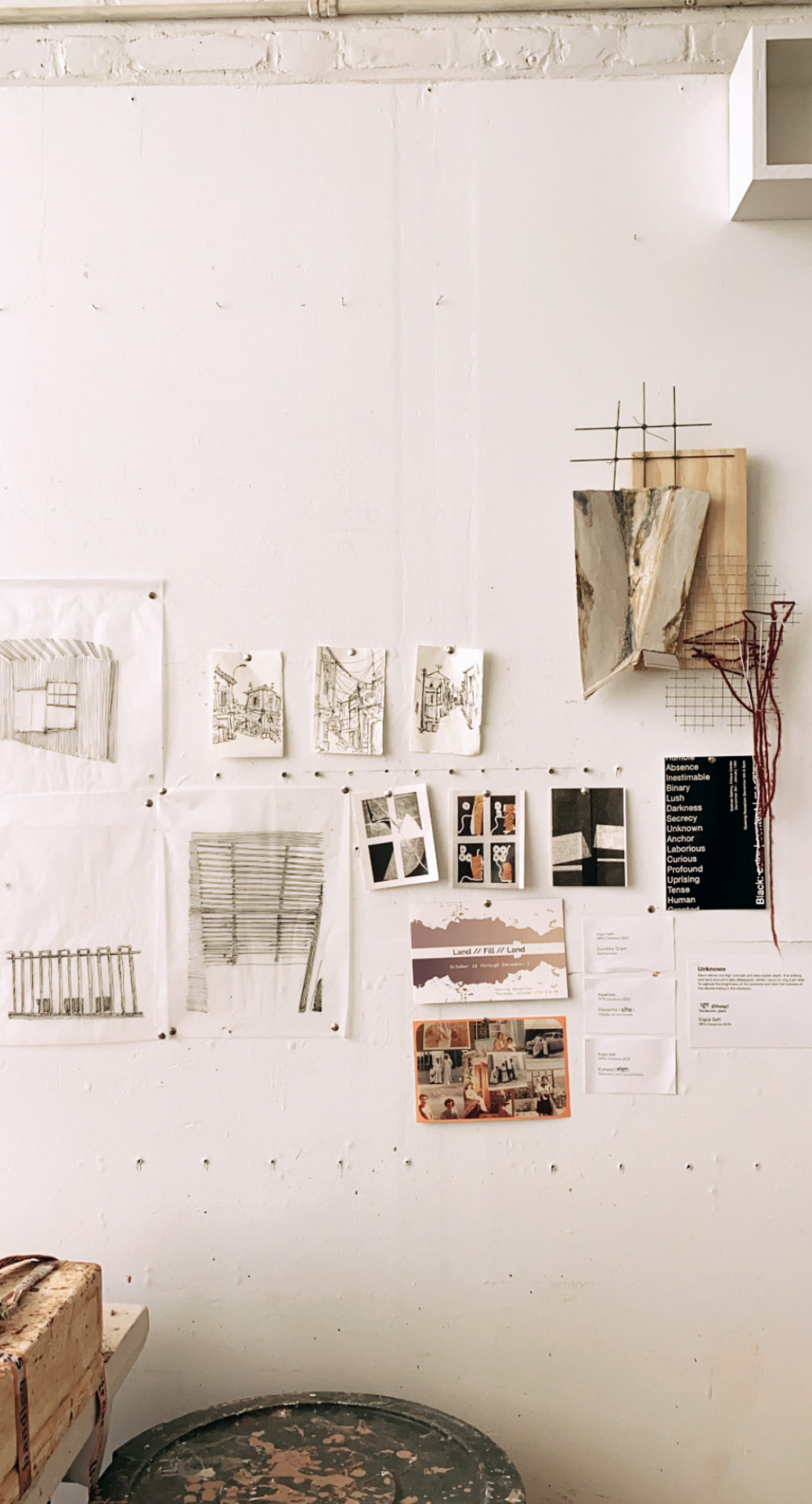
Safe and clean drinking water is an essential aspect of healthy nutrition. Water contamination and lack of access to clean drinking water cause major health problems, particularly serious malnutrition in children living in rural India.(6)

Until recently the *Matka* was found in every Indian household. The water quality was celebrated and people preferred the taste of water. As it runs out of use, I would like to focus on some of its rudimentary properties that can help us reduce our carbon footprint and help reduce the effects of climate change.

These low fire clay pots have many attributes. They are affordable, porous and have many health-giving properties, including mineral nourishment as well as alkalinity to the body. Their porosity ensures that water is kept cool in a climate where high temperatures may exceed 50 degrees Celsius. Drinking out of these clay pots can curb the effects of extreme heat easily.

The healing attributes of the earth: this is one quality which no other container has. The alkaline clay then reacts with the acidic water, creating proper pH balance resulting in relieved acidity and gastric pains. Drinking from an earthen pot can boost metabolism without dangerous chemicals like BPA, which can be found in plastic bottles. The minerals present also help to improve digestion. The water stored in an earthen pot is gentle

on the throat. It is a soothing drink for people suffering from cough or cold. It is the best option for people suffering from respiratory diseases during the summer since water from the fridge can be too cold to consume and the water that's been kept outside in plastic bottles can be too warm. The water out of the clay pot is perfectly chilled, abundant in earthy goodness to quench your thirst. India being a hot country we are much too familiar with sunstrokes in summer. It provides the body with the necessary nutrients and vitamins to maintain body glucose.(7)





Creating Links for Transition

To create my pieces, I charted away from the traditional way of making a *matka* as these objects are more representational/symbolic than functional. I begin with throwing and trimming the mother form on a mechanical wheel, once it is leather hard, I move on to create plaster molds for slip casting. I prefer to work with a terracotta slip which is a low fire body that results in orange color when fired to cone 04 but as a personal aesthetic preference I over fire the said clay body to obtain a chocolate brown color to resemble a water-filled pot.

My process is simple up until the pot releases from the mold and then a lot of it is impulsive and driven by my instincts and the workflow. I am always looking to incorporate new mediums in my practice. Finding ways to use various materials seamlessly is a challenge that I embrace and find thrilling. I almost always prefer to work in multiples as it gives me space and freedom to sketch out my ideas and make tests. I have also observed I am better able to communicate or narrate a story with a series of work than a single piece. It allows me to highlight a unique characteristic of a space or atmosphere.



I specifically use the *matka* to symbolize my culture, traditions and history. It serves as a canvas for me to project my observations gleaned from a fast and changing world. I populate the core form with surface additions to create an overwhelming visual impression that captures the chaos of the urban. A rapidly globalizing economy erases tradition, and here a once mundane object reasserts its presence as a form, symbolizing the urgency for adaptation.

**The cloth,
The wires,
The glittering blue green,
The sunny decals,
The geometry,
The stacks,
The crowd,
The rips,
And cracks...**

...materialize my status as a female maker. **Tied, bound, caged and overwhelmed by social expectation**—each characteristic represents a somber space, atmospheric condition and a set of emotions. The essence of a site emerges from a birds eye which surveys a sprawling architecture and urban landscape. I wish to locate in these pots a space devoid of labor hierarchy. In refocusing on the mundane, terracotta craft traditions of the sub-continent suddenly occupy space in the mainstream art world, making visible an overlooked (and vanishing) practice.





Through working hard, old chap,
I hope to make something good one day.
I haven't got it yet, but I'm hunting it and
Fighting for it, I want something serious,
Something fresh-something with soul
In it! Onward, onward.'
-Van Gogh

























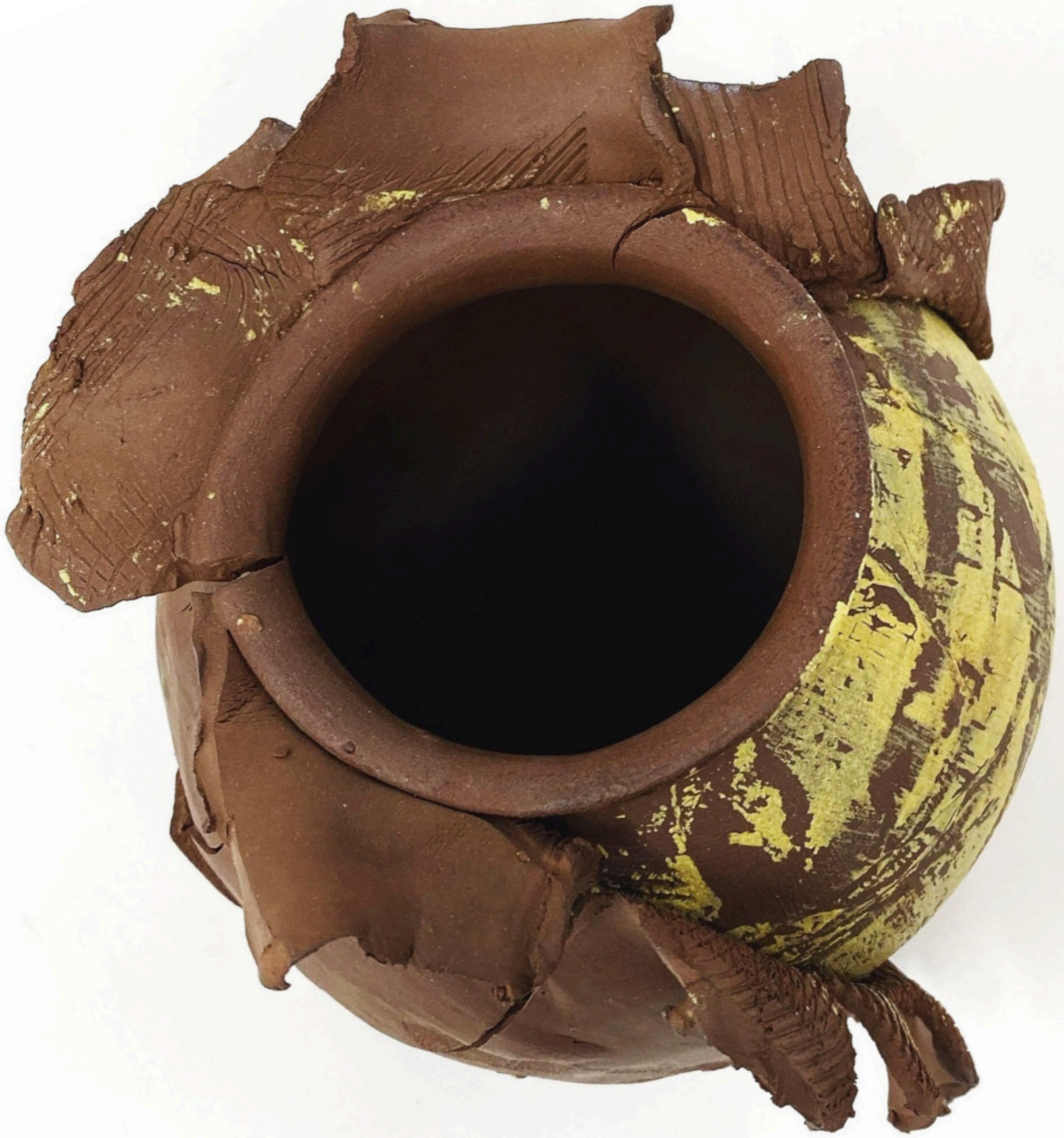




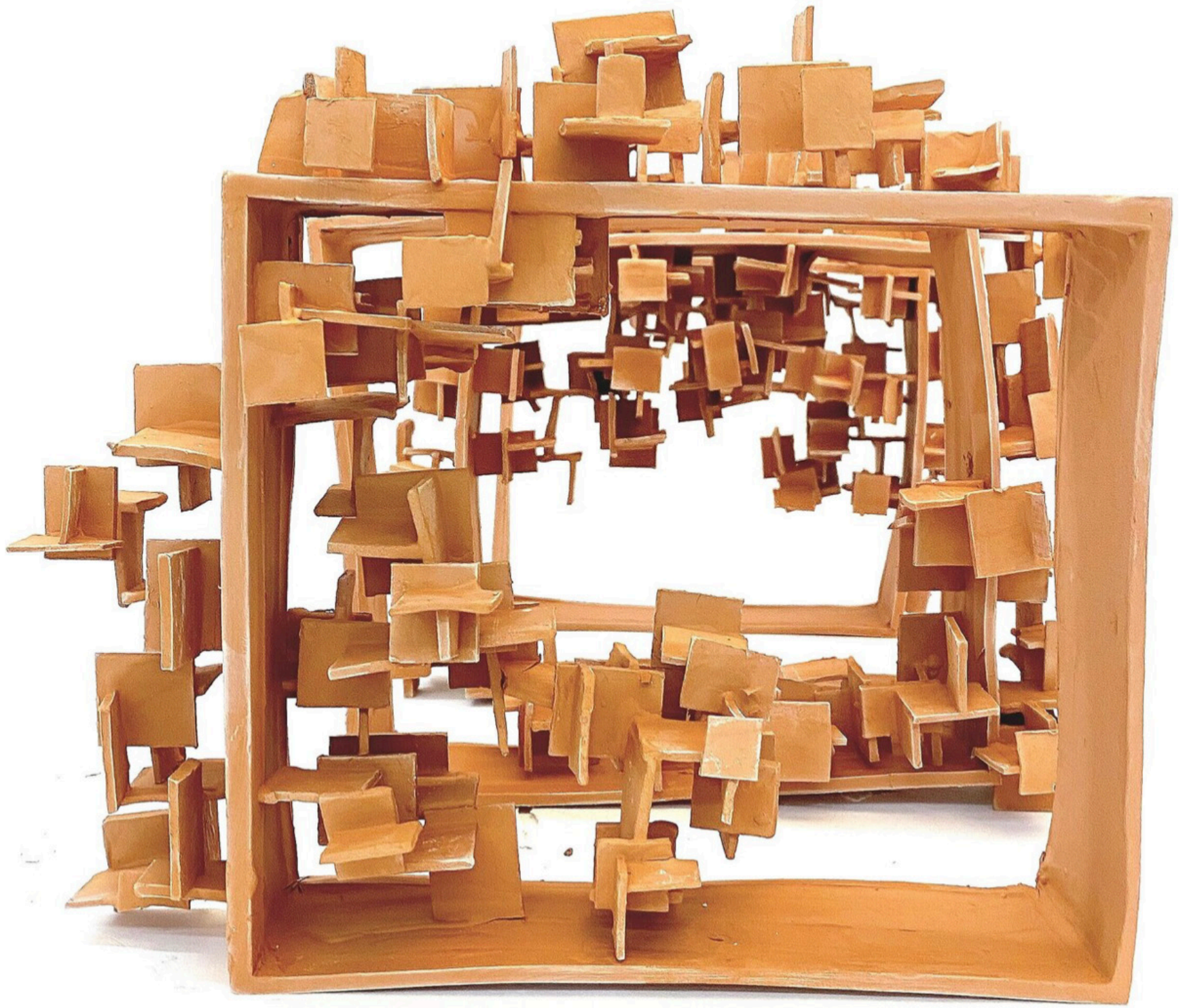


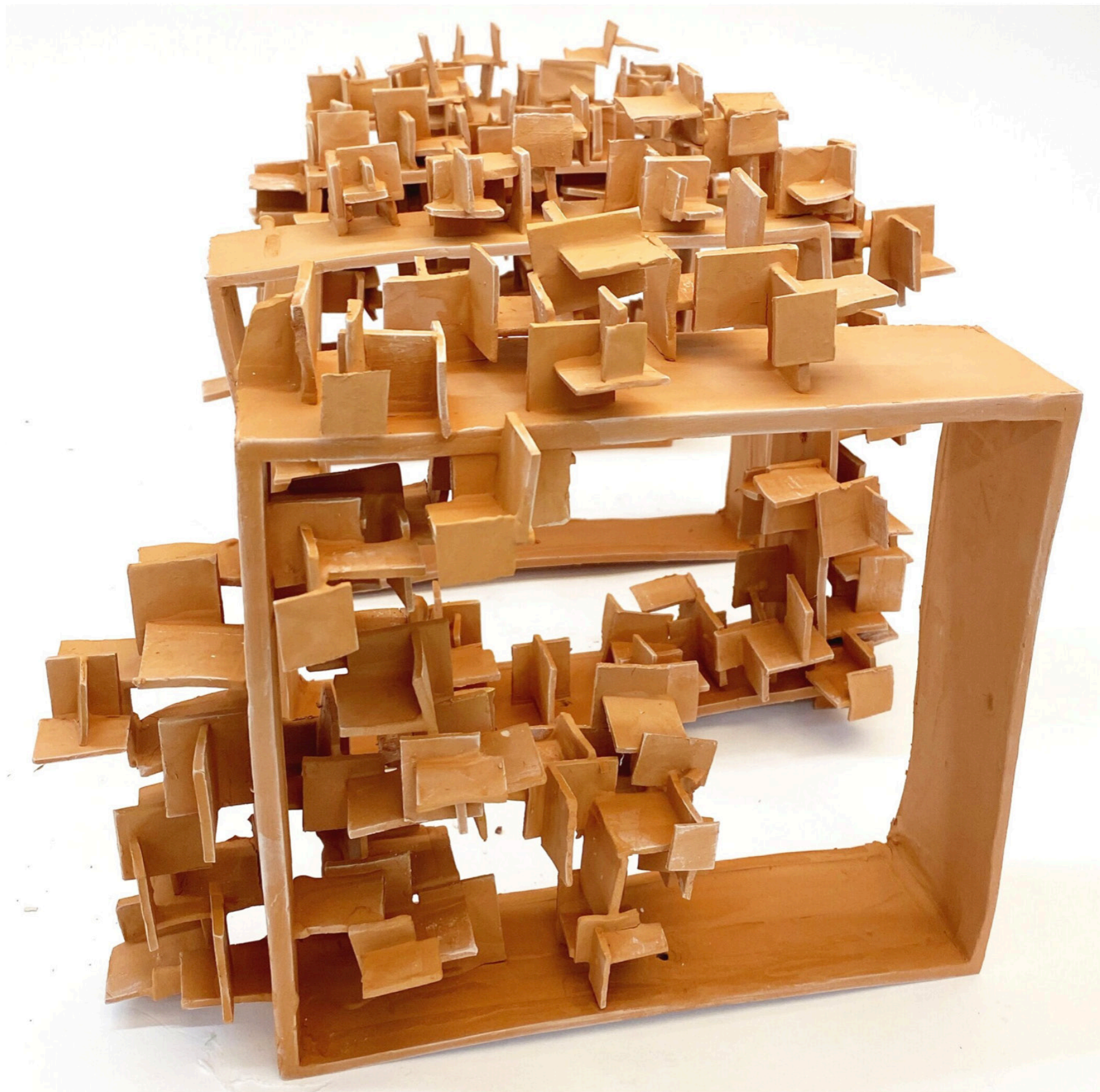


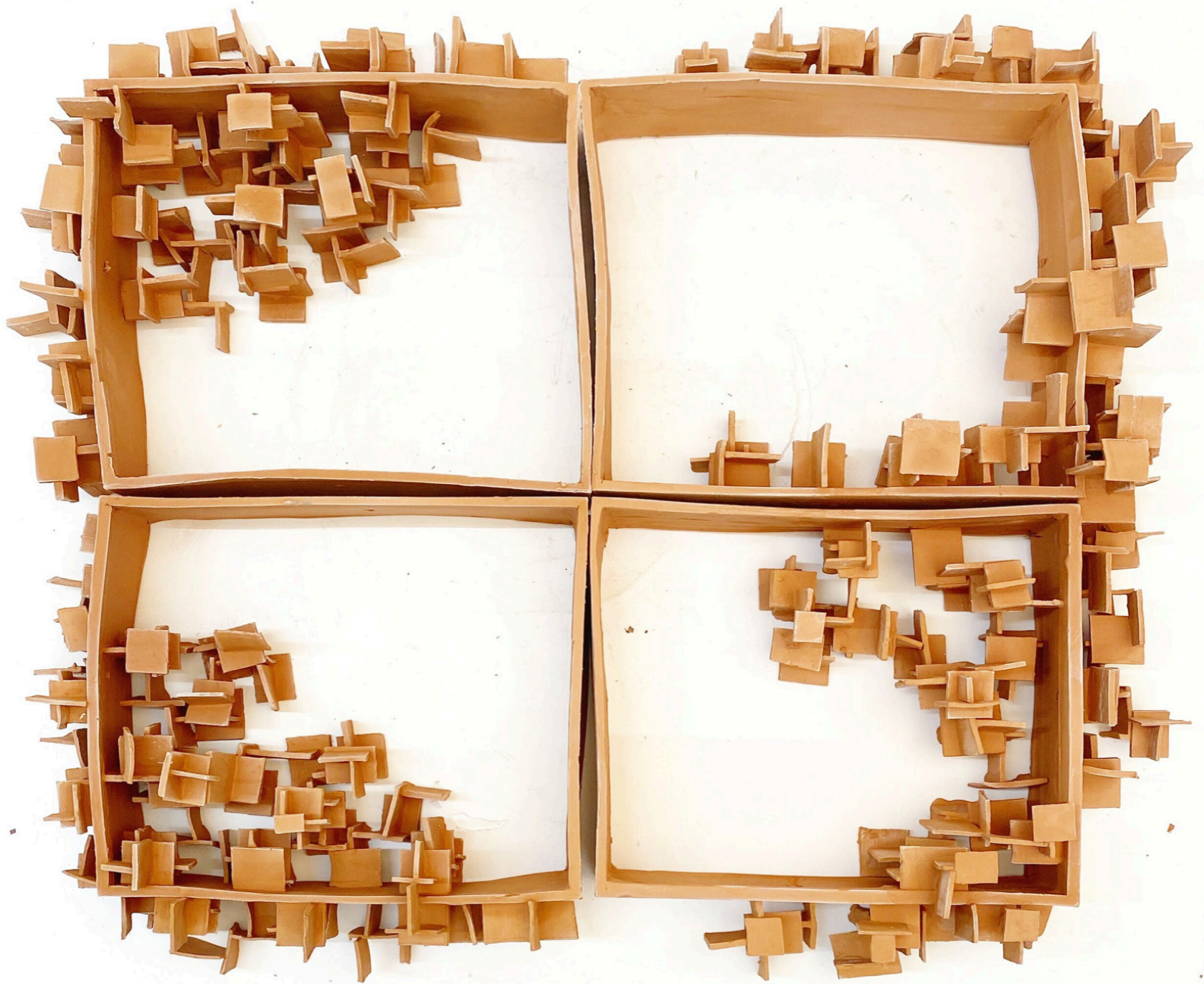


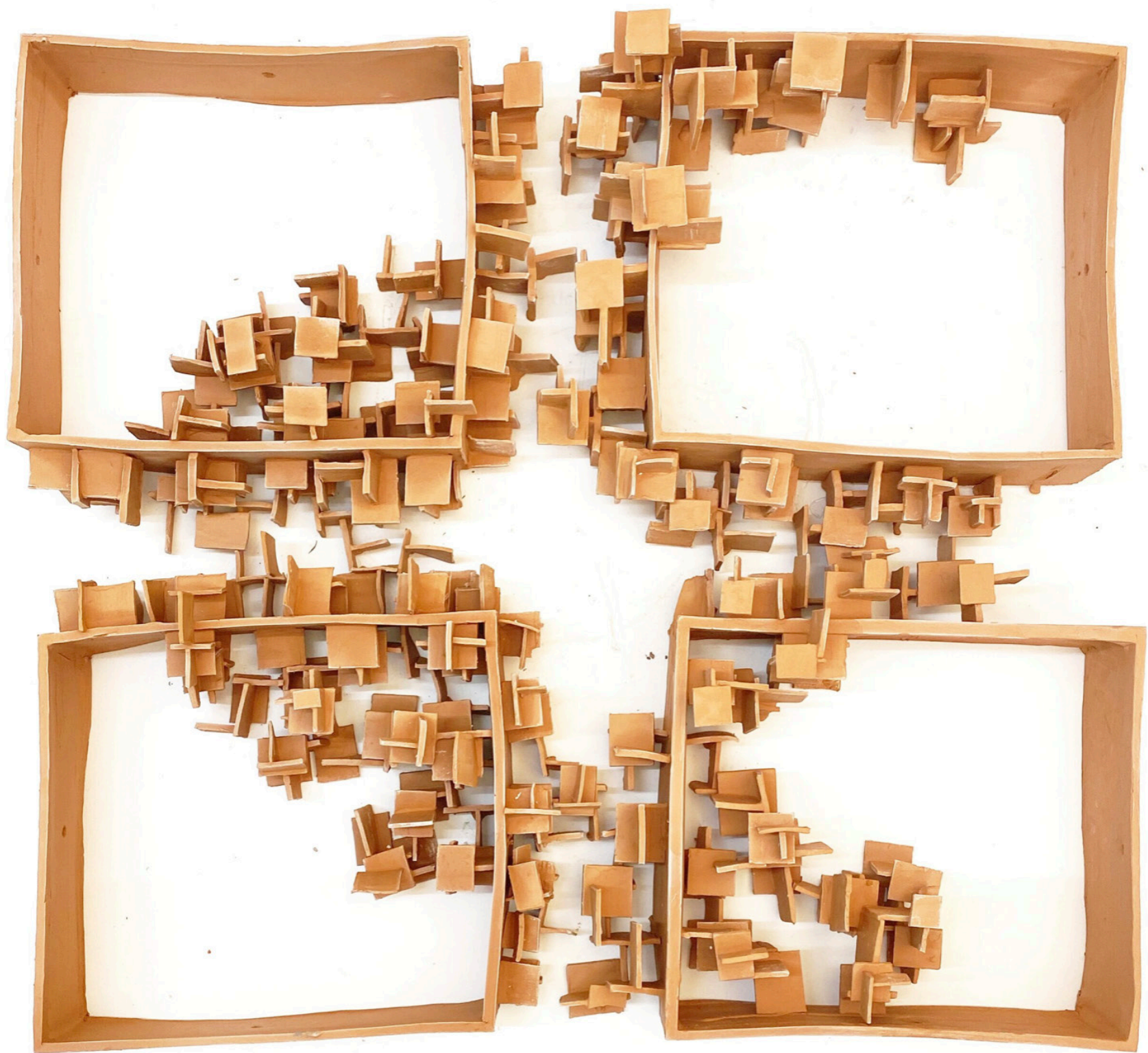














Expanding the Practice:

Interested in a multifaceted practice, I strive to explore and incorporate various mediums within my work. Having started my artistic career as a painting major, I am always looking to include imagery in my 3-dimensional work. Considering world ceramic history, printmaking seemed like a natural progression to integrate drawings over the 3-dimensional surfaces. Rediscovering the transfer printing process for ceramics opened the space for me to expand my practice to accentuate other mundane events and objects. Feeding off this notion to evoke poetry and exploring the ideas of home and distance, I aim to take over space with numerous recreated clay objects which are seemingly mundane in nature.

To produce multiple objects, I use digital rendering software to produce small scale models of deemed mundane architectural spaces like corners. Space that brings out the notions of the forgotten, mundane and displaced. Then I use a slip casting process to cast multiples. Creating multiples allows me the opportunity to widen the range of expression. Printing and slip casting share a symbiotic relationship as both result in multiples from a single plate and mold respectively. The association of printmaking and ceramics goes way back in time, this crossover of disciplines generated a successful hybrid between art and design in the past and has great potential for creating meaningful art in the future.



I seek inspiration from artists who reflect, evoke, explore the ideas of home and distance. That spans into trajectories influenced by culture and socio political issues. India is home to many such artists who reflect on the state of the world and the country through their art. The need in the country is to explore and carve ways to bridge the gap between the depleting cultural history in the face of accelerating modernization. Artists in the country through their work call for social change, they call upon the people to move away from social taboos and move more towards a progressive and accepting world.

Artists such as Zarina shaped the development of South Asian modern and contemporary art. Going against all cultural norms and taboos, she created and reflected upon the time of the partition, which created the country of Pakistan and resulted in mass displacement and loss of homes. Her exquisite work is as deep as it is simple. Her lines touch on various socio-political issues that face the country today. But what it does the most is it challenges the viewers to reflect upon the unfortunate history which has resulted in decades of war between the two countries. It depicts that sombre time of loss and grieving. To provide the people with an alternative opinion to the popular beliefs. I am interested in how she uses simplicity and history to create something eclectic. That has in the past and still creates waves of social change as it challenges the public's preconceived notions that result in suppressive cultures.

Madhavi Subramaniam's practice resonates with me, as one of the very few female ceramic artists of the country. Her explorations interconnect nature and urban culture through shadows and memory of her travels and displacement. Her simple clay installations that cast intricate shadows immerse the space around to become part of the work. She uses clay not just as her medium but also as a material extension to her ideas for its qualities. Her observations of the mundane drive her practice as she uses the seedpod forms as a metaphor to express fertility, movement and migration. She juxtaposes the natural mundane with the ordinary to create whimsical arrangements that encourage us to appreciate/consider our relationships to what we consider mundane.

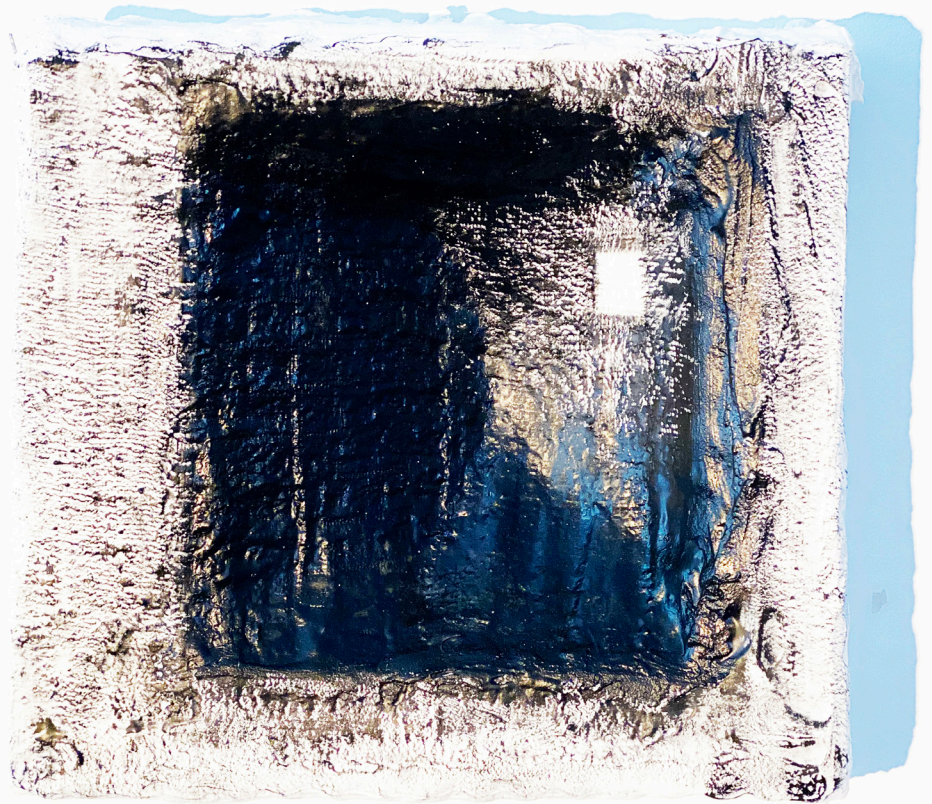


Disruption

Covid-19 pandemic has disrupted regular lives all around the world. It has given us a unique opportunity to introspect and adapt to fast changing circumstances. Discontinued access to the studio has given me an opportunity to discover the essence of my artistic practice. Learning to use new material in a productive way has posed many challenges and opportunities for discoveries that have the potential to fuel my practice in the future.

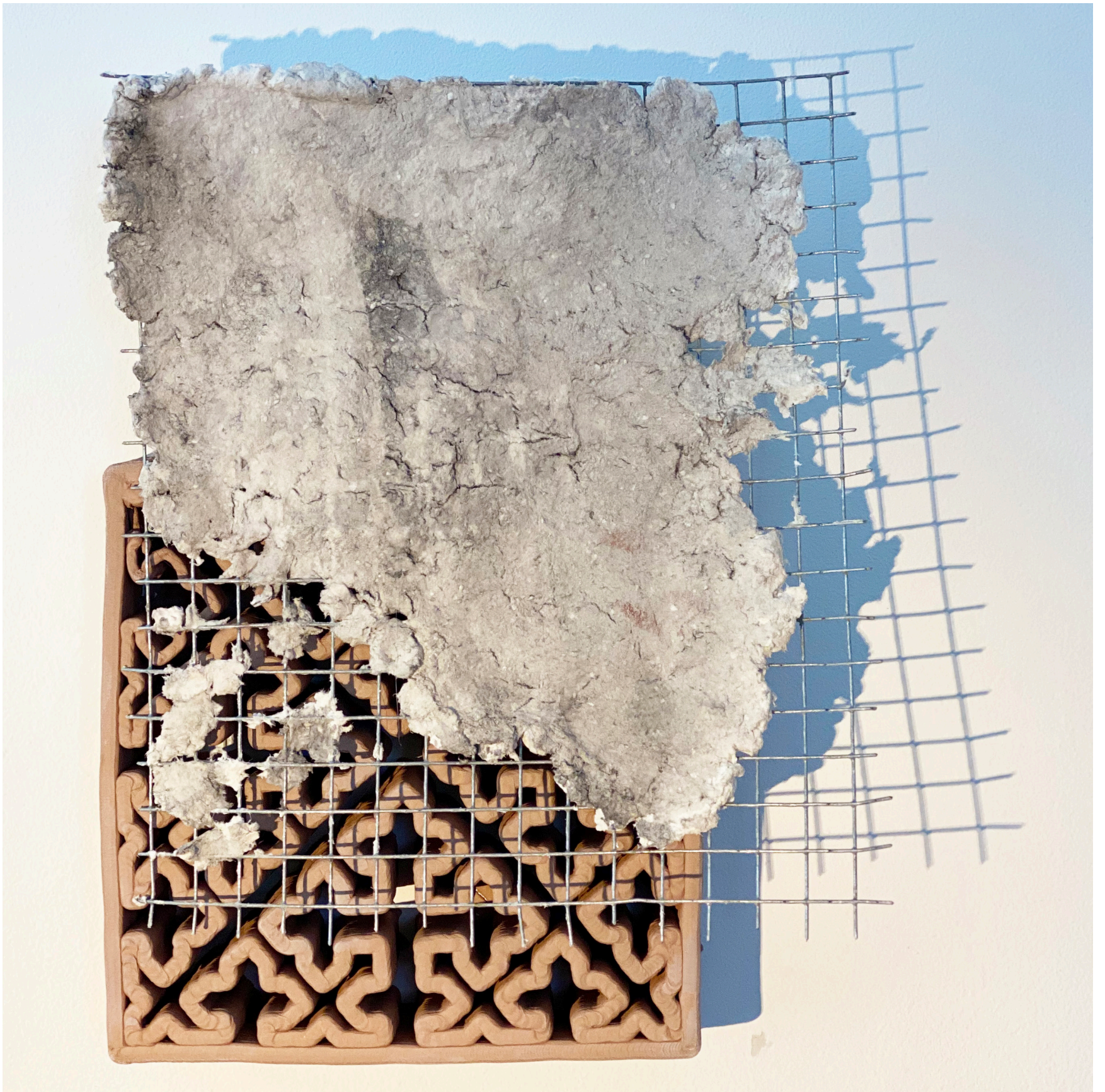
It has given me the time to immerse myself in the mundane, to observe that which might have gone lost in the hustle bustle of our busy lives. I have felt a sense of calm in observing the still. I have seen spring change into summer through a window. I have had conversations with the neighbors window.

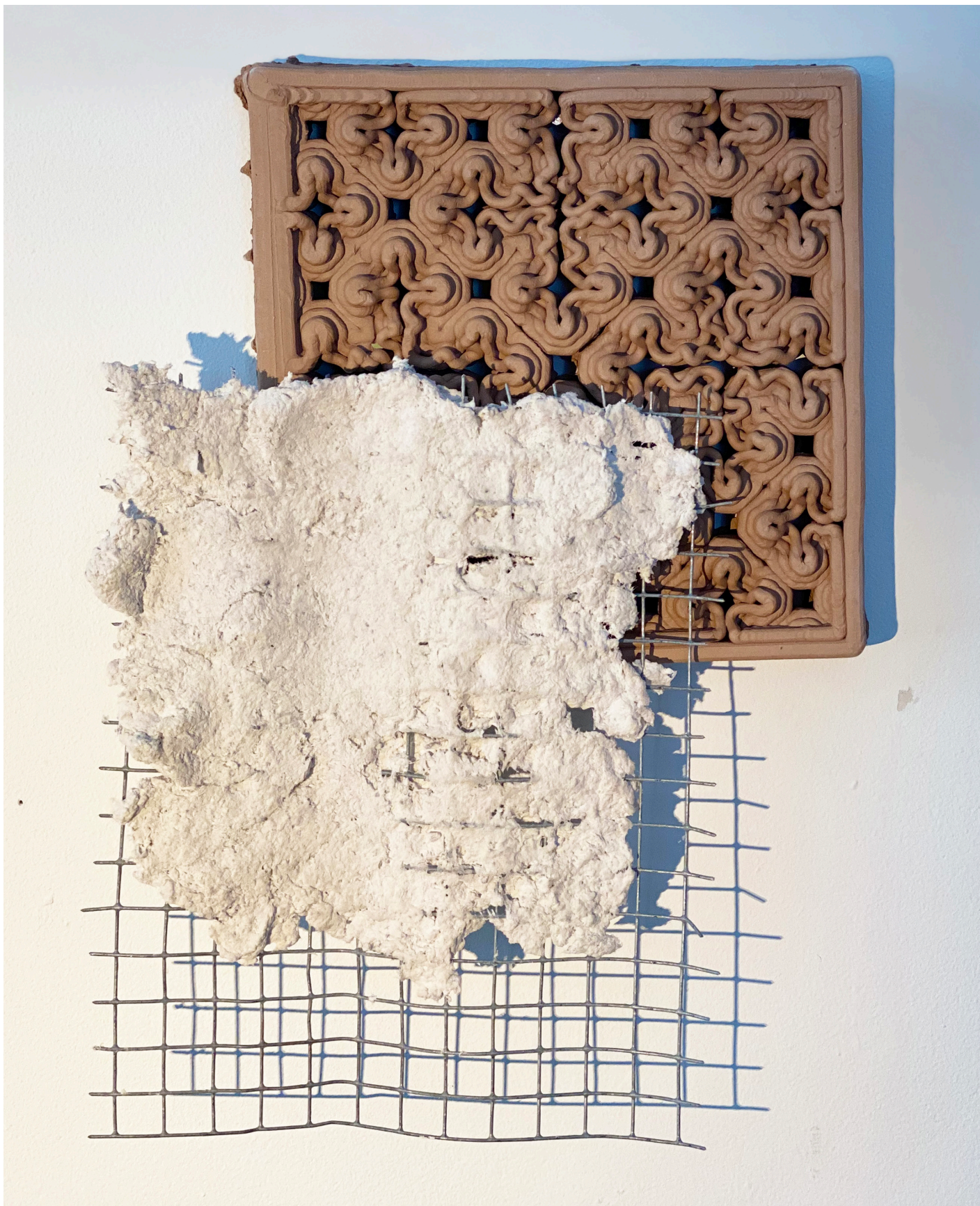
Focusing on this idea of the window, I created observational prototypes or test pieces out of wire, celluclay, bisqued clay, inks and chalks. The intention with this forced change in direction was to find the beauty in the dullest circumstances. I am inspired by my surroundings and the atmosphere, making is not just my work it is my lifestyle. It was integral for my mental health to keep making. I took this opportunity to rework some of my unfinished ideas to develop them under unprecedented situations, to discover truly how my mundane surroundings impact my work.

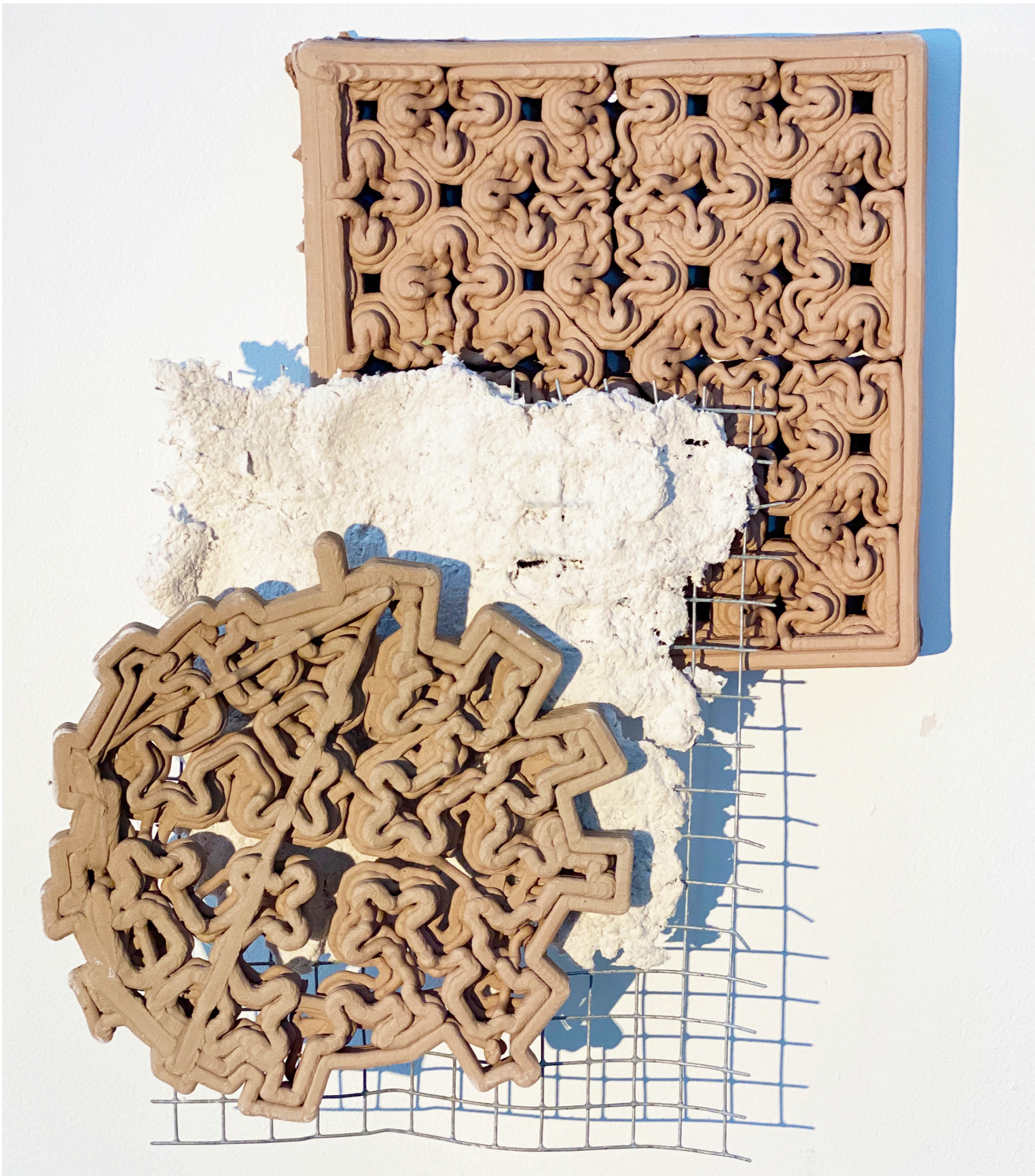
















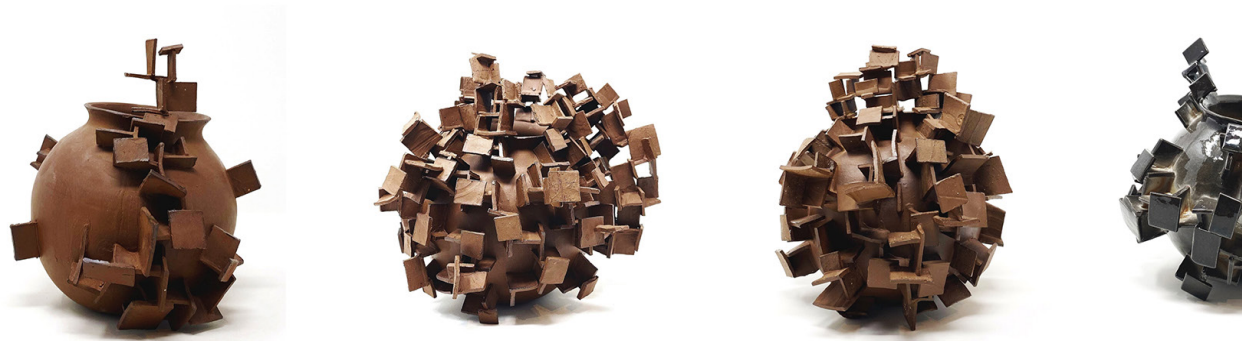


Kumbha Gharam Series

Media: Terracotta

Dimensions: 9"x8"

Date: 2019



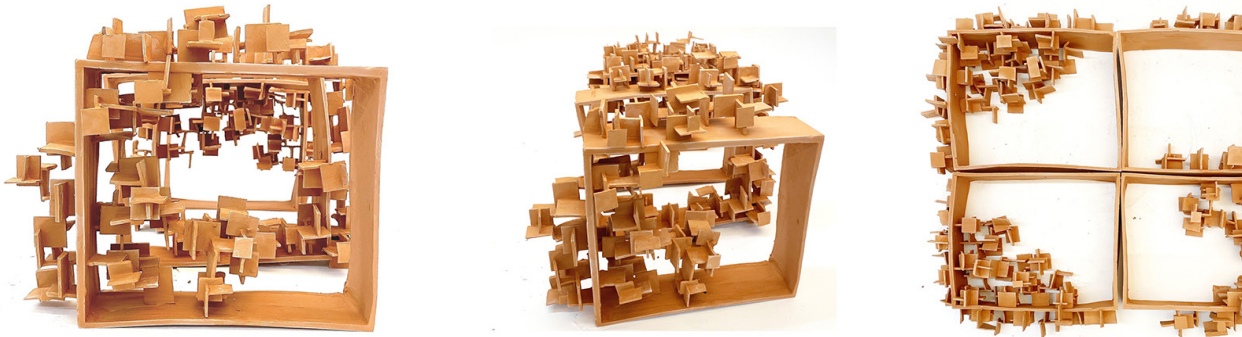
Bheed

Media: Terracotta

Dimensions: 10"x24"

Upon installation

Date: 2020



Dareecha

Media: Intaglio on Stoneware

Dimensions: 5"x3.5"

Date: 2019



Kohara

Media: Silkscreen print on Porcelain

Dimensions: 7"x7"

Date: 2019





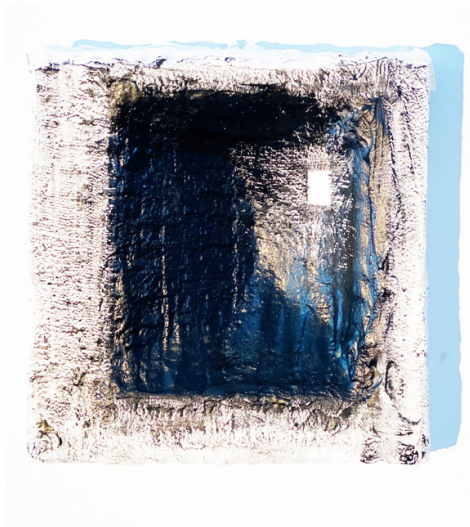
Dhoop
Media: Underglaze on stoneware
Dimensions: 14"x12"
Date: 2019



Untitled

Media: Mixed Medium

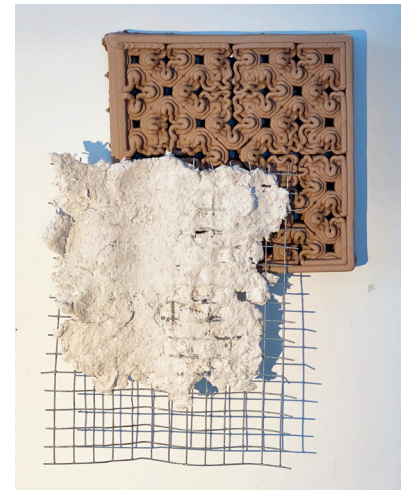
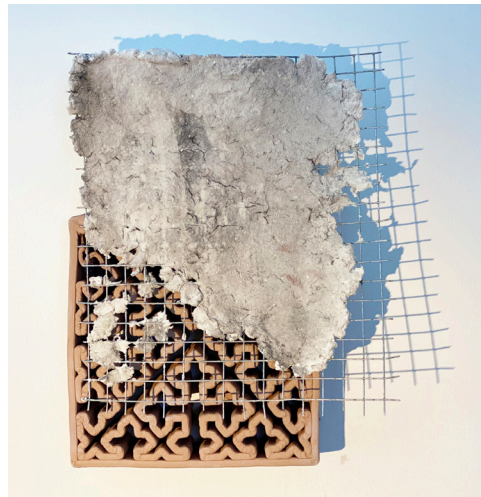
Date: 2020



Expose

Media: 3D Printed Dark Stoneware,
Wire and CelluClay

Date: 2020



Untitled

Media: Terracotta, Wire, Ink,
Chalk and CelluClay

Date: 2020





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