

## Giving her All

The taxi drops me off at the locked gate. I cross over the cattle guard, entering the lane that leads into the Auroville community of Samriddhi. *Samriddhi*, meaning wealth.

A large upturned terracotta *sal* reads “Forest Pottery” with an arrow pointing right. The narrowing track through dry cyclone-ravaged forest soon widens onto the small garden paradise that is the home of ceramic artist Ange Peter and her horticulturist husband Paul Blancheflower.

Flowers of pristine freshness bloom on tall shrubs that savour the South Indian summer. Others survive the heat in protective net housings near the house itself.

Ange greets me and guides me to her studio through the open-to-garden living space, passing through no doors

until we come to her tiny enclosed office. We have already passed a potter's in-house retrospective of works dating back twenty years, as long as I have known Ange as a potter. And now the cool little room is filling up with new forms in progress for the Habitat exhibition—works too fragile to trust to the open studio.

Three-foot-tall narrow pockets of white porcelain called “flower shoots” await the first of the two kiln firings that will bring them to maturity in their celadon dress.

Platters, two-foot-diameter and more, formed by hand of thin porcelain slabs, are slip-trailed with variations of a Japanese iris motif which will soften under the ash glazes that Ange has developed from her forest gleanings.

We talk of Ange's influences—of her teachers through the years, back to the early nineties when she started as a student at Golden Bridge Pottery in Pondicherry, and further back, to her childhood under the tutelage of her German mother—poet, painter, sculptor—who encouraged the artist she recognized in her daughter.

Ange, growing up in the house on the Pondicherry beachfront road, where her father still resides today, was drawing and painting as far back as she can remember. Her mother taught her how to see, says Ange, how to see beauty. Years later Ange would write, “I am most grateful for the quality we humans have of recognizing the beauty of nature. Recognizing it means taking it in, means exchange of energy, means love, means humility. . . .”

Golden Bridge gave Ange the basics of working with clay. From there she went to Taiwan, started learning Chinese, and met Ms. Sayinee Ling. In 1995 Ms. Ling was one of only a few women in Taiwan noted for her work in clay. Ange offered her services as Ms. Ling’s studio assistant for several months before buckling down to the task of earning money to build her own studio in Auroville.

Under a thick canopy of *sambu* grass thatch, resting on a frame supported by wooden pillars from old Tamil houses, is Ange’s studio. Where walls might be is only

garden view. The work area is small. Its wheel benches and racks for storing wares are crowded now with clay “ideas” still to be developed, and with fully modeled forms.

Ange’s dragons enter the third dimension right off the pages of her sketchbook, masterfully detailed. Lithe and lifelike porcelain dragons embrace stoneware forms, combining heaven and earth. A small golden ball accents each piece. This is the plaything, the fireball, of a traditional Asian dragon, representing, says Ange, the spirit—the essence of being. “I decided to bring the fireball into the work as a gold ball. Normally we don’t see the spirit at work as the energy of evolution. I want to express it, make it visible.”

Small gold balls made of overglazed enamel on porcelain appear importantly in a series of celadon bowls and cups, at once sculptural and, if you will, functional. Ange fired gold on her own porcelain pots with Polly and Gerry Uttley in England in the summer of 2011, bringing home the technique to fire in her own kiln built for the

purpose. The porcelain clay body comes from China, imported for sale to Indian studio potters by The Delhi Blue Pottery Trust. Ange first developed her iconic celadon for a workshop with American potter Jim Danisch at Golden Bridge in 1998.

Inspired, I think, by my own experience apprenticed to a Japanese master potter in the 60s, Ange sought a comparable experience. She spent 6 months under the guidance of Japanese master potter Shibata Masaaki in Tamba-Sasayama in 2005. In the inimitable and inscrutable Japanese way, Shibata-san imparted his method of *haiyu* (ash glaze) slipware to an eager learner, who didn't even know he was teaching her until she came home and found herself mysteriously equipped to make it herself. The resulting range of honey-hued ash glazes has become a signature of Forest Pottery. Applied over floral motifs on porcelain, embellished with gold overglaze enamel in a third firing, Ange's *haiyu* can now be called her own.

As pots become invisible in the gathering dusk, Ange and Paul and the dog Patch walk me back to the end of the lane where the taxi waits. Paul pulls open the gate. It turns out it wasn't locked.

Deborah Smith Pondicherry July 2013