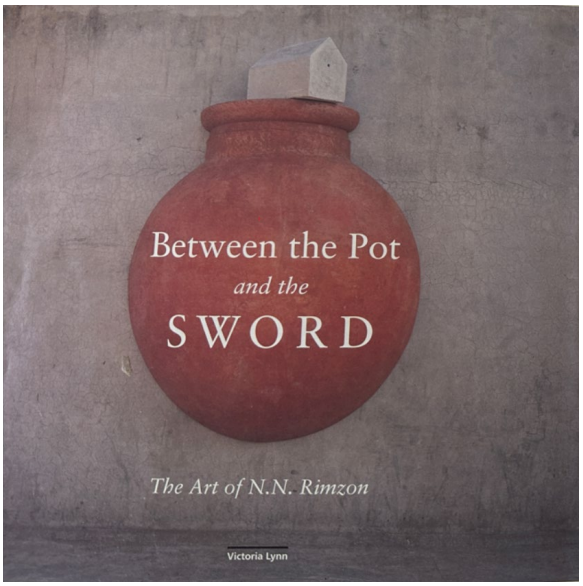

Between the Pot and the Sword

The Art of N.N. Rimzon

Victoria Lynn

Creation of A Poet
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Within this earthen vessel are
bowers and groves, and with
it is the Creator:
Within this vessel are the seven oceans
and the unnumbered stars.
The touchstone and the jewel-appraiser
are within;
and within this vessel the Eternal
Soundeth, and the spring wells up.
Kabir says: "Listen to me, my friend!
My beloved Lord is within."

—*Songs of Kabir* translated by Rabindranath Tagore, 1915[1]

India has more than a million potters. In the midst of a late twentieth-century post-industrial community, these craftsmen and women produce terracotta animals, figures and vessels for both utilitarian, everyday purposes as well as for major ritual events such as birth, death, marriage, initiation, annual and seasonal festivals. In some communities the potter is regarded as a priest[2]. India's terracotta tradition has roots in prehistory: there are resemblances between pots made today in the district of Kachch in western India and surviving examples from the Indus Valley Civilization. From this prehistoric period, the vessel has been regarded as a symbol of the mother goddess[3]. Oscillating between secular and religious functions, these terracotta objects parallel the cycles of human life and death: they are created, used and then disappear back into the earth, only to be created once again[4].

Along with the Tirthankara Jain figure, the sword and the house, the swollen form of the pot is a recurring image in the sculpture and drawings of N.N. Rimzon. His work exists within a continuum of certain traditional Indian belief structures and simultaneously reflects the prevailing contradictions apparent in the fabric of contemporary life in India. Rimzon absorbs the ramifications of the coexistent traditions in India as a living reality. His work constitutes a distilled comment on the religious, political, economic and cultural fragmentation of Indian society where regional differences grate against a national culture, which in turn exists in tense anticipation of increasing international influence.

Whereas in the context of the western avant garde a complete break with the past is understood as progressive, in Indian modernism artists have been concerned to forge an independent position between the international avant garde and the many traditions that continue to pervade daily life. In India, the term 'tradition' carries almost more weight than it can bear. The terracotta pot, as described above, is not simply a vessel, but represents a complexity of attributes. Similarly, the sword and the house are multi-vocal archetypal symbols that Rimzon assimilates into his personal language. By experimenting with the aesthetic push and pull between these different forms, capturing rather than dispelling the past, Rimzon participates, he says, in a process of unlocking meaning. Citing his enthusiasm for the writings of Heidegger, Rimzon says 'a stone lying in the street won't mean anything. But when you put it up to the sky then it can reveal the earth, or the silence of the earth ... when the sky meets the earth, it represents a dual moment ... I am fascinated with that poetry'.[5]

Writing in 1985 on the formative work of a group of young figurative sculptors from the south of India (including Rimzon), the critic and artist Anita Dube expressed this complex tension between tradition and modernity:

Today we are also aware that our tradition is not a foregone fact, or a determinant. So the question is whether to accept this tradition for what it has become per se, a formula of forms and ideas, or to sociologically examine it as the very substance of a dialectical relationship to the present... The artist, born in a quasi-urban context outside the matrix of tradition, can only intuitively apprehend it through larger experience and memory.[6]

In 1990 Rimzon indicated something of this 'larger experience' in a short article he wrote entitled 'The Artist as Exile':

I feel as though I have lived my life in exile - in exile from my family, from society and from mainstream culture. I feel rootless, nomadic, like a gypsy. And this is reinforced by what I see and read around me. All information is fragmented. I seem to be on an odyssey - I move from one class to another; there is no fixed point, no continuity.[7]

Rimzon was born in Kakkoor, Kerala, in 1957. Kerala, a southern Indian state, is well known for its high level of literacy and its radical Marxist government. Rimzon was aware of radical ideas of the West and was well educated. He joined the College of Fine Arts in Trivandrum in 1975. The

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[1] The fifteenth-century poet Kabir, cited in Haku Shah, Form and Many Forms of Mother Clay, Contemporary Indian Pottery and Terracotta, National Crafts Museum, New Delhi, 1985, p. 68. Kabir's writings have influenced the work of Rim- zon, who also cited this passage in his catalogue entry for 'Prospect 1993', Frankfurt.

[2] Jyotindra Jain, National Handicrafts and Handlooms Museum, New Delhi, Mapin Publishing, Ahmedabad, 1989, p. 175.

[3] Pupul Jayakar, 'Celebration of Mother Earth', Form and Many Forms of Mother Clay, op. cit., p. 9.

[4] Haku Shah, Tribal Ritual, Folk Myth, National Institute of Design in collaboration with Ahmedabad Municipal Corporation, 1981, unpaginated.

[5] Interview with the author, November 1995.

[6] Anita Dube, Seven Young Sculptors, Kasauli Art Centre, 1985, New Delhi, unpaginated

[7] N.N. Rimzon, The Artist as Exile', Art Heritage, No.10, 1990-91, p. 21.

British Council gave the College library back-issues of *Studio International magazine* from the 1950s until 1973. Rimzon studied these and familiarized himself with the work of post-minimalist artists such as Eva Hesse as well as the formation of conceptual art in Europe and the United States. (There was little published on modern Indian art at this time). During this period (1975-77) India was in a State of Emergency declared by the then Prime Minister Mrs. Indira Ghandi and there was a great deal of political activism in Rimzon's environment. It became important for Rimzon and his contemporaries to develop a radical, socially committed attitude that was independent from western modernism and mainstream Indian politics.

After graduation in 1982 he joined the sculpture department at the Faculty of Fine Arts in Baroda, discontinued for a short time and resumed post-graduate studies there in 1984. In Baroda, Rimzon developed a kind of expressive and exaggerated realism, partially inspired by the German figurative expressionism of the early 1980s and by the Indian modernist sculptor Ramkinkar Baij whose large-scale cement figurative work is charged with an earth-bound passion and energy. From 1987 to 1989 Rimzon completed a Master of Art degree at the Royal College of Art in London. He has since lived in New Delhi.

Painting, rather than sculpture, has been the dominant medium in modern Indian art. Rimzon's self-declared sense of 'exile' was most likely underscored by the fact that he practised as a sculptor in an artistic milieu dominated by a narrative form of painting. Indeed, Rimzon comments that when the narrative aspects of Indian painting began to subside in the mid-1980s, the conceptually oriented form of sculpture came to be regarded more seriously. When Rimzon exhibited a group of heads in the Sixth Triennale India in 1986 and Pushpamala N. (another leading contemporary Indian sculptor)[8] exhibited a group of terracotta pigs in the same show, 'installation art' was not practised by contemporary artists in India. Over the last decade, the concept of combining multiple forms in space has gained increasing acceptance amongst the art literati in India, although it remains difficult to market and continues to be the focus of heated discussion.

Rimzon's installations have become increasingly minimal over the last decade. The figurative expressionism has given way to a post-minimalist aesthetic where the circle, sphere, cube and square, imbued with a life force, coexist in a magnetic field of energy. His works are poetic couplets that distil the artist's particular conceptions of sky, earth and self into succinct form.

In a work entitled The Tools, 1992-93, the arms of a Jain figure are drawn together in a prayer-like gesture that points to the heavens. While this verticality connects the figure to the sky, the distribution of weight is such that it is strongly grounded in the earth. The iconography of the Jain figure, dislodged here from its traditional architectural environment, represents purity; it is 'sky-clad' (without robes), immovable, inward- looking, beyond time and purged of human idiosyncrasies. Like the figure that the artist used in The Inner Voice, 1992, it is poised in a trance at a point of connection between heaven and earth. The Jain religion is intensely anti-violent. Highly religious Jains will not eat after nightfall for fear of eating an insect by mistake. Jainism was not adopted by the agricultural community by and large because it would be impossible not to kill living things in the course of one's occupation. It is all the more significant then that Rimzon's figures are surrounded in one instance by cast iron swords and in another by the rusted tools of agricultural labour.

The formal integration of the floor elements with the figure is achieved in these two installations through Rimzon's use of the mandala and half circle. An arche- typal symbol of wholeness and resolve that has been used extensively by the British artist Richard Long (whose work is recalled by The Tools), this mandala shape visually unifies the otherwise contradictory elements in Rimzon's installations. It is this aesthetic unification and integration that enables Rimzon's sculpture to work beyond the iconographic references of his forms. This process of distillation ensures that the sculptures exist as compelling rearticulations of the relationship between religion and violence in contemporary India.

In a work entitled *The Virgin Pot*, made for 'Prospect 1993', an international survey show in Frankfurt, Germany, Rimzon combines a white house with the swollen belly of a large pot affixed to the wall. The house and the pot are containers, metaphors for the home, a place of protection and warmth. Just as the pot can be a mother goddess, or even a womb, the house can be a temple. One can be of the earth, while the other can be of the heavens. In *The Virgin Pot*, the house and the vessel exist in a sur- real harmony with one another. Like a man and a woman, they awkwardly, yet inextricably, form a couple. Rimzon's attention to the surface texture of his sculpture (often treated with marble dust) asserts a sense of skin and, by implication, that which lies beneath it. This sense of inside and outside and the continual flow between the two-a concept that has also motivated the work of Anish Kapoor - suggests the connections between earth, sky and self. The pot, vessel or house becomes a metaphor for the self- the body - and The Virgin Pot comes to be pervaded by a strong sexual energy.

In Faraway from One Hundred and Eight Feet, 1995, a line of terra- cotta pots, choked with handmade brooms and lengths of rope, sprawls like a centipede over a grassy field. There was once a custom in the Indian city of Poona where the Untouchables (outcasts from the Hindu caste system) were not allowed to enter the city unless they wore a small pot around their neck and carried a broom to identify their lowly status. One hundred and eight, as a multiple of nine, is an auspicious number in Hindu rituals. Repetition is more than a formal device for Rimzon. It is used here to create the image of a spinal cord grounded in the soil. While it helps to know the story of the Untouchables at Poona, Rimzon unlocks the meaning of the work through his juxtaposition of the three elements of pot, broom and rope. Together they invoke the repetitive nature of human labour, a fertility that is both regulated and disconnected and a rootedness to the soil that is inextricable.

In a culture where a perpetual accumulation of imagery and content is part of daily existence, Rimzon's use of a minimal aesthetic is telling. A strangeness, simplicity and at times a quiet absurdity pervades his work. The installations and drawings possess a sensuality that could just as easily be inspired by traditional Indian sculpture as it could by the sexually charged works of Eva Hesse. Rimzon's artistic language is a universal one, translating his varied experiences as a nomad in his own culture into imagery that is a metaphorical expression of his time.

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[8] Pushpamala won a medal at the Triennale for this work.