

# The Marathon of Sustainable Art Practices Needs to Go Beyond Just Using More Biodegradable and Recycled Materials

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**Abstract – Sculptors have always been working with and for the environment. Unlike other fields of Fine Art that are slowly entering digital and virtual space, sculptures still largely tend to be made with and displayed within nature. During prehistoric times artists discovered animal bones, stone and wood as their sculpting material. With time they discovered baked clay, even further they went on to explore metals, and made alloys. Newer ages gave rise to industrial materials like cement, ceramic and fiberglass, and artists adapted themselves to the material they felt would help them express. With their hands on approach and understanding of the marvels that mother earth provided to them, they managed to make these materials into mediums. They explored how these materials came into existence, observed properties like textures, durability, or strength and forged tools and techniques to express through them. A sculptor's choice of material is often one of the most crucial decisions of any art making process.**

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Sculptors, after careful deliberation, pick a material that they choose to convert into a 'medium' of communication; their channel of expression. For, an exactly same realistic form of a woman sleeping on her bed would appear completely different carved in marble, caved in Sheesham, or modeled and baked in terracotta. This 'feel' of the sculpture as artists would call it, would change drastically over the choice of medium and artists would not wish to compromise on it. A lot of conservationists and artists have now successfully introduced the community to biodegradable and ecofriendly mediums. These artists are cautious with the bio loads of their materials and usually cater their artworks toward bringing attention to the environmental issues. Ecological relationships are often invoked as a way to understand and fortify relationships to place (material) (Wallen). These might be safer and easier on the environment however, I believe those have a different language of communication than the traditional ones that the artist may or may not want to adapt.

I explain this with an example of Mrinalini Mukerjee's Vanaraja Figure 2 and Bharti Kher's Warrior with Cloak and Shield Figure 1. Mukherjee's sculpture has an inherent earthiness and a fluidity that only hemp fiber could provide. Kher's choice of material adds structure, strength and a sense of balance that wouldn't have been possible in a medium like hemp fiber.



Figure 1

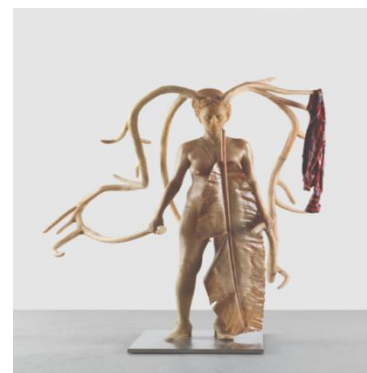


Figure 2

When it comes to sustainable art practices just adopting certain materials on the basis of how easily or quickly they decompose cannot be the only criteria. The trajectory of replacing materials with more ecofriendly material might work for utilitarian objects, but they need not apply in terms of artworks. Alternatively, more sustainable studio practices and waste management systems should be encouraged to ensure artist studios do not become environmentally degrading industries.

For instance, a 12 inch terracotta sculpture with intricate details commonly wrongly assumed as biodegradable is also very fragile. During transportation a regular sculpture studio will require an extensive amount of plastic wraps and styrofoam and even wooden boxes to ensure safe handling. Adding to that is the carbon footprint of land transportation. A 12 inch fiberglass sculpture which, as a material is more harmful for the environment might not require extensive care while transporting. The studios can then focus on biodegradable packaging materials and produce much less waste.



Figure 3

In another instance a paper sculpture like the one shown below might look very ecofriendly to an unaware spectator but, analyzing the whole process will reveal a different story. Firstly a wire armature (framework) was constructed, and then clay was added to it. Next a plaster of Paris mold was constructed; thereafter comes the casting process using paper, glue and chalk powder. Every process at every stage has its waste and adds to the bio load of the overall construction of the sculpture which cannot be overlooked.

The waste being produced at sculpture studios is slowly yet surely becoming hazardous for the environment. There is no one solution to this problem, every studio is different, and their working materials might change drastically through the year. However some basic steps could be taken to make the studio more environmentally sustainable. This entails a philosophical shift, one that re-connects art-making and art education to the issues and concerns of the communities in which they take place, but also a

practical shift, one that reduces the waste and toxicity on which many art programs are built (Inwood).

The furnace and kilns for terracotta and metalworking need to be shifted to their electrical options. Wastes need to be segregated into wet and dry and disposed of accordingly. Reusable products like clay, metal tools, metal and wooden wires and armatures need to be used, reused and utilized in as many times as possible in multiple projects. Packaging if possible can be done using easily biodegradable materials and reused to their full extent.

I would like to end by this beautiful categorization of artists done by Rosenthal who does not blindly term an artwork or artist environmentally friendly based on their use of materials. She prefers to identify artists and their work as environmental by a common set of values that informs their art and their lives. These values include the support of a land ethic ( valuing all forms of life on the planet), systems thinking, sustainability, social and biological diversity, social and environmental justice, collaboration and integrity which Rosenthal refers to as " closing the gap between what we value and how we act in the world" (Rosenthal).

## WORKS CITED

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