

Andréhn-Schiptjenko

STOCKHOLM PARIS



Ranti Bam

(b. 1982, Lagos, Nigeria), lives and works in Paris, France

RANTI BAM

Bam uses clay as an avatar to explore themes of collective bodies, connectivity, and the multiple significations of water. For Bam, clay is a living material that ties all beings to the earth. This concept is embodied in her ongoing *Ifa* series, named after the *Yoruba* words "ifá" (divination) and "I-fàá" (to pull close). Each piece channels a profound connection to self and place, transcending language to touch the ineffable realms of energetic and material existence. Each piece channels a profound connection to self and place, transcending language to touch the ineffable realms of energetic and material existence. The *Ifas* are formed by Bam physically embracing the clay before firing.

Through her vessels, Bam creates microcosms that investigate relationships, material limitations, and broader themes of freedom and containment. Her practice extends beyond ceramics to include film and photography.

Ranti Bam (b. 1982, Lagos, Nigeria) received her MA from The Cass Faculty of Art, Architecture and Design and a diploma in ceramics from City Lit, London. In 2023, Bam was commissioned to produce a series of *Ifas* for the Liverpool Biennial in the United Kingdom. She recently had a solo exhibition, *Anima*, at the James Cohan Gallery, New York and her work has been featured in group exhibitions such as *Insistent Presence: Contemporary African Art from the Chazen Collection* (2023) Chazen Museum of Art, Madison, Wisconsin, and *Hard/Soft: Textiles and Ceramics in Contemporary Art* (2023), Museum of Applied Arts, Vienna, Austria.

Bam's work is represented in the public collections of the Brooklyn Museum, New York; Contemporary Art Society, London; Chazen Museum of Arts, Wisconsin; High Museum, Atlanta; Victoria & Albert Museum, London, the Princeton University Museum and the Fondation Thalie.

Selected exhibitions

- 2024** *How do we hold our stories*, Andréhn-Schiptjenko Paris
Anima, James Cohan, NY
MOTHER TONGUES, Southern Guild, LA
As feeling births idea, Tiwani, London
- 2023** *uMoya*, Liverpool Biennale, Liverpool
malléable, aléatoire, Andréhn-Schiptjenko, Paris
HARD/SOFT: Textiles and Ceramics in Contemporary Art, MAK, Vienna
- 2022** *Common Ground*, Catinca Tabacaru, Bucharest
Off Water II, Saint Anne Gallery, Paris
- 2021** *Spring*, Fondation Thalie, Bruxelles
Avalanche, Pal Projects, Paris
Medicine Man, Wellcome Collection, Londres
La rencontre des eaux, Cité Internationale des Arts, Paris
- 2020** *Stasi Frenetica*, Palazzo Madama, Turin
African Arts - Global Conversations, Brooklyn Museum, New York
- 2019** *Strangers in Town*, Kristin Hjellegjerde gallery, Berlin
- 2018** *CTG(R): Zimbabwe 2018* - Catinca Tabacaru Gallery, Harare
Gallery of Small Things, Dakar Biennale OFF, Dakar

Selected collections

The Studio Museum in Harlem, New York
Brooklyn Museum, New York
Victoria & Albert Museum, London
Contemporary Art Society, London
Fondation Thalie, Brussels
Chazen Museum, Wisconsin
High Museum of Art, Atlanta
Princeton University Museum, New Jersey

Residences / Fellowship

- 2025** Black Rock, Dakar
- 2023** Norma Lipman Ceramics Fellow, Newcastle University, Newcastle
- 2022** Récollets, Paris
- 2021** EKWC, Oisterwijk
- 2020/21** Cité Internationale des Arts, Paris

How do we hold our stories? **Andréhn-Schiptjenko Paris, 2024**

Andréhn-Schiptjenko is pleased to present *How do we hold our stories?* The gallery's first solo-exhibition by British-Nigerian artist Ranti Bam. The exhibition features new *Ifa* sculptures alongside pieces from her *Abstract Vessels* series.

The title *How do we hold our stories?* reflects Bam's deep interest in language. She explores the feminine semiotics of intimacy, care, and vulnerability, crucial for rethinking our relationship with nature and dismantling ideological constructs. Bam uses clay as an avatar to explore themes of collective bodies, connectivity, and the multiple significations of water.

For Bam, clay is a living material that ties all beings to the earth. This concept is embodied in her ongoing *Ifa* series, named after the *Yoruba* words "ifá" (divination) and "I-fàá" (to pull close). Each piece channels a profound connection to self and place, transcending language to touch the ineffable realms of energetic and material existence. The *Ifas* are formed by Bam physically embracing the clay before firing, resulting in dips and folds that give each sculpture a bodily presence, further emphasised by their placement on wooden, plinth-like stools.

Her *Abstract Vessels* are defined by this same care and tenderness. Each sculpture is crafted from embellished slabs, painted or mono-printed with pigmented slips before being assembled into delicate, oblong forms. The exterior of each piece is unglazed, highlighting delicate cracked surfaces achieved by exploring the limits of the clay by rolling the unreinforced slabs as thinly as possible and firing the vessels past their prescribed temperature. In contrast, the inside of each form is glazed, embodying the idea of the *anima* as a luminous, reflective interiority.

Bam describes her sculptures as hearths—places of communal nourishment, holding spiritual and physical sustenance. Through her vessels, Bam creates microcosms that investigate relationships, material limitations, and broader themes of freedom and containment. Her practice extends beyond ceramics to include film and photography.



Ranti Bam
Installation view, *How do we hold our stories?*, Andréhn-Schiptjenko Paris, 2024



Ranti Bam

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Ranti Bam

Installation view, *How do we hold our stories?*, Andréhn-Schiptjenko Paris, 2024

Anima

James Cohan, New-York, 2024

Ranti Bam engages with the feminine; confronting notions of fragility, vulnerability, and care. Her recent practice explores multivalent concepts of *anima*—which in Latin represents the soul and in Jungian philosophy is defined as the feminine spirit tied to emotion, empathy, and sensitivity rooted in the unconscious. Bam creates clay forms that embody this life force in two related bodies of work: abstract vessels and Ifas.

In *Anima*, the artist draws inspiration from the symbolic amalgamation of Eden and Hieronymus Bosch's painting, *The Garden of Earthly Delights*, building a sculptural world that reimagines Eve as *prima materia*—the primal feminine. The *Abstract Vessels* are constructed with thin slabs of overlapping earthenware and are often supported by legs, while others are grounded flat. Using the language of gestural painting, the artist works with slip—a pigmented liquid clay—to rub and transfer painted sheets of paper onto the surfaces of her vessels, as well as painting directly onto the slabs. Her intuitive use of color is influenced by the exuberance of her West African Yoruba heritage, as well as the palette of Bosch's *Garden*. Bam occasionally punctures her intricately patterned surfaces to reveal their glossy interiors, inviting the audience closer.

Interspersed throughout the gallery and perched on stools, the artist's meditative *Ifas* reference the body and ritual practice. The torso-length vessels are shaped by the artist's physical embrace. These forms subsequently pucker, crack, and sometimes collapse in on themselves during the firing process; a compelling metaphor for fragility. The *Ifas* are rendered in raw earth-toned stoneware and terracotta, some a copper color, rich with red iron oxide and others stone, ashy gray, and deep charcoal black. "Ifa" in Yoruba means both (*ifá*): divination and (*l -fàá*): to pull close, reflecting on the transformation from pure material to states of expression. The stools that the vessels rest upon, known as 'akpoti', are integral to indigenous life and are used to facilitate spiritual and material sustenance; rest and communal gathering. Bam symbiotically fuses these supports with the vessels, presenting her *Ifas* as votive offerings or "portals" to another sphere.

Through her work in clay, Bam searches for a new state of consciousness, one that is unbound. Her colorful *Abstract Vessels* and corporeal *Ifas* emit an interior spirit that encourages public contemplation and invites us to embrace vulnerability.



Ranti Bam

Installation view, *Anima*, James Cohan gallery, New-York, USA, 2024







HARD/SOFT: Textiles and Ceramics in Contemporary Art brings together two seemingly contrasting materials.

MAK Vienna, 2023

While textiles are associated with warmth and flexibility, ceramics formed from soft clay radiate a cool fragility. Yet both media bring to life an aesthetic language that shifts between hard, soft, unwieldy, and flowing. The materials, shapes, and significance of the selected works reveal a broad spectrum of ambiguity, vagueness, and simultaneity.

The exhibition showcases the work of around 40 artists from Austria and all over the globe, whose artistic practice draws on craft techniques such as embroidery, knotting, and weaving, as well as sculpting, wedging, and firing. The sculptures, installations, and painted works, which also include embroidered images, patchworks, and tapestries, show a vast range of artistic and interdisciplinary approaches that combine visual and applied arts, architecture, music, and digital space.

These pieces offer an insight into production methods, ateliers, and workshops, as well as cross-disciplinary collaboration. Here textiles and ceramics hold cultural significance for communities; they have become intertwined with economic and political systems. Alongside the materials' characteristic features, the exhibition considers feminist ideas, explorations of the body, questions of cultural appropriation as well as gender stereotyping.



Ranti Bam

Installation view, *HARD/SOFT: Textiles and Ceramics in Contemporary Art*, MAK, Vienna, Austria, 2023







uMoya: The Sacred Return of Lost Things **Liverpool Biennial, Liverpool, 2023**

The 12th edition of Liverpool Biennial 'uMoya: The sacred Return of Lost Things' addresses the history and temperament of the city of Liverpool and is a call for ancestral and indigenous forms of knowledge, wisdom and healing. In the isiZulu language, 'uMoya' means spirit, breath, air, climate and wind.

The festival explores the ways in which people and objects have the potential to manifest power as they move across the world, while acknowledging the continued losses of the past. It draws a line from the ongoing Catastrophes caused by colonialism towards an insistence on being truly Alive.

More than 30 international artists and collectives have been invited to engage with uMoya as a compass, divine intervention, and thoroughfare. Taking over historic buildings, unexpected spaces and art galleries, a dynamic programme of free exhibitions, performances, screenings, community events, learning activities and fringe events unfolds over 14 weeks, shining a light on the city's vibrant cultural scene. Liverpool Biennial 2023 is curated by Khanyisile Mbongwa.



Ranti Bam

Installation view, *uMoya*, Liverpool Biennale, Liverpool, UK, 2023



malléable/aléatoire

Andréhn-Schiptjenko Paris, 2023

"In spite of everything, how many beings leave us and themselves before disappearing? In this rhetorical question, we find the reasons that incite the philosopher Catherine Malabou to mobilize neuronal plasticity - the capacity of neurons to gradually reform after their disappearance as a kind of inexhaustible self-repair - as a possible analogy to aesthetics in philosophy. Thus, Catherine Malabou proposes to consider creativity as a capacity for transformation, destruction, chance and unpredictability, whereas philosophy traditionally studies form and matter in their fixed and finite aspects. It is a completely different conditioning of the work, accidental or random, that interests us here.

The wasted part of the matter would be the result of what C. Malabou names the "destructive plasticity" in which "the living form, appears finally in its evidence, at the price of their disappearance". To create the form, another form exists, then is eliminated. Like the mold, the plan, or the ritual, usually conceived as stages of the creation, considered like the negative of a photograph, thrown if unusable. A kind of waste that betrays our systemic conception of reality and perhaps, of what we consider to be true, or beautiful.

In their work, the artists use creation as a strategy of negotiation with reality to propose alternative or evolving discourses. To leave the margins, to deconstruct parts of the history considered as acquired, to dress the hybrid bodies, to seize the codes to contradict them, it is in that the plasticity, malleable and random, answers certain contemporary problems posed by the artists.

The works of Lise Thiollier on energy, Hugo Servanin and Ranti Bam on hybridization and junctions, approach the material and the body in their most critical dimensions. To try to work with the living is also to accept the moving fault of it. This is also what Nina Bernagozzi's performances feed on, literally in painting and abstraction through our consumption of food. Some challenge inertia, others subject the work to the stigma of chance, or propose new collective narratives. This is notably what lies at the heart of Chedly Atallah's work on the revolution in Tunisia or in Samuel Nguyen's installation that proposes new possibilities to the habitat and the commons.

In search of their own history in order to offer a more universal version, the artists sow the seeds of trouble in unstable and mutable works whose metamorphoses offer an alternative to what everyone thought they knew about the world. In the exhibition, plasticity questions the formation of the event, takes the fold of techniques, counterforms them, leaving room for the unknown.



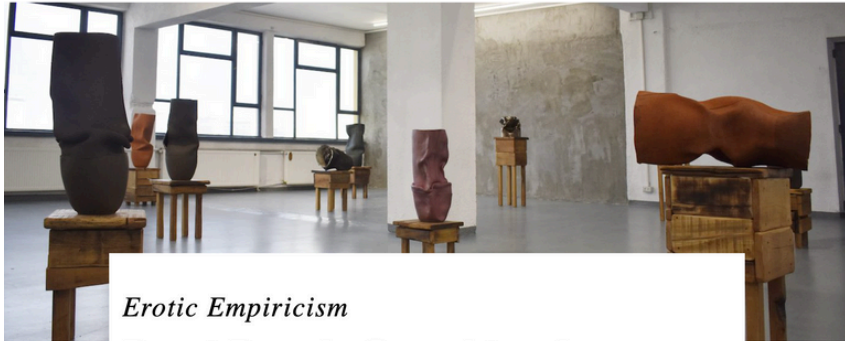
Ranti Bam

Installation view, *malléable, aléatoire*, Andréhn-Schiptjenko Paris, 2023





PRESS



Erotic Empiricism

Ranti Bam Is Searching for Common Ground

In her first solo show the British-Nigerian artist displays her delicate and tender clay hearths, and here she offers her insights on the commons and spirituality.

By Tobi Onabolu
30. September 2022

REVIEW

“You can smell the pieces. Go and touch them. But if you break them, you buy them.” There is a warmth to Ranti Bam’s demeanour, succinctly juxtaposed with a curt, matter-of-fact characteristic, that instantly eradicates any doubt of disingenuity.

Life began in Lagos for Bam, before moving to London where she spent the best part of her childhood. She has since lived in Greece, Dakar, London and is now based in Paris. Though we’re meeting in Bucharest, for the opening of her first solo show, where I am afforded delicate instances and opportunities to get to know the artist and ceramicist.

With clay as her medium of choice, Bam’s artistic approach is fundamentally sensually based, considering the energetic value held in all humans, objects, and ultimately the earth itself. Environmental considerations manifest in her work, as she considers clay as an immediate connecting point with her natural surroundings. Bam views her practice through a curative lens that embodies a planetary conscience, facilitating the necessary and urgent healing between humans and their natural habitat, adopting animist belief systems.



Installation view of “Ranti Bam: Common Ground” at Catinca Tabacaru Gallery in Bucharest. Courtesy of the gallery.

“Women create the commons,” she tells me, referring to writings on eco-feminism by Silvia Federici. She also references clay-making practices in West African contexts which have typically been led by women. Indeed, Bam draws on Yoruba understandings of gender duality, where each individual is ultimately made up of man and woman, promoting an understanding of femininity that extends beyond the social.

“The feminine holds space, but we are lacking those hearths in society,” Bam shares, alluding to feminine centred communes and nexus points, which are also how she refers to her objects. An apt and timely reminder, in the context of a self-implosion of cisheteropatriarchal hegemony.

We discuss her Muslim upbringing, and other faith-based practices, yet Bam critiques how spirituality is presented in these contexts, suggesting that “my religion is physics.” The translation for the Latin word “inspirare” means “to be filled with spirit”, she says. It is through this lens of spirituality that Bam creates and imagines, which she calls “inspired action”: being and doing from awareness.



Installation view of "Ranti Bam: Common Ground" at Catinca Tabacaru Gallery in Bucharest. Courtesy of the gallery.

What emerges through this outlook is a dialogue between the known and the experienced, combining body and intellectual knowledge, synthesised with the power of spirit – re-imagining empiricism through the lens of African spirituality.

She has been diving into Yoruba culture to explore her sources. But she also mentions being influenced by Abraham Hicks, who she describes as the closest thing you get to speaking to God. She also names author Joe Dispenza, and philosopher Alan Watts as influences.

The artist's universe reflects the richness and multitude of these influences. Upon arriving on the third floor of an abandoned warehouse adjacent to a major highway junction, there is something quite special, if not mesmerising, about seeing a vast open space, solely filled with Bam's hearths. The works on display are part of a series titled *Ifa*, at once referring to *Ifáá*, meaning "to pull close" in Yoruba, and *Ifá*, the Yoruba system of divination.

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Installation view of "Ranti Bam: Common Ground" at Catinca Tabacaru Gallery in Bucharest. Courtesy of the gallery.

Curated by Raphael Guilbert, there are well over a dozen works presented on wooden stools, *akpoti*, which are normally used in clay-making processes. Bam tells me that the pieces in this exhibition are a token of gratitude to Gaia as well as a thank you to her ancestors for introducing her to the material and medium.

The spatial layout of the show succeeds in inviting guests to *gather*. These new works bare similarities with Bam's sculptures and reinstate the artist's playfulness with the medium through folds and bends with a determined fluidity and sensuality, and moments of dramatic spontaneity. A number of works break with cracks and holes, balancing gracefully like columns, even in their intensely lopsided forms.

There's a clear tenderness to the work, bringing a sense of aliveness to the objects, and a delicate edge to the material in its fired form, creating a continuous narrative between process and presentation. Yet amidst the rough and raw sculptures, a few of the hearths boast a glossy metallic finish – somewhat seductive, albeit in a slightly obvious way.



Installation view of "Ranti Bam: Common Ground" at Catinca Tabacaru Gallery in Bucharest. Courtesy of the gallery.

A second room features a two-channel video installation of the Osogbo Sacred Grove where Bam has spent time for the conception of this series. This offers a welcome balance to the exhibition, helping to root the work.

Bam's show is the latest from Catinca Tabacaru Gallery, whose artist roster includes several names from Africa, many working conceptually around highly pertinent socio-planetary challenges. Tabacaru herself is particularly eager to mention how many of these artists have exhibited at biennales this year, notably Terrence Musekiwa, whose works are on display at the Zimbabwean pavilion at the Venice Biennale, and which were part of Dak'Art, earlier this year.

Departing the show, there's a certain peace that percolates through the atmosphere, perhaps brought about through the necessary patience that must be applied to such a demanding creative process. There's a feeling of oneness that comes from this exhibition, and a new understanding of how both, the artist and her objects, are the vessels through which such oneness and creativity can flow.

Ranti Bam: Common Ground at Catinca Tabacaru Gallery in Bucharest, Romania runs through 08 Oct 2022.

Tobi Onabolu is an award-winning Filmmaker, Poet, Creative Director, and Cultural Strategist focused on pan-Africanism through storytelling, healing, collaboration, and critical thought.

At the Liverpool Biennial, Troubling Local Histories Echo Across Time

BY LISETTE MAY MONROE June 30, 2023 10:53am



Ranti Bam



Ranti Bam, *Ifas*, 2023.

Photo : Photo Rob Battersby/Courtesy Liverpool Biennial

Another commission for this year's biennial is Bam's *Ifas*, at Our Lady and St Nicholas Church Gardens. The church is the burial location of Liverpool's first recorded Black resident and former slave, an African person known only as Abell, who died a free man in 1717. Bam's work offers a space for reflection and meditation. The work, consisting of seven clay sculptures, is so bodily, so immediate, that there is a deeply felt need to hold them close. The vessel like structures, fold back on themselves like they are crouching to greet you, as if they are welcoming an embrace. Bam gives further context for this in the supporting texts: "The title 'Ifa' references the Yoruba word 'I-fàá', meaning 'to pull close', as well as 'Ifá', the Yoruba system of divination – Yoruba are one of the largest ethnic groups in Nigeria, concentrated in the southwestern part of the country. The sculpted stools, known as 'Akpoti' are integral to indigenous life and are used for rest, care, communication, and communal gatherings."

CERAMIC REVIEW



ARTICLES

Curative clay

RANTI BAM | SCULPTURE | TERRACOTTA

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AUG

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Ranti Bam's sculptural vessels push terracotta to its limits. She spoke to CR's Annie Le Santo about her devotion to making and the powerful potential of clay.



Milo, 2020, Terracotta, 43 x 17cm by Ranti Bam

All judgement is suspended in the studio of Ranti Bam. The torsos of her terracotta vessels are born from a place of joyous spirit, fearless optimism and free from expectation. So, when Bam arrived in Paris for the *Cité Internationale des Arts* residency programme at the beginning of March this year, her relaxed response to the events that followed is unsurprising. Just a few weeks after her arrival, as the coronavirus swept through Europe, France closed its borders. Come midsummer her stay has been long extended.

You might assume such uncertainty would do away with any creative momentum, but speaking to Bam, it is clear that the Montmartre gardens and studios have become fondly familiar. A global pandemic isn't going to discourage her from doing what she went there to do. 'It's been a very nice place to be confined,' she says. 'I'd like to stay until I can actualise my project and work with the local community.'

Born in Lagos, Nigeria, Bam moved to North London when she was six years old. The assumed route for members of her family was into law, healthcare or engineering, but Bam isn't one to stroll down well-trodden paths. Her openness to veer and venture is in part what has led to the success of her art, and she knew from a young age that she enjoyed being creative. Despite the expectation of a more 'respectable career', Bam's parents were supportive of her alternative choice.

'My mother was a nurse but she was always crafting; embellishing her clothes, shoes and handbags or baking cakes,' Bam recalls. After discovering she had an affinity for clay at boarding school, she chose to study BA Design at university. 'I always knew I wanted to make things and I thought a design course was the most plausible way to do so,' she says, 'but I didn't enjoy it. It was static and I needed immediacy.'

AWAKENING TO CLAY

It wasn't until 2005, when Bam visited *Africa Remix* at the Hayward Gallery, an exhibition featuring the work of over 70 artists from across the continent, that she was introduced to a broader spectrum of what 'making things' could be. 'It was like an opening of my third-eye,' she explains. 'For the first time I was seeing contemporary work made by African artists.'

“
It's about saying to the clay “show me what you can do! Where can we go together?”
”



Lisi, 2019 Terracotta 38 x 16cm by Ranti Bam



Ranti Bam

With newfound perspective, Bam undertook an MA Research by Project at The CASS, London. Her thesis was intertwined with her interest in philosophy, particularly an Eastern belief that humans and nature are one. During this time, she used clay to conceptually investigate the idea that we are inseparable from our environment, producing porcelain objects to examine the ways people relate to their surroundings.

Fascinated by etymology, the study of words, Bam recognised early on that she creates in order to communicate. 'We speak to encompass our experiences into a tangible thing, to share. My work contains metaphors that I can show to others,' she explains. She has carried this approach throughout her career, finding joy in observing visitors gather and talk around her vessels at fairs 'as though they were a hearth'. 'I always want people to connect with my pieces in a haptic way,' she says, 'Buddhists bow to each other in recognition of the god in one another. In this same way when I hand someone a piece, it is in recognition of a trust in them beyond (the handling of) the object.'

NURTURING PROCESS

Elevated by her postgraduate experience, Bam enrolled on the Ceramics course at City Lit, London. Initially thrown by the technicalities that come with working with ceramics in a less conceptual way, she found relief when tasked to produce an 'abstract vessel'. Constructed by collaging slabs together to build an organic form, the thin walls of Bam's vessels are punctured and cut into, which garnered warnings from tutors that they wouldn't survive the kiln. 'It's about saying to the clay, "show me what you can do! Where can we go together?"' she describes. 'It's important to me to be able to work freely, quickly and just let things flow.' Daringly, she fires terracotta high past 1100°C, but by pushing it out of its comfort zone, she nurtures its rich qualities.

Mono-printed and painted with a considered use of slips and stains, the pieces are left largely unglazed, giving the illusion of hung cloth when viewed in person. 'I work very intuitively,' she explains. 'I go into the studio intending to use a particular colour or feeling inspired by a poem I've read and I just let the clay do what it wants.'

CURATIVE POWERS

In a gallery setting, Bam's vessels stand tall, radiating a warmth and containing a strength that defies their fragile construction. At a time when ceramics was still in the process of making its big break into contemporary art, Pascale Revert, the director of 50 Golborne (a gallery specialising in African talent) took a gamble. She invited Bam to exhibit her ceramics at *Collect 2017* and later at the *154 Contemporary African Art Fair*. Resulting sales convinced sceptical curators and Bam's work has since returned to *Collect* a further three years in a row. It's also found a permanent home in the collections of the V&A, the Contemporary Art Society and the Brooklyn Museum. Yet while these material successes have exceeded Bam's expectations, she speaks most passionately about the socially engaged aspects of her practice. With an impressive record of delivering numerous workshops and artist residencies, she has taken her love of clay across borders to Zimbabwe, Italy, Kenya, Nigeria, and now France.



Ohuno, 2019, Terracotta 40 x 16cm by Ranti Bam



Romos, 2018, Terracotta, 31 x 16cm by Ranti Bam

Participants of Bam's interactive sessions have ranged from the members of disenfranchised communities to over 200 feminist activists. 'In Nigeria, a young man came to hug me after a session and said how the experience had made him feel closer to his father (who was a sculptor) in a way he never had. That was very powerful,' she describes. 'Clay is the primordial body: it is a material that can be curative and has great narrative powers.'

With *Rock, Paper, Scissors*, the project for her residency in Paris, she is returning to a conceptual approach, hoping to harness and express these qualities further. 'While I am still excited to explore the three-dimensional form of the vessel, which allows me to investigate notions of the body and spirituality,' Bam explains, 'I am also expanding my practice with more storytelling, embracing other materials and going big!'

Throughout Bam's journey she did not hesitate to do other jobs in order to support her art and travels. If it meant protecting her creativity from external pressures, she had no issue with it. Her studio is a 'sacred' space where the objects she creates unfold into their own being. 'I remember the American mythologist Joseph Campbell talked about "following your bliss," she explains. 'I am very happy that I have found my material in which to express myself. For me, clay is a metaphysical thing. It's a gift.'

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In conversation with Ranti Bam

 **Samantha Manton**
Curator, V&A East
April 12, 2021

Ranti Bam is a British-Nigerian artist whose work in ceramics made a big impression on the V&A East team last year when we came across several of her sculptural vessels on display at the annual art fair Collect. We were lucky enough to secure one piece, *Itari*, for the V&A's collection. One year on – a year in which 'real life' encounters with artworks and indeed, other people, have been rare – Ranti and I discuss her creative practice and how acts of making can be powerful sources of connection, solace and joy.



Itari, Ranti Bam, 2020. Image courtesy of 50 Golborne.

Ranti, you're currently in residence at the [Cite Internationale des arts in Paris](#) where last year you set up a regular ceramics workshop with Franco-African women in the Goutte d'Or neighbourhood. Can you tell me a little bit about how these workshops came about? What was the intention behind them, and what role does connecting with other people play in your practice?

Having observed that my vessels function as 'hearths', objects around which an audience gathers in contemplation, [meditation](#) and discourse, I began holding workshops with the intention of sparking the wonderful conversations that happen around art. And because making art creates a space of non-judgment, these workshops become more than a space for participants to learn clay-making skills, they become platforms that harness the curative properties of clay to nurture a spirit of creativity, imagination, reflection and connection to themselves and their environment. They facilitate open, meaningful dialogue.

The first workshop I held was a few years ago at a contemporary art space in Lagos, Nigeria. At the end of it a young man came to tell me that as a result of the weekend workshop, he felt closer to his father, a sculptor he had never met. Since then, I have held workshops including in the UK in London for architects, Kenya for feminist activists and recently in France to hold conversations about postcolonialism. So, I am merely a conduit who loves this extraordinary material, believes in its magical powers and wants to share them with the world.



Workshop led by Ranti Bam as part of her residency at Cite Internationale des arts in Paris, 2020. Image courtesy of Ranti Bam.

I'm really interested in this notion of the curative properties of clay, particularly in this current moment as the pandemic rages on! As part of our gallery development for V&A East we've been looking at a variety of works in the collection for which the act of making itself has played a healing or cathartic role, whether for an individual or for a group of people brought together in the process. Opportunities for making as a means for meditation and reflection feel more important than ever right now. But the virus must have been taking hold just as you began your residency, so how did you manage to reconcile your plans to bring people together in this way with the disruption of the health crisis? Was the curative role brought into sharper focus?

I was able to hold the workshops as I envisaged, however due to COVID rules and regulations the numbers were kept low and we wore masks. Though this did not diminish the quality of the workshop. On the contrary, I think not seeing my mouth meant that more attention was on my hands.

The curative is always going to be needed. To be human means there will be a desire for a degree of solace at most points in our life. I acknowledge that the need for healing in the context of this crisis is more pronounced and immediate, however the connection, openness and solidarity the workshops create, is always going to be pertinent.

What is the significance of using clay in this space and in your practice? What was it that drew you to clay as a material and to the process of making ceramics in the first place?

I felt a synergy with clay right from the first moment I touched it. After school, I forgot all about the material until my MA where I used it conceptually to manifest my hypothesis, which was '*How can art help man understand his inseparability from his environment*' aka a dialogue between the known and the experienced. After my MA I knew I wanted to delve further into the material technically, and so I signed up for a 2-year Ceramics Degree course at City Lit where all my tutors were renowned.

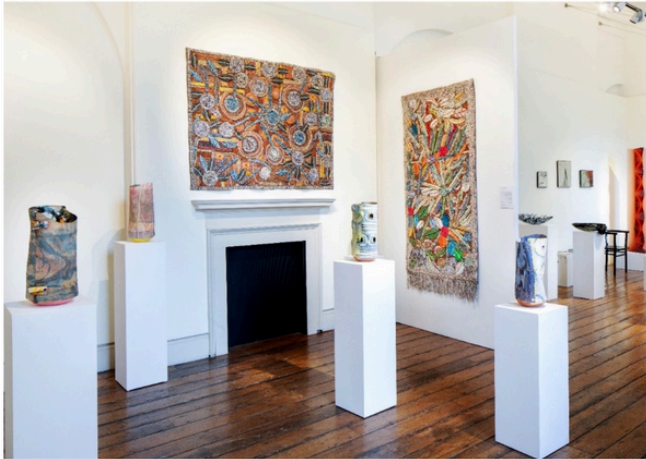
The haptic is important to me, as is a holistic experience of the world. I am very aware of my body in space, and dextrous with my hands, and so I enjoy the corporeal immediacy of working with clay. With this material there is a symbiosis. There is so much I love about it – the way it registers and remembers every action. It feels to me as if I am working with air itself manifested as matter. I also enjoy that it is a material that can do and be anything you want. I like that it has great narrative potential, also revealing truths about its creator as well as stories about civilisations long gone. I love the poetry of all the elements, earth, wind, water, fire and air, combining into one form. I find it constantly reinforces in me patience and acceptance.

When my team and I came across your vessels at Collect last year there was something very immediate and visceral about the experience of them. Their haptic qualities really drew us in. But there was also a real joyousness – in their fluid forms, colour and texture, with the sense of freedom exercised in their creation palpable. They are constructed through a process of wrapping adorned slabs together, rather than built up from the bottom. With *Itari* – the piece we were lucky enough to secure for the collection – the use of tabs, as if fastening these elements, along with its monoprined surface, means the clay is almost reminiscent of cloth. I particularly enjoy the subversive use of glaze on the interior, as if somehow the form has been pulled inside out. Everything works together to produce something that feels strong and resolute, yet at the same time vulnerable. Is this something you aim for? How do you make decisions around colour, form, texture?

I'm glad you speak about joyousness. For me my work is a celebration of life. A celebration of my life, and wonderful experiences I have moving through the everyday. A celebration of clay and its materiality and extraordinary ability. And a celebration of people I meet in the spaces that my work leads to.

For my last series, the inspiration were abstract paintings I had made during the first lockdown when I did not yet have access to clay but instead to tubes of acrylics courtesy of a fellow resident. Often the beginning of a work is inspired by a line in a book I'm reading or a quote from an article that moves me. In and out of my workshop, I am devoted to words.

So, I approach the clay with an idea in mind and then I just let things unfold organically and intuitively from there. I work fast and it seems to me that I am problem solving. Always trying to redress something in the whole of the piece so that it all just sits and fits just right.



Works by Ranti Bam as part of 50 Golborne's installation at Collect 2020. Image courtesy of 50 Golborne.

With part of the V&A East project being a new Collection and Research Centre – a new open-access store for our thousands of objects – we've been interested in how the V&A's holdings are used by makers across all disciplines as a source of inspiration. Opportunities to see aspects of our collection through the eyes of those that make and create is something we plan to offer our future audiences. You've mentioned to me in the past that the V&A is one of your favourite spaces – is this a place you've found inspiration? Do you have a go-to gallery or favourite object?

The V&A was vital to me during my Ceramics Diploma course. I knew I wanted to work with clay, I had great narrative ambitions, but I truly had not seen enough ceramic art to know what the material's real potentialities were. And so, the V&A's Ceramics department, 4th floor, was a most wonderful source of inspiration.

I am just as inspired by texture, textiles and the material as I am by words, and I work with clay like it's fabric – cutting, stitching, constructing, assembling. Visiting the V&A's costume and textile collection always provides me with ideas. I am also inspired by those who have a mastery of their medium. Alexander McQueen was one such person for me. I saw the Savage Beauty exhibition at the V&A and I was extremely moved. It was one of the most spectacular shows I have seen.

That's great to hear Ranti. We so look forward to welcoming you back to the museum once the lockdown is lifted, and to the V&A East sites once they are open! I'd like to round off by asking what's next for you and your practice?

Upcoming projects include mixed media sculptural pieces under the theme *Rock, Paper, Scissors*, some collaborative work and eventually setting up my own studio.



Ranti Bam in the studio. Image by Claire Luna.

For Ranti Bam, Clay is Life

By [Stephanie Bailey](#)
New York
6 June 2024

Ranti Bam's debut exhibition in New York with James Cohan expands the artist's deep and thoughtful engagement with clay as a curative, archival force.



Exhibition view: Ranti Bam, *Anima*, James Cohan, New York (17 May–26 July 2024). Courtesy James Cohan. Photo: Phoebed Heurle.

In 2023, Ranti Bam produced seven terracotta and stoneware sculptures for the [Liverpool Biennial](#). Installed in the gardens of Our Lady and St Nicholas Church, each vessel was created by the artist physically embracing the clay before firing, with the resulting dips and folds infusing each sculpture with a bodily presence that was amplified by their placement on wooden, plinth-like stools.

Bam refers to these stools in Yoruba, *akpoti*, which represent traditions of rest and gathering that feed into the artist's description of her sculptures as hearths. The idea of the vessel as a place of communal nourishment connected to the site that hosted Bam's sculptures, where Liverpool's first recorded Black resident, a former slave named Abell, was buried. There, Bam's earthen bodies doubled as guardians and votive offerings, assembled to honour one life as a prism into so many others.



Ranti Bam, 'Ifas' (2023). Exhibition view: 12th Liverpool Biennial, *uMoya: The Sacred Return of Lost Things*, Our Lady and St Nicholas Church Gardens (10 June–17 September 2023). Courtesy Liverpool Biennial. Photo: Rob Battersby.

For Bam, clay is both an archive and a connective tissue: a living material that relates to all living beings as bodies fashioned from the earth. Hence the title of this ongoing series, 'Ifas', referring to the Yoruba words *ifá*, meaning 'divination', and *I-fàá*, 'to pull close'. Each clay form channels a deeper connection to self and place, reaching beyond language into the ineffable realms of energetic, material being.

Bam's debut exhibition in [New York](#) with James Cohan, *Anima* (17 May–26 July 2024), expands on these ideas. On view are several new 'Ifa' sculptures, this time with bases built into their forms as stoneware legs, presented alongside new compositions from the artist's 'abstract vessels' series (2024).



Exhibition view: Ranti Bam, *Anima*, James Cohan, New York (17 May–26 July 2024). Courtesy James Cohan. Photo: Phoebed Heurle.

The show's title, *Anima*, refers to concepts of the soul and feminine unconscious, which psychoanalyst Carl Jung described as 'an imprint or "archetype" of all the ancestral experiences of the female'.¹ But as Bam notes, her work is not about gender since Yoruba is a genderless language. Rather, it is about the qualities that are traditionally understood as feminine—including the life-giving and life-sustaining forces of care, vulnerability, and resilience.

‘Each clay form channels a deeper connection to self and place, reaching beyond language into the ineffable realms of energetic, material being.’

All this boils down to what Bam summarises as 'softness'—a condition that defines her abstract vessels. Each sculpture is composed of thinly rolled clay slabs that are painted on or mono-printed with pigmented slips before their assembly into delicate, oblong vessels that rest on legs or curved bottoms.



Exhibition view: Ranti Bam, *Anima*, James Cohan, New York (17 May–26 July 2024). Courtesy James Cohan. Photo: Phoebed Heurle.

Combining gestural strokes, swirls, and printed shapes, from vines to florets, these three-dimensional patchworks are painterly compositions that invoke the minimalist grid. They refer to Hieronymus Bosch's 16th-century painting, *The Garden of Earthly Delights*, with colours ranging from pastel greens to rosy pinks and midnight blues, and compositions that turn Bosch's interlocking bodies into an overlapping of skins.

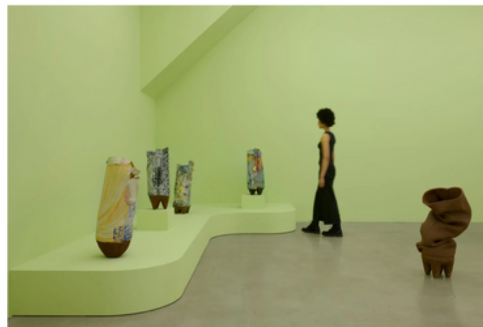
The exterior of each vase is left unglazed, accentuating the delicate cracked surfaces that speak to the artist's collaboration with her material, where she tests clay's capabilities by rolling sheets as thinly as possible and firing vessels as one piece and at high heat. By contrast, the inside of each form is glazed, as if to reflect on the idea of the anima as a luminous, reflective interiority.



Ranti Bam, *Mimo* (2024). Glazed stoneware. 73.7 x 30.5 x 30.5 cm. © Ranti Bam 2024. Courtesy the artist and James Cohan, New York. Photo: Matthew Herrmann.

In some instances, shapes are cut into the clay, as with *Mimo* (2024), where a grid of circular voids on a canary yellow sheet hints at the glazed green coating the surface within. In other instances, strips are arranged to create gaps in the form; in the case of *Ritiroo* (2024), two ribbons slump so delicately at the lip that they appear like gauze.

Such details activate an awareness of the material: a revelation that reflects Bam's experience of working with clay and asking the material to show her what it can do. That invitation to actively see possibility in matter is rooted to Bam's relationship with clay as a portal into an expanded, relational consciousness.



Exhibition view: Ranti Bam, *Anima*, James Cohan, New York (17 May–26 July 2024). Courtesy James Cohan. Photo: Phoebed Heurle.

An interest in how we move through the world and interact with others infuses Bam's practice, whether through clay-making workshops organised with Franco-African women in France, feminist activists in Kenya, or architects in the U.K., or in performances like *Sowing Seeds in Hearthland*. Performed at Art X Lagos 2022, Bam and a group of women built clay vessels filled with soil and seeds in homage to the Baobab tree, a traditional site of gathering across the African continent.

Sowing Seeds in Hearthland connects with the two-channel video *In Hearthlands* (2022), presented as part of *Common Ground*, a remarkable exhibition of 'Ifa' sculptures at Catinca Tabacaru Gallery in 2022. In the video, Bam embraces a vessel whose coiled composition and contoured, dimpled surface echo the ancient tree trunks surrounding the artist in the Osun-Osogbo Sacred Grove in Nigeria, a UNESCO World Heritage site revered as the home of Yoruba fertility goddess Osun.

Both performances beautifully express what Bam celebrates with every clay form. Life is an act of creation and creation is an act of life: earth is the ground upon which that profound miracle unfolds. —[O]

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