

Ashwini Bhat  
Artist Statement

During shelter-in-place, I found myself turning both inward and toward the world. It has been an intense time for self-reflection, for questioning both my own identity and my identification with others, with nature. My sculptures reveal a focus on that alliance of inscapes and landscapes.

The "Self Portrait as Kali" series was developed as a response to the Black Lives Matter movement and my own reflections on the injustices of the caste system in India. "California Poppy" and "Wild Lupine" are engagements with the drastic changes to the microclimates of California due to climate change. "Beginning is the End is the Beginning" and "Garden of Earthy Delights" are series that integrate my sense of our current environmental exigency.

With regard to the "Self Portrait as Kali" series, I should point out that in India, tradition and the modern often co-exist, although not always compatibly. There is, generally, a bias against dark skin in India, and it's not just the result of a century of foreign domination. I have been long-intrigued by Goddess Kali. She's a formidable force and a symbol of duality, but also a perfect example of India's contradictions. To this day, lighter skinned Indians treat darker skinned Indians with contempt, and yet most worship a black-skinned Goddess. I had to travel out of India to encounter my own brownness. But now that I've set my roots in California, I have enough critical distance to look back, to draw from my heritage without falling into nostalgia or romanticism.

I developed the "Self Portrait as Kali" sculpture through constant interactions with my mom. As she can't read or write English, we exchanged voice messages where I shared with her how I was looking for a way to retain the tactile quality of raw clay even when it is fired. How the knotted folds on the body of the sculpture resonated with how I felt during the current state of the world, and how I wanted to celebrate the dark-skinned Kali. When I added gold leaf to the lip of the sculpture, Amma thought that it brought a ceremonial quality to the form. I wanted to emphasize the ritual aspect, and mentioned to her that I intended to use one of her old silk saris as part of the sculpture. My mom understands that although I'm not a traditionally religious person, I'm someone whose interest in mythologies, comparative cultures, and rituals might lead to a sculpture which is essentially a syncretic shrine. The archival print that appears adjacent to the sculpture extends the dialogue to include an abstract image of the sculpture and my own brown body.

Our garden in California has been another source of inspiration and joy for both me and my partner, Forrest. As in South India, in Petaluma I can grow fruits and vegetables almost ten months a year. During the shelter in place, I started cultivating a variety of vegetables including ginger and turmeric. Meanwhile Forrest took on a special project. He decided to fill a hilly area with wildflowers native to California. We thought it would also make the bees and hummingbirds happy. Forrest got so invested in this project that I would watch him every morning through my study room window, standing over the seeds he planted. He literally watched the plants grow. The hill came alive with color that is reflected in the California poppy and Wild Lupine sculptures which also draw our attention to non-charismatic species and their necessary place in biodiversity.

What does art mean when we are living through times of pandemic, racial injustice, and wildfires and hurricanes intensified by climate change? For me, my artistic practice is a grounding. It humbles me and keeps me in contact with the earth itself and with the aspirations, I think, of all of us, human and not, who briefly flicker here.