My Works Have Soul

BY LARISSA KIKOL

RANTI BAM

Portrait of **RANTI BAM**, 2023. Photo by Laura Stevens. Courtesy the artist.

Each issue, ArtAsiaPacific *presents a critical essay in collaboration with Burger Collection, a Hong Kong nonprofit that partners with many institutions to support contemporary art worldwide.*

British Nigerian sculptor Ranti Bam works primarily with clay and her own body. Her objects resemble vibrantly painted vases, or abstract creatures with udder-like feet. Some are the height of small children—standing slightly askew, their hoods pulled low to conceal covert, watchful gazes. Another large series of works is titled *Ifas*. To create these sculptures, Ranti Bam takes warm, still moist clay in her arms, physically embracing it as her work takes form. Her approach differs from the postwar trope of action painting, which involved sensational happenings employing (mostly female) bodies as living brushes and sponges. In contrast, Ranti Bam's work engages the body in a quieter, more spiritual manner. Her method integrates healing rituals, but with a goal that transcends mere superficial feelings of happiness or flow. Instead, her process emphasizes introspection, grounding, and sensitivity. In its associations with the womb, the vase symbolizes fertility and birth. There is the first birth—the physical emergence of life as a baby leaves the womb. Then, there is the second birth—not physical, but spiritual, when a person undergoes an inner transformation and is born anew. This second birth is also a vital process of life. "That I have been started is bearable if I learn to start myself. That is the second birth. The birth out of freedom," wrote the philosopher Rüdiger Safrangski.[1]

1 Rüdiger Safranski, *Einzeln Sein* (Frankfurt am Main: S. Fischer Verlag, 2023), 216.

RANTI BAM, *Ifa 4*, 2024, stoneware, 81 × 42 × 34 cm. Photo by Matthew Herrmann. Courtesy the artist and James Cohan, New York.

What does the idea of the soul mean to you? Do your artworks also have a soul, or are they more of a helping hand, leading the viewer to their own soul?

To me, spirit and soul are the same—they are essences connected to the body. But spirit moves me differently. It feels more dynamic and light, while the soul feels heavier, denser. I tend to think with spirit. I like to be inspired into action—inspired action is my guiding force. Inspiration comes from the Latin *inspirare*, meaning to be filled with creative spirit. I see my body as a manifestation of spirit, and by extension, everything I create is infused with it. In that sense, my works have soul. They function like votive offerings to me.

Hugs play a major role in your art practice. They leave imprints on your sculptures and are thus integrated into the process of creation. Why do you embrace your sculptures? What happens in you, and in the sculpture?

After the pandemic, I felt the need to connect with something more sacred. I wanted more devotion and ritual in my life. So I thought I would make large totemic objects to serve as shrines, through which I could connect to the divine.

I started the process by making large clay cylinders. As soon as they took shape, I realized I no longer wanted to do what I had set out to do. But I didn't yet know what I wanted. So I sat in a space of uncertainty, waiting for something to manifest. One morning at 3 a.m., I woke up, walked into the studio, and fell into the clay.

Clay is my avatar in the world. The material grounds me. When I am in the studio, I forget myself, and I attain a deep sense of peace that stems from pure expression and the constant awareness of being. When I am in that space, I have complete trust that everything will work out. By falling into the clay and embracing it, I was pulling all those feelings as close to my physical body as possible—and I became one with them.

The making of the *Ifas* is a huge labor of love. I maneuver about 60 kilograms of wet clay on my own to make the columns. It is important that I make the work myself, because it gives me something to long for at the end of the process. The embrace of the clay becomes the gift after all that labor.

Can you describe your working process in more detail? What do you consider when you hug the clay? I imagine the embrace must be of just the right intensity, not too tight, nor too gentle. And what goes on inside of you while you do it?

When I hug the clay, I'm really just falling into it. My body generates a lot of heat during the process of maneuvering heavy clay, so when it's time to embrace it, it feels good to be engulfed in cold, moist clay. The duration is intuitive—I hug until I am satisfied. It is always a firm, significant hug, because those are the ones I like.

Nature, soul, femininity, connections to one's own body, portals to other spheres—you investigate all these concepts in your practice. Are you religious or spiritual?

I am spiritual. However, I like to say that my religion is physics, and that my sacred text is Newton's third law. I believe that energy moves, transforms, and returns.

Is this related to Buddhism?

I live a highly sensitive, existential life—always questioning. As a child, the big question was: Why me? In my early teens, it shifted to just: Why? This change profoundly altered my state of being and led me to some fascinating books. I don't subscribe to any ideology, but I am drawn to what I see as universal truths. Physics is one of them. As a sensitive adult, I've come to realize—through lived experience—how much of my reality is shaped by where I focus my energies on, and what I put into the world. It is as simple as waking up in a bad mood and experiencing how that energy impacts my day.

How do you deal with doubt, whether about spirituality or about yourself? I think doubt is very important, as it prevents us from being arrogant and from living superficial lives.

Doubt is like swimming in a new sea. Each body of water feels different—you wade in with some trepidation, not knowing where the bottom is, or what lurks within the waters. But you are okay, because you can swim. I have doubt, but I trust myself, and I trust life. I welcome doubt, but I do not wallow in it.

Your sculptural vessels often have an outer shell—a kind of skin, which is painted abstractly. Let's talk about the relationship between form and non-form—about abstraction and figuration. What dimensions can abstract painting open up in your sculptures?

My love for clay is deeply tied to my love for language. For as long as I can remember, I have tried to capture the richness of my highly sensorial way of thinking and experiencing life into something I can hold and place in another person's hand. Before I make, I always ask: *How will this hold my story?*

The clay body is a microcosm of my body in the world. I constantly ask: *Within the limitations of this form, how can I find liberation? How can I be free?*

The shell of my vessels becomes a canvas for expression—of texture, color, pattern, and text. For me, the magic of abstraction lies in its ability to create space for wonder. I use abstract painting to expand that space, hoping to create a place for joyful contemplation.

How did you get into clay in the first place? What were your first experiences with it?

I first discovered clay in art class in school and felt an immediate connection. But after that, I didn't touch or think about it again until my MA. My thesis was titled "How can art help man understand his inseparability from his environment: a dialogue between the known and the experienced." As part of my research, I explored materials that embodied paradox. Bone china clay, for example, is visually and physically cold, while flock is warm and inviting. I combined these two materials into amorphous forms and invited viewers to engage with them. The idea was that the way we relate to objects mirrors the way we relate to life. My practice became a quiet study in perception and meaning. Rediscovering clay during this process sparked something in me, prompting within me a desire to learn everything I could about it.

Ceramics and clay are ancient, natural materials. But your paintings are also reminiscent of contemporary graffiti. How does the aspect of time relate to your work?

I live largely outside of "societal time," in the sense that I am in no rush to arrive anywhere or become anyone. Of course, time does factor into the making—I need a deadline. Then I allow myself a gentle, joyful process of unfolding as I create.

If you watched me work, you might think that I move fast. But what you're seeing is the result of countless hours spent thinking, making, and unmaking the work in my mind's eye—a process that begins the moment the deadline is set.

I'm also acutely aware that once clay becomes ceramic, it exists in the world for hundreds of thousands of years. That makes me highly intentional about what I deem worthy to go through the fire.

I find the time aspect very interesting. Even abstract painters, whose works look very spontaneous, tell me that they take quite a long time—often stopping, thinking, and reflecting, until they find a solution. What are the hurdles and challenges in your process? What do you brood over?

My greatest challenge is the desire to do everything myself. This requires sacrificing other parts of my life, simply because I want to express and experience myself fully through my work. But I hesitate to call it a challenge—it is a gift and a pleasure to make art.

That said, I'm currently scaling up for a major project, and my work is slowly stretching beyond clay. This has me reflecting on how to involve others in the creation process.

What inspires you today?

I am always and forever inspired by beautiful words. And by old-world values like integrity, honor, and courage. And by people who have a mastery of their craft, whether they make robots or cakes.

Installation view of **RANTI BAM**'s "How do we hold our stories" at Andréhn-Schiptjenko, Paris, 2024. Photo by Alexandra de Cossette. Courtesy the artist and Andréhn-Schiptjenko.

Installation view of **RANTI BAM**'s "Anima" at James Cohan, New York, 2024. Photo by Phoebe D'Heurle. Courtesy the artist and James Cohan.

Honor is a very topical concept in our world, and also a very difficult one. What does it mean to you?

I define honor as the quality in a person whose words and actions align with the highest values of truth, kindness, and compassion—toward themselves as well as others. Especially in a world that pushes indifference.

How did you get into art? What did you play with as a child?

As a child, I was an avid reader and loved to write. I also enjoyed using my hands and was skilled at it. I liked painting, tearing things out of magazines, and collaging. I enjoyed problem-solving, and loved mathematics. It's all basically creating order from chaos. But in the beginning, although I knew I would always be creating, the idea of becoming an artist as a profession did not cross my mind in the explicit sense of the word.

Simply wanting to make things, I pursued a BA in industrial design. I didn't like the course, but I completed it. It didn't provide the hands-on making experience nor the material expression that my spirit sought.

Seeking a more fulfilling academic experience, I enrolled in an MA in art, design, and visual cultures. This allowed me to combine my interests: research, Eastern philosophy, and creating. In this course, I rediscovered clay and began experimenting with it. After completing the MA, I was compelled to continue to learn more about the wondrous material, which embodied immense potential for both narrative and healing. So I began studying ceramics and find myself here today, gently unfolding as an artist.

Your mother was a nurse—perhaps you are not so far removed from her concerns after all, as you are also concerned with questions of healing, care, and the body. What is your take on this?

Absolutely! My mother was a nurse and a midwife. There is a deep connection between what my mother did and what I explore in my work. Your question highlights why I emphasize fragility, vulnerability, intimacy, and care in my sculptures. How we hold something on a small scale—whether it's literally holding a body or holding space—reflects how we engage with the world on a larger scale. I see my work as an ongoing conversation about the body, its fragility and strength, and how we, as humans, care for ourselves and others, even through art.

In today's world, where everything is about optimization, and where everyone is trying to be more successful, more attractive, or physically healthier, are we unlearning how to heal? Do you think art heals? Or is it the making of art—which involves physical, mental, and sensual aspects—that heals us?

Mental and physical health issues are on the rise globally, and much of it stems from the toxic elements we constantly take in—whether visually, physically, or psychically.

I was in Hydra, Greece last year and was struck by how peaceful the island was. There were no cars, and donkeys roamed freely. I realized the feeling of peace was also due to the absence of advertising, which was prohibited there. The quiet I felt was profound.

Great art offers a similar kind of psychic respite—a pause from all the noise. It opens a door. It makes room for us to imagine something different—something that is not yet here.

Making art also heals. One doesn't make art for money. You make because there is something inside of you that yearns to be expressed. So you mine your soul repeatedly. And if you are lucky, you strike gold—achieving the fine balance between that which longs to be expressed and what is actually conveyed.

Is there a work you struggled with—where the creation process was difficult or complex?

At the beginning of my practice, before any of my works were made (including *Abstract Vessel* and *Ifas*), I found the moment before creation deeply unsettling. But now, I understand that discomfort is the signal that something powerful is on its way. So now, when that uneasy, percolating feeling starts to rise, I know to not fear it. I let myself surrender to the unknown—to just wait for the work to come forth.

While many male thinkers tended to focus on the topic of death, female philosophers, like Hannah Arendt, reflected on birth and new beginnings. Are your vase-like objects connected to birth? If so, in what way?

My sculptures are connected to birth in the sense that my practice reflects on how we deal with ourselves as fragile, fluid beings, born into the world anew each day. Born into new ideas, more expansive concepts of ourselves, or versions of ourselves that are ever so slightly gentler and kinder. This is where the abstraction comes in—the reaching of a non-binary, undefined space of potentiality.

Ranti Bam (b. 1982, Lagos, Nigeria) pursued her formal studies in London where she received an MA from The Cass Faculty of Art, Architecture and Design and a diploma in ceramics from City Lit, London. Solo exhibitions include "Anima" (2024) at James Cohan, New York, "How do we hold our stories?" (2024) at Andréhn-Schiptjenko, Paris and "Common Ground" (2022) at Catinca Tabacaru Gallery, Bucharest. Recent notable group exhibitions include "Insistent Presence: Contemporary African Art from the Chazen Collection" (2023), Chazen Museum of Art, Wisconsin, and "Hard/Soft: Textiles and Ceramics in Contemporary Art" (2023), Museum of Applied Arts, Austria. Bam's work resides in the public collections of the Brooklyn Museum, New York; the Contemporary Art Society, London; the Studio Museum in Harlem, New York; the Princeton University Art Museum, New Jersey; the Chazen Museum of Arts, Wisconsin; the High Museum, Atlanta; and the Victoria & Albert Museum, London. In 2023, Bam was commissioned to produce a series of *Ifas* for the Liverpool Biennial in the United Kingdom.

Larissa Kikol is a German art historian who writes for publications such as *Kunstforum International* as well as for museums and galleries. In 2016 she won first place for art criticism in a competition organized by the C/O Amerikahaus Berlin. Kikol completed a doctorate in art history at the Karlsruhe University of Arts and Design and previously studied at the Weissensee Academy of Art Berlin. She lives in Marseille and Berlin.