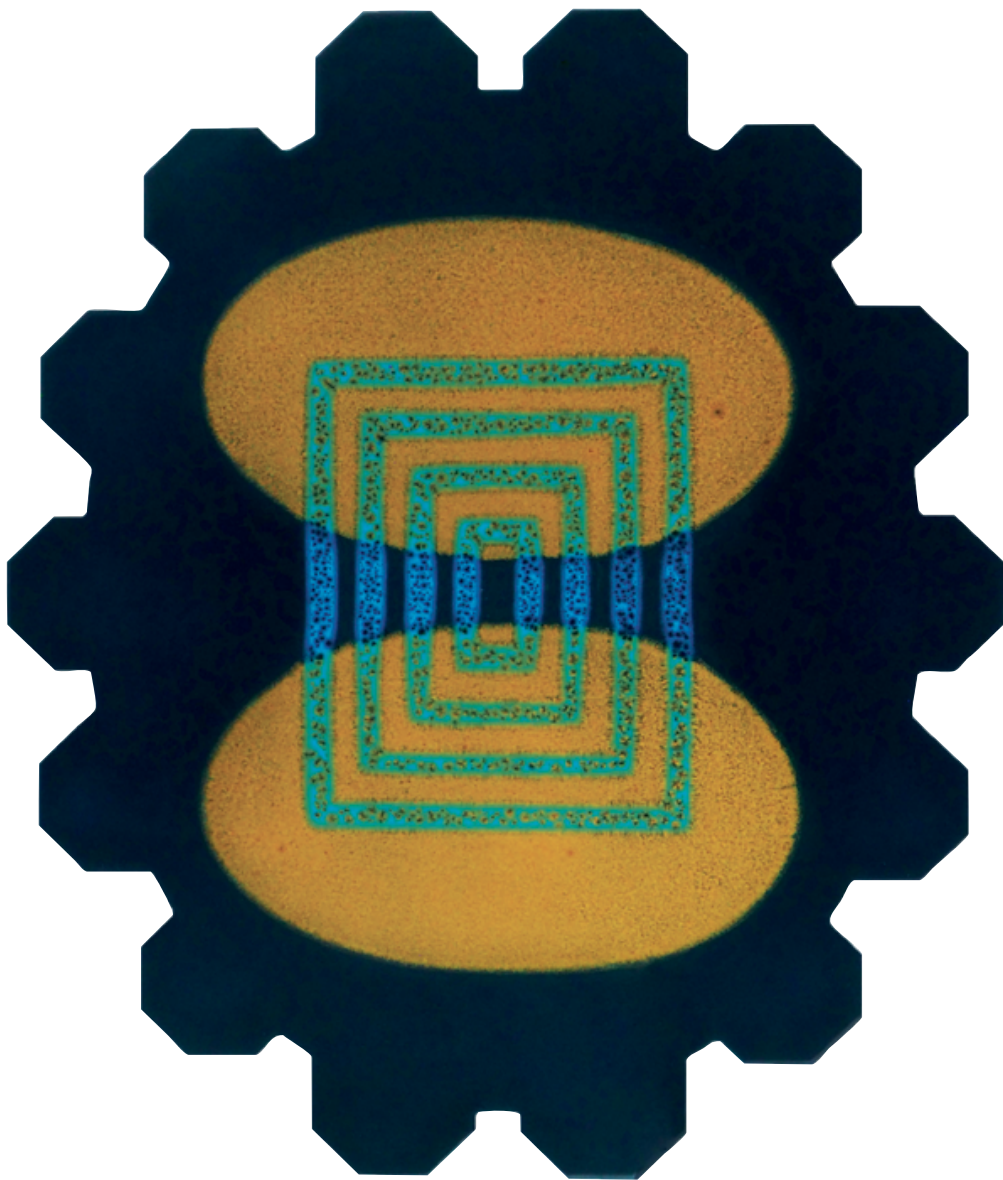


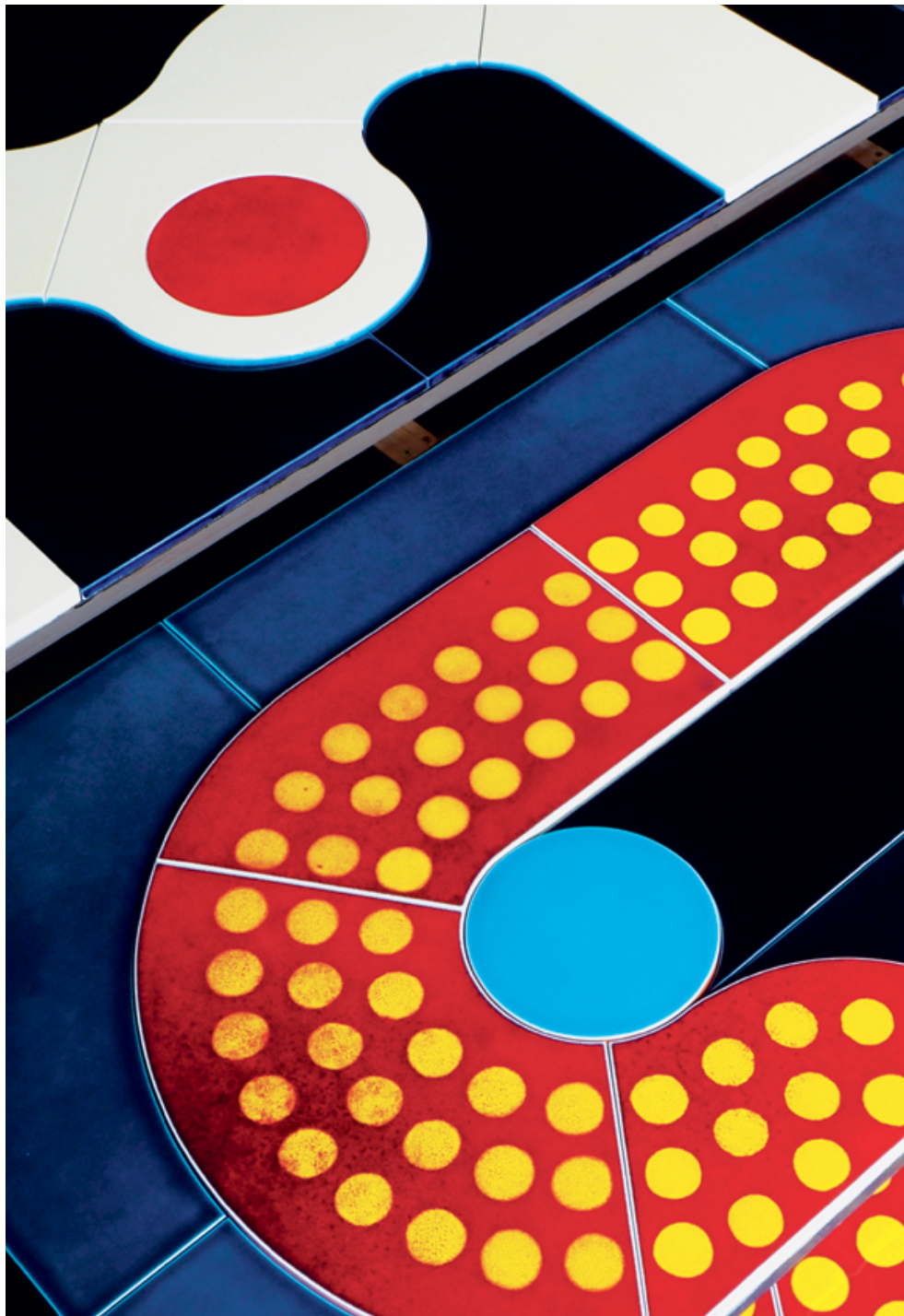
LUBNA
CHOWDHARY



Erratics

SUBVERSIVE DEPOSITS

On the work of Lubna Chowdhary



ABOVE: *Sign 4*, 2021, glazed ceramic panel, 140 × 140 × 5 cm BELOW: *Sign 7*, 2021, glazed ceramic panel, 135 × 242 × 4 cm
Image from artist's studio. Photo by Alberto Balazs.

Glacial erratics are impressive things. They are stones out of place, rocks of a different geological composition and origin than their surroundings. No matter their size, from pebble to boulder, their presence reveals the forces around them: broken off from larger formations by time and tides, by frosts and by heat, they were carried to new locations by glaciers and their flows over thousands of years, or slowly drifted on ice floes, following the run of waters that have long receded. Standing out to the eye of both wanderer and geologist, glacial erratics draw attention, wonder and curiosity – thus both creating the perceived landscape within which they sit and disrupting it; all of which makes erratics an apt metaphor for art in general and for the work of Lubna Chowdhary in particular.



Born in 1964 in Tanzania to parents from an Indian, then post partition, Pakistani Muslim background, Chowdhary was raised in Rochdale. Her family worked in the textile industry, and it is clear to see how patterns, colours and the assembling of individual pieces into new forms was a formative experience in the artist's upbringing. Chowdhary's early interest in art was encouraged by teachers and increasingly accepted by her parents. Chowdhary continued her financially precarious emancipation independently, pursuing her education at Manchester Polytechnic and eventually being accepted into the Royal College of Art, London, from where she graduated in 1991. Since then, Chowdhary has been the recipient of prestigious awards and residencies, including the 1996 London Arts Board Award and several Arts Council England Awards; the well-known Camden Arts Centre residency in 1994; a coveted 2017 residency at the Victoria and Albert Museum and, most recently, a 2020 residency at IASPI, Stockholm. The artist's cultural background, her life and her experience as a second-generation immigrant are a crucial lens through which to view her work. As Emily King remarks, among Chowdhary's 'primary concern is the relationship between East and West, an area where her questions about her own identity merge with her interest in culture and its expression in form.'¹ But the idea of merging interests at the heart of the artist's work also allows the viewer to adjust the depth of field. While deeply personal, Lubna

Chowdhary's practice is also located within a history of ideas in art. The outstanding position of her work allows for surveying the artistic landscape that it sits within and to consider the forces that brought it here.



Sign 7, 2021, is a large, polychrome, wall-based sculpture made from sixty individual, glazed tiles. A group of eight blue discs, coupled into four vertical pairs, appears snugly enveloped by a meandering band of yellow spots on red, itself placed on a deep indigo background. The sumptuous glaze of the tiles gives the composition extraordinary luminosity, stunning in its subtle changes of hues and intricate in its contrast of precisely cut tile edges with the soft glazes and hand-crafted pattern of dots. At first glance, the strong colours and ceramic sheen of the work evoke the standardised patterns of industrial finishes. But the initial impression is soon altered by the warmth of the colour gradients and the necessary imperfections of hand-iterated shapes. This is quite clearly not an industrial product, but an object created to both evoke and resist the impression that it might be. *Sign 7* is one of a several works making use of ceramic tiles, a material that Chowdhary has employed in various forms from the 1990s to now. Commissioned by British designer Terence Conran's company in 1999 for the private dining room of the restaurant Alcazar in Paris, *Alcazar* consists of a 75 × 600 cm frieze of individually crafted tiles. Varying in sizes, colours and surface structure, the tiles have moments of repetition, variation and counterpoint, evoking the score and notation of modern music and paying homage to the musical history of its venue, a 19th century cabaret hall that later became a popular jazz club.

Chowdhary's 2007 *Lantern Tower*, commissioned by Slough Borough Council for the highly visible centre of Slough train station with over 3.5 million commuters per year, takes the potential of abstract tile compositions to an impressive scale of 11 × 15 metres. All three works have Chowdhary's use of ceramic tile as their common denominator, but all three works operate differently. Where the tiles of *Alcazar* appear clearly hand-crafted in deliberate imperfection, *Lantern Tower's* scale allowed Chowdhary the use of actual mass-produced, industrial



Lantern Tower, 2007, ceramic installation, 1100 × 1500 cm
Architectural commission for Slough Borough Council.

tiles, assembled by a team of professional tile setters to the artist's designs, reminiscent of circuit boards and semiconductor wafers. Intentional or not, with their different aesthetics of making, the two works are reminiscent of different ends of the spectrum within the discourse of ceramics, and especially that of ceramics in Britain. Ever since the Industrial Revolution's pursuit of profitable efficiency separated the design of the product from its actual creation by its makers, ceramic theory discussed approaches to making in terms of a binary dichotomy of 'artisanal' vs. 'industrial'.² The most influential figure in this discussion in the 20th century was the potter Bernard Leach, co-founder, with Shōji Hamada, of St Ives' Leach Pottery and author of the widely received 1940 *A Potter's Book*.³ Leach is often credited with popularising the concept of 'Studio Pottery', the deliberately small-scale production and teaching of plain, utilitarian pottery in opposition to both industrialised mass production and expressive 'fine art pots'.⁴

Chowdhary is distinctly aware of the history of ceramics and its discourses, and she distinctly distances herself from Leach, expressing her opposition to his aesthetic and ethics of production: 'The language of white male artists was being presented to me all the time [...] and I really didn't have anything in common with it. In craft, it was the tradition of Bernard Leach, and I just found it dull and uninspiring. The lack of colour, the earthy surfaces. Ceramics were vessel-formed, plinth-based, quite conventional. And my work didn't fit that format.'⁵ *Sign 4* and *Sign 5*, 2021, seem to merge the two previously outlined

approaches. On the one hand, their tiles feature the clean lines and precise execution that modern engineering techniques allow. On the other hand, Chowdhary's work embraces the subtle nuances, imperfections and irregularities that tell of the individual maker's hand in the glazes and point to the history of the object's own artifice. Using the linguistic phenomenon of code-switching as an analogy, Murtaza Vali suggests that Chowdhary's practice stakes out 'a conciliatory middle or common ground between various binaries: art and craft, East and West, ornamental excess and minimal restraint, industrial and handmade, architecture and body, and object and image.'⁶ But the deliberate adaption of selected aspects from differing concepts does not necessarily result in common ground. Deliberately making differences between opposites visible might well be understood as a playful subversive rejection of the authority of either.



Such playful dissent is visible in other works by Chowdhary. Here, Vali's linguistic analogy opens up fruitful means of interpretation of the artist's language of abstract forms. *Certain Times 51*, 2021, presents a sequence of nearly 60 individual, flat ceramic objects. Each between 30 and 60 cm in height and rarely more than 40 cm wide, the objects are each unique, yet use recurring form elements in their variation: composed from squares, discs, pyramids or truncated rods, they feature perforations, cut-outs and protrusions as well as glazes and colours that allow the beholder to imagine connections, repetitions and relationships between them. The series further explores themes that Chowdhary has pursued in such works as the 2017 *Serial Structures*, created during Chowdhary's residency at the Victoria & Albert Museum. Murtaza Vali describes the works as 'short linear arrangements of simple and complex geometries and patterns' which can be 'interpreted as linguistic or semiotic compositions, as coded phrases or sentences, each individual tile a lexical unit in an unfamiliar language.'⁷ Just as phonemes – discrete sounds and utterances – do not inherently have individual meaning, their repetition and combination can ascribe them just that: sounds become words, words become sentences. *Certain Times* can thus be understood as an experiment in visual linguistics.

In this, Chowdhary's work operates in close vicinity to that of British artist Eduardo Paolozzi (1924 – 2005), her former tutor at the Royal College of Art. Paolozzi was one of the prominent artists associated with the Independent Group at London's Institute of Contemporary Art in the 1950s. His wide-ranging interests and artistic appetites stretched from textiles and printmaking to sculpture in bronze, wood or plaster, always fascinated by popular culture and its potential for cultural analysis.⁸ As the curator Andrew Wilson points out, the Independent Group's playful undermining of traditional hierarchies of artistic materials and sources in inherently critical and self-reflective ways constitutes another similarity to Chowdhary's practice.⁹ As tutor for ceramics at the Royal College of Art, Paolozzi interviewed Chowdhary at the point of her application and later supported her in her research and artistic endeavours.¹⁰ In the late 1960s, Paolozzi had 'embarked upon an exploration of the universe of language games'.¹¹ By combining prefabricated,

modular elements of aluminium like blocks from a toy kit, Paolozzi articulated a limited vocabulary of artistic forms into a near-infinite amount of sculptural variations, often even requiring the visitor to actively engage with the artwork.¹² Paolozzi's expansive, playful and non-dogmatic approach to modular sculpture in the 1970s ran counter to the minimalist orthodoxy of artistic contemporaries like Donald Judd or Carl Andre. Nearly 50 years later, Lubna Chowdhary's investigation of the combination and recombination of individual elements to create meaning explores a form language related to Paolozzi, but employs a different material. By using ceramics for the sculptural pursuit of *Certain Times 51*, 2021, Chowdhary calls on the discourse history of clay as Bernard Leach's material of utilitarian pottery. Merging the abstract forms of fine art with the materials of 'craft', she embraces a similarly anti-dogmatic approach as her former Tutor did – once again subverting received wisdom.



A new departure in Chowdhary's repertoire are recent wooden sculptures, such as *Erratics 1*, *2*, and *3*, 2021. With oval shapes lining up on its top like a row of hand-held mirrors or perhaps heads, the body of this work is dominated by an aesthetic of repetitive seriality, while retaining the proportions reminiscent of the human form. Featuring a grid of smaller oval apertures, one after another, the sculpture's torso, supported by well-crafted wooden legs, is at once reminiscent of a modernist architectural model and an ornate piece of furniture. That functional ambiguity is echoed in its making: *Erratics 1*, *2*, and *3* is at once the product of hi-tech engineering and a collaboration of highly skilled makers. While Chowdhary created the initial clay models, drawings and designs for the sculpture, its grid of openings was created in South East London with the aid of state-of-the-art computer guided routing, then assembled and hand-finished. 'The initial idea was to mimic the creation of hybrid objects across continents, such as the furniture pieces encountered in the V&A collections during my 2017 residency there', recounts Chowdhary. 'Due to Covid restrictions, the works were eventually made by artisans in the UK. This was just as acceptable and interesting to me, as I saw myself as the hybrid person in the relationship. I felt that I could work towards making in either direction – either with my inherited culture in the UK, or the culture I originated from in Asia.'¹³ The coming together of stylistic elements from different cultures and the possible loss of functional

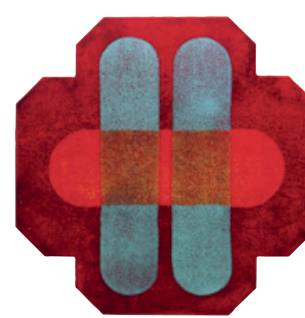


Certain Times 51, 2021, ceramic tableaux, 60 × 350 cm
60 pieces (approx.), detail. Photo by Nick Higgins.

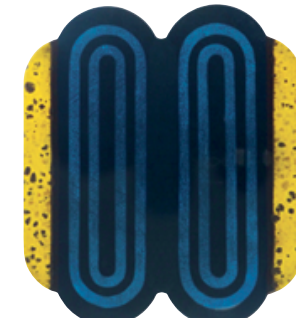
information in the process of cultural translation presents another continuation of one of the artist's ongoing interests: 'When Europeans arrived [in India], they came with their own culture of furniture and a new set of ergonomics that were unfamiliar to the Indian craftsmen they commissioned. Within the objects, there is a complete merging of aesthetic and cultural understanding, or lack of understanding. When I first saw these hybrid objects [in the Victoria & Albert Museum's collection] – I recognised my own botched together aesthetic and formal language in them.'¹⁴ But in their ambiguous status between architecture and furniture, the sculptures also present a barb in the aesthetics of modernism as expressed by Adolf Loos in his infamous polemic, 'Ornament and Crime', originally published in the beginning of the 20th century.¹⁵ The Viennese Loos argued against contemporaneous theories of ornament, using racist tropes to decry fashionable demands for decoration in design. Chowdhary's sculpture does not claim to be either architectural model or functional furniture. It does not demand or require a binary choice. Instead, it clearly claims the common ground of art as a space of ideological dissent and cultural re-imagination. In provoking to do so, Chowdhary's ornamentation becomes both a subversive act and one of empowerment.



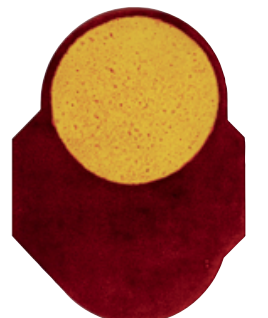
On the eastern tip of the island of Djurgården in Stockholm, Sweden, a large glacial erratic sits near the waters of the Saltsjön, the expansive bay that extends from the



Marker 10, 2021, ceramic painting, 45 × 45 × 1 cm
Photo by Nick Higgins.



Marker 3, 2021, ceramic painting, 48 × 42 × 1 cm
Photo by Nick Higgins.



Marker 1, 2021, ceramic painting, 48 × 36 × 1 cm
Photo by Nick Higgins.

Stockholm’s Baltic Sea archipelago to the inner city, where it meets the freshwaters of Lake Mälaren. In 2020, Chowdhary received the IASPIS International Artists Studio Program, a three-month residency in Sweden’s capital. During the uncertain times of the global COVID-19 pandemic, the residency provided a welcome change from homebound lock-downs in Britain, but also presented practical challenges. Separated from her home studio and kilns, Chowdhary discovered local home improvement retailers as resource for readily available, prefabricated materials: sponge pipe and foil lagging, angular duct pieces and simple boating rope. Her latest works re-assemble these constituents through repetition and intricate sequencing into modular sculptures. The reflective surface of foil lagging is assembled into a geometric pattern paying homage to minimalist aesthetics like those of Frank Stella or Sol LeWitt, but translating two-dimensional patterns into the third dimension to connect exhibition spaces. Angular duct pieces are combined into plastic modules, recalling artistic predecessors like Paolozzi or Charlotte Posenenske, while also harnessing the industrial material’s glossy colour. The strong pigmentation that is also a dominant aspect of Chowdhary’s pinned down rope sculptures. Meandering its way around red ceramic discs, the artist has coiled the blue boating rope into a knot shape, reminiscent of shapes of hard-edge, post-painterly abstraction. Oscillating between ornamentation and abstraction, the weaving lines of the rope connect to the warp and weft of traditional making, but their bright colour can also be seen through the lens of gendered art historical traditions: ‘Often regarded as feminine, as too connected to the senses and the emotions, to the body and to pleasure, colour threatens to get in the way of the more serious, intellectual and masculine business of drawing and forming. Although, having said that, there are always those for whom the disorderly, disruptive and occasionally narcotic character of colour has been its principle asset.’¹⁶ In her embrace of colour, Chowdhary also embraces its disruptive potential.



Erratics are not made. They were deposited by the glacial movements of nature, exposed to the element cover vast amounts of time. But they still make for a beautiful metaphor for art. They obtain meaning through our reactions to them. Our understanding of their displacement imbues them with imaginative power. By seeking them out, encountering them, acknowledging their difference from their surroundings, we pay attention to our role within it. And in doing so, the erratic allows us to acknowledge ourselves.

Daniel F. Herrmann
London, September 2021

Daniel F. Herrmann is Curator of Modern & Contemporary Projects at the National Gallery, London. His recent exhibitions include *Young Bomberg and the Old Masters* (2019) and *Bridget Riley: Messengers* (2019); previous exhibitions at the Whitechapel Gallery include *Eduardo Paolozzi* (2017); the *Max Mara Art Prize for Women: Emma Hart* (2017) and *Hannah Höch* (2014). He is currently working on the National Gallery’s inaugural *Contemporary Fellowship with ArtFund: Nalini Malani* (2023) and on the catalogue raisonné of the prints of British artist Eduardo Paolozzi (1924–2005).

- 1 Emily King in conversation with Lubna Chowdhary, Lubna Chowdhary, (London, 2017), p. 12.
- 2 For a far more nuanced, complex and erudite history of this topic, see Tanya Harrod, *The Crafts in Britain in the 20th century*, (Published for the Bard Graduate Center for Studies in the Decorative Arts by Yale University Press: New Haven, 1999). For current anthologies and introductions to the subject, see Glenn Adamson (ed.), *The Craft Reader*, (Berg Publishers: Oxford; New York, 2010) and Tanya Harrod (ed.), *Craft*, (Whitechapel Art Gallery: London, 2018).
- 3 Bernard Leach, *A Potter’s Book*. London: Faber and Faber 1940.
- 4 Once again, Harrod 1999 (as endnote 2) provides comprehensive and critical background on the subject.
- 5 Baya Simons, ‘Ceramicist Lubna Chowdhary: “The language of white male artists was being presented to me all the time”’, *Financial Times*, 22 March 2019.
- 6 Murtaza Vali, introduction to exhibition ‘Code Switch’, Jhaveri Contemporary, Mumbai (14 January – 27 February 2021).
- 7 *ibid.*
- 8 For an excellent introduction to Paolozzi’s work, see Judith Collins, *Eduardo Paolozzi*, (Lund Humphries: London, 2014); for the purpose of this text, also see Daniel F. Herrmann (ed.), *Eduardo Paolozzi*, (Whitechapel Gallery: London, 2017).
- 9 Conversations with the author, 3 September 2021.
- 10 as footnote 1, pp. 11–12.
- 11 Christopher Finch, ‘Introduction’, *Moonstrips Empire News*, 1969. See also, by the same author, *Image as Language. Aspects of British Art 1950–1968*, London, 1969.
- 12 See Elly Thomas, ‘Suwasa’ in Herrmann 2017, as footnote 9, p. 224–5.
- 13 Conversation with the artist, 1 September 2021.
- 14 as footnote 1, p. 13.
- 15 Adolf Loos, *Ornament and Crime*, (London: Penguin 2019).
- 16 David Batchelor (Ed.), *Colour*. Documents of Contemporary Art. London: Whitechapel Gallery 2008, p. 19.



After a visit to Pakistan in 1991 Lubna Chowdhary wrote:

This is a picture of my dad and uncle restringing a charpoy – a typical Pakistani/Indian bed. In the hot season you’d just sleep on them in the courtyard and in the daytime they’re used as seats or stacked to one side.

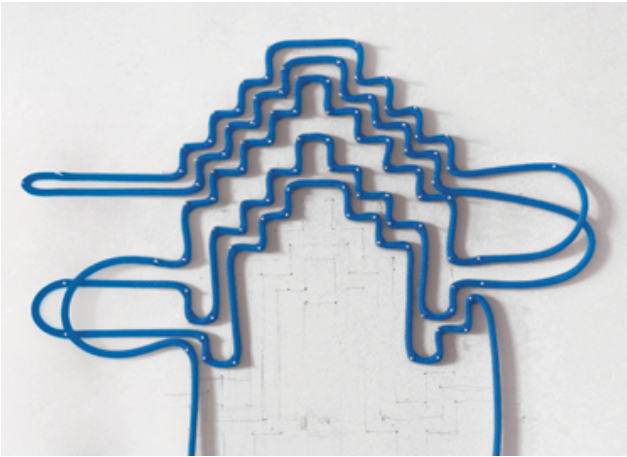
I’d thought that restringing these beds would have been a female task but it wasn’t. The rope was bought from a local bazaar and my uncle dealt with the whole process extremely deftly as he had inherited knowledge, passed from generation to generation.

My dad’s knowledge was a bit rusty so he’s spectating and lending a hand where necessary. He has adapted totally to Pakistani life during this short trip, wearing a dothi and sitting comfortably on a peeri (the low stool).

Photo by Lubna Chowdhary.



Disobedient typologies, 2021, ceramic sculpture, dimensions variable, detail. Photo by Nick Higgins.



Trial work made at IASPIS residency, Stockholm Sweden, 2020
Photo by Lubna Chowdhary.



Erratic 2, 2021, wood sculpture, 149 × 66 × 60 cm
Photo by Rosa Harvest.

Lubna Chowdhary
b. Tanzania, 1964. Lives and works in London.

Education:

Royal College of Art, London, M.A. 1991
Manchester Metropolitan University,
Manchester, B.A. 1988

Selected recent exhibitions, residencies and projects:

- 2021 *Code Switch*, Jhaveri Contemporary,
Mumbai, India; Interstice, 100 Liverpool
Street, London, UK
- 2020 *Some Mysterious Process*, Art Gallery
of NSW, Sydney, Australia; IASPIS
residency, Stockholm, Sweden.
- 2019 Standard Hotel, 10 Argyle Street,
London, UK
- 2018 *Speech Acts: Reflection–Imagination–
Repetition*, Manchester Art Gallery,
Manchester, UK
- 2017 *Windows*, Jhaveri Contemporary, Mumbai,
India; Victoria & Albert Museum
residency, London, UK
- 2015 Masjid Alhikmah and Community Centre,
41 Nelson Street, Aberdeen, UK

Selected Bibliography:

- Allie Biswas, 'Lubna Chowdhary's Reinvention
of Form', *Frieze*, August 2021.
- Veeranganakumari Solanki, 'Transitioning
Images: Lubna Chowdhary and Matthew
Krishanu', *Pix*, 2021.
- Stephanie Bailey, 'Lubna Chowdhary's Dynamic
Abstractions', *Ocula Magazine*, February 2021.
- Surya Praphulla Kumar, 'Lubna Chowdhary:
Switching identities', *The Hindu*, 29 January
2021.
- Murtaza Vali, 'Code Switch', *Code Switch*,
Jhaveri Contemporary, Mumbai, India 2021.
- Shwetal A. Patel, 'Culture in a Time of Crises:
Lubna Chowdhary', *74Podcast*, July 2020
- Baya Simons, 'Ceramicist Lubna Chowdhary:
"The language of white male artists was being
presented to me all the time"', *Financial
Times*, 22 March 2019
- Emily King, 'Emily King in Conversation with
Lubna Chowdhary', Niru Ratnam, 'Objects in
the Metropolis', *Lubna Chowdhary*, published
on the occasion of V&A residency, 2019.
- Rymn Massand, 'Her Vocabulary of Forms:
Lubna Chowdhary', *Verve*, 28 March 2018.
- Nick Compton, 'Trail glazer', *Wallpaper**, 2014

Lubna Chowdhary is represented by
Jhaveri Contemporary

Lubna Chowdhary
Erratics

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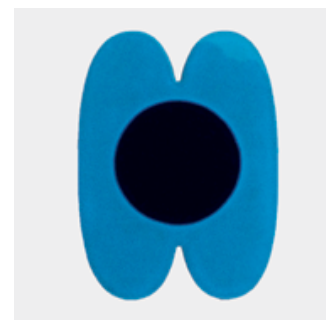
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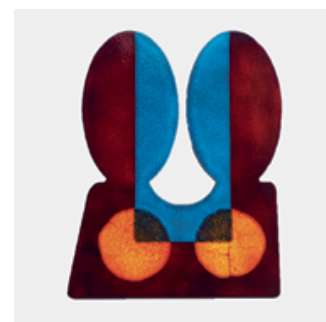
Lubna Chowdhary's exhibition has been initiated
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in an expanded presentation in 2022.

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FRONT COVER: *Marker 4*, 2021, ceramic painting,
48 × 36 × 1 cm. Photo by Nick Higgins.



Erratics I (Blue), edition of 15 + 1 AP
glazed ceramic, 29 × 22 × 0.8 cm
£650



Erratics II (Red), edition of 15 + 1 AP
glazed ceramic, 29 × 23 × 0.8 cm
£750

Lubna Chowdhary has generously produced
two exquisite tile works, each in an edition of
15 to help support PEER's future programme.
To find out more, and to place a reservation,
email rosa@peeruk.org.



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