

Flaunt, 2022, Maddie Klett

ISHITA CHAKRABORTY
THE POWERFUL SPORES OF DIASPORAS, THE POWERFUL FUNGUS AMONG US



Ishita Chakraborty. "Europa" (2019 - Ongoing). Fired, Unglazed Ceramic Installation. Dimensions Variable. Unique Series. Photographer: Moritz Schermbach. Image Courtesy The Artist.

Mushrooms entered the lexicon of multidisciplinary artist Ishita Chakraborty through her grad school job. Working in the kitchen of a Zürich restaurant, she recalls, "I'd never seen truffle mushroom in my life. The head chef told me to cut this thing. And I cut it a little bit thicker than I was supposed to. He insulted me—'Do you know how much one kilo costs? It's 10,000 Swiss Francs.'" Her boss couldn't believe that she'd never encountered a truffle, and threatened to cut her wages over the misunderstanding.

Born in West Bengal, India and living in Switzerland for the past five years, Chakraborty's work is often about bridging the assumptions and assertions of nativism, to communicate the complexities of the immigrant experience. Begun in 2019, *Europa* is an ongoing series of unglazed ceramic mushrooms. These petite fungi are installed in smatterings on the ground, in hues ranging from ivory to copper to chocolate. Their allusion to human skin tones is not by mistake. According to Chakraborty, "We're all mushrooms...mushrooms grow where they get food. If you think metaphorically, it relates to our own colonies. They feed each other, like human beings."

The connectedness of mushrooms—their underground networks of communication—motivates why Chakraborty often creates the ceramic pieces of *Europa* through participatory workshops with others. These gatherings involve sculpting, talking, cooking, eating, and in her words "are not only meant for production. They work as a connector," she continues, "as a platform where people can cook and share stories." Regarding the palette of the ceramics, she acknowledges that the work strongly suggests racial and ethnic diversity. "But I don't tell people this... I ask why they choose one color over another, and a lot of interesting dialogues pop up from that."

Galerie Peter Kilchmann

Zurich

Paris

Cooking is essential to this exchange, which the artist has recently done in workshops with teenagers seeking asylum in Switzerland from Afghanistan, Syria, and beyond. She found that sharing food encouraged participants to open up, even if language barriers inhibited verbal communication. "It's a very complex terrain, with people who have taken refuge from different parts of the world. So I try to work in a manner where we can find a bridge through food. It goes through your body, soul, mind, and histories. That binds us together."

Europa indicates the continent where Chakraborty conceived the project, and also where she has most often shown it. Currently on view in her solo exhibition, *In Other Words*, at the glass-walled Vitrine gallery in Basel, the mushrooms are visually melded into the environs of the building's surrounding sidewalks. Chakraborty is pleased with this display, as it opens the work up to greater viewership, to passing commuters and families. Like many public artworks, there is a monumentality to it. Only measuring a few inches high, in unison, the fungi assert a significant footprint on the otherwise bare sidewalks of the surrounding plaza. In a country where many immigrants are in low-paid wage work and, in the artist's own experience, are considered replaceable. The installation evidences this invisible labor: "We don't have a face if we have just a name."

Chakraborty's assertions of visibility and difference are not bombastic. In addition to *Europa*, her other recent works have an unassuming quality in both title and format. Scratch drawings hang on the inner walls of the Vitrine exhibition; almost indecipherable letters and forms etched in white paper that appear abstract because of the tonal affinity between figure and ground. The artist's "Whispering Benches" sculptures have dotted public spaces in Switzerland. These simple wooden pews each have a speaker that softly emits immigrants' stories.

In the artist's opinion, there is a power in the intimacy that her projects encourage. "As a woman, I have been told that I should make something look super big and gigantic. But I really believe that we women have the ability to make connections with care, by taking the microscopic view." She continues, "It's also not only about gender, but it is about gender...even if you see my little mushrooms, they're many in number...something doesn't have to be gigantic to make an impact—that is a very male-dominated view." Her works intentionally require close looking and close listening, and that extra length of effort is humanizing in a world of increasing alienation and outsourcing.

Bridging her platform in Europe with the people and places who are suffering from the worst effects of climate change is her next challenge. Chakraborty just spent three months in her native South Asia, in a forest in the Ganges Delta that contains the world's largest mangrove ecosystem. "The women there are balancing agriculture, fishing, and taking care of the household, all with the responsibility of planting the mangroves to protect the land." She is developing how she can share the stories of these climate refugees, "trying to find the language" she acknowledges, "to do justice to what is happening." Knowing that the simplest expressions are often the hardest to conceive, Chakraborty's poetic invitations for human connection and awareness are not the quick fix. Still, in her eyes, they are the only way forward.