

FIRST CITY deconstructs Alwar Balasubramaniam's walls. Even as he re-builds them for us

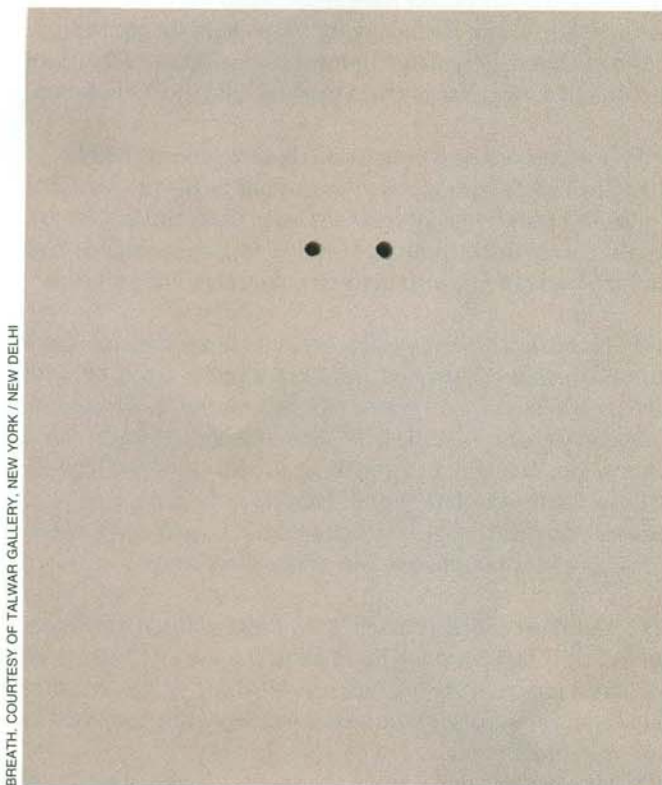
# HYALINE

**I**t's a different kind of drama. You might even pass it by. After all, who would notice a plain white wall? Or the two holes in it. Alwar Balasubramaniam, or Bala, stands in a corner of the gallery perhaps, and notices viewers not noticing. His work that is, essentially, 'two holes at 64 inches height and 5/8 inches apart, on a wall of an enclosed room of 110 cubic feet', and titled, simply, smartly, *Breath*. "Sometimes, people just walk by thinking there are two holes, it's a mistake. Sometimes, people wonder, 'What's the great thing about it? Even I can do it'. And sometimes, people question it, they're curious to know, and then they'll find out about it..." Bala, in a conference call, Bangalore to Delhi, discusses what he considers his most impossible and/or powerful work, and the viewer piqued with curiosity, "I suppose the curious viewer would get the subtle meaning. They might think... why it's called *Breath*, and find that there's 110 cubic meters space connected to the small hole. So, it's not really hidden, just subtle." The 'it' being "the clue", a password of sorts, a key to enter this world of Bala's art, wherein seeing almost never is believing. Dawn to Dawn,

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for instance, are burn marks on paper, traces of actual sunlight, captured on paper. "People think it's buried or hidden, and that's why I think I've also started saying it. But I'm not intentionally hiding it. In *Breath*, I've put in the clue by adding that it's a false wall. I just made the two holes and the space inside and outside the wall are disconnected because of the false wall, and if you look at it another way, the inside and outside wall are connected because of the false wall... I don't want everything to be put right in your face. If you're interested, you'll read it in the gallery's brochure, or just read the medium. I would leave the space for the viewer to complete it. If they want to really see it, they have to put in a little effort. That space for the viewer, the effort to be put in, is important to me." He's not an unreasonably demanding tease, not quite, "We all choose to put in the effort or not. When I listen to music or read poetry, it's not like I put in the effort each time. So, yes, I have to accept the fact that if someone can't relate with it, they can't."

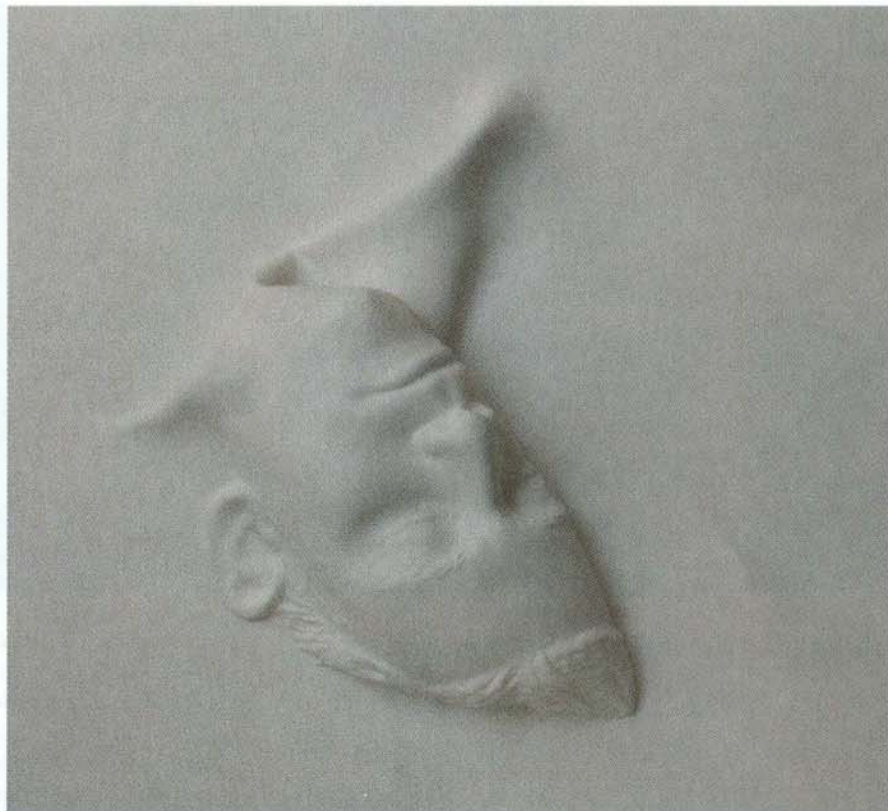
Just over a year ago, we'd found ourselves Skype-ing with the artist, Bangalore to Delhi, both of us alt-tab-ing between windows that popped up the conversation and his work, *Shadow of a Shadow of a Shadow*, moot point of our discussion then. Is what's in my head reality? Since it's only in *my* head though, could it be *your* reality? But then, isn't it all, including reality in my head, anyway? What, after all, is perception? Is it entirely different from reality? Is the difference in degree, or kind? (Fiona Apple, Descartes, Krishnamurthi, Kierkegaard, help!), but for now, we turn to Bala). He scrapes beneath the surface of what he means when he says, "not ignoring the senses, but at the same time, not *indulging* the senses", probing deeply into his philosophy, articulating it for our benefit, "It's an effort to under-



BREATH, COURTESY OF TALWAR GALLERY, NEW YORK / NEW DELHI

stand perception and context, because that's one of our fundamental problems. We try to make others think what we think is right, as if that is reality. What I am trying to suggest is that we have our senses, our perception, which are great tools, but we need to consider them as tools. We live in a perceptual world and when we try to make the perception a reality, that's when all the problems start. We know that this is our view, but we must be willing to balance it and accommodate the other's opinion and perception... There *must* be a way to balance it." In 2009, Bala had elaborated on the nuances of what comprises reality, "It's like when someone says, 'Don't think about the white bird', that's all you'll think about for the next five minutes at least. You'll see it in your mind. That's psychological reality, as opposed to physical reality. We need to have an object to understand that reality exists. But that's not reality, it's not easily categorised, it's all about perception." As you walk through a showing of Bala's works, you'll find the walls creased up, or in folds, the tension tangible, taut with friction, linked up in magnetic fields at times, with a fish hook for good measure (Link), as three-dimensional statements leaping out at you, almost (In, But Out, Self in Progress). Bala would distance himself from anything as definite as a statement, though; in a monotone that's soft yet urgent, he qualifies, "It's basically a question, not an answer." At another point, he acknowledges "a questioning spirit" as intrinsic to him and his work, adding, "You want me to have all the answers, to tell you what is right and wrong, but I can't pretend to." Communication is vital, as it is with all art, says Bala, "I am saying it, because I love to share it. But I don't expect everyone to follow. Whoever is in the same realm, or on the same wavelength, will get what I am saying. I don't think I'm working towards it though, where everyone can understand it..." He pauses and shocks-surprises us, "Sometimes I take time myself to understand completely." Viewers derive "a certain amount of happiness", feels Bala, when they 'see' what he 'sees'.

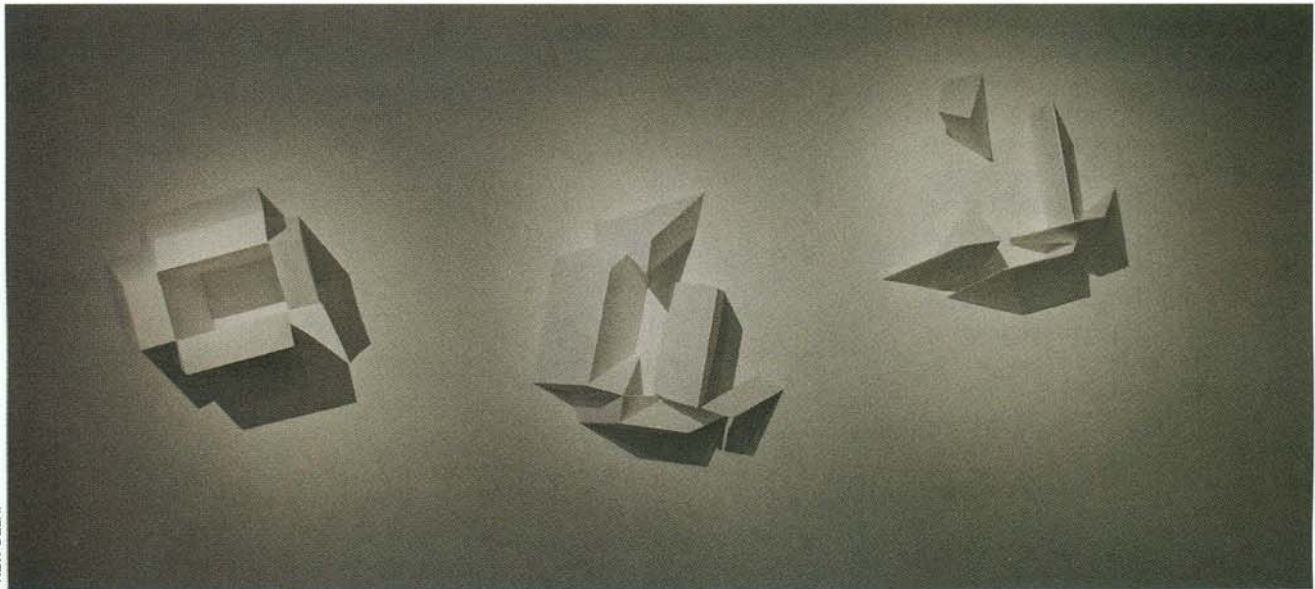
**R**achel Whiteread, the British artist, is someone Bala's work has been compared with, perhaps in response to Whiteread's casting empty spaces with plaster, perhaps because they're contemporaries; he couldn't agree less, "I thought, it is completely, the *opposite* of what I'm trying to do." He tells us more about the western reaction, "I remember, in my first show in New York, they asked, 'Where is the Indian-ness in your work?'... Now, the same people, after having watched the body of my work, say, 'There is too much of Indian philosophy in your work.' They're looking for a superficial skin-level Indian-ness,



GRAVITY (DETAIL), COURTESY OF TALWAR GALLERY, NEW YORK / NEW DELHI

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which I'm not about." Bala often describes the cause and effect of his work as "making the invisible visible", and you could argue that there is nothing simpler than doing that. Or difficult. Bala elaborates, "I'm sculpting *where* the shadow is, that's it. It's already there, I'm just making it visible. It is not Bala's perception of the shadow, it is there, I am materialising it, making it tangible. The core is there, I am just creating a skin around it. Casting the path of light, is not my own personal expression. The path of light is already there, I am trying to sculpt the path, trying to sculpt what already exists. I am simply drawing attention to it." Akin to electricity, light, gravity, you reckon. Gravity is, in fact, a work out of Bala's powerful oeuvres of sculptures, and when you see it, you know there is no other title for it; it's evocative of his thought process and resonates with an iconic figure that the artist deeply admires - Newton. Bala tells us, emphasising on the simplicity of what he does, "When Newton says there is gravity, is he bringing gravity into the world? And what I'm doing is another level lower..." Bala counts Archimedes and Galileo as influences, besides Newton, "They are the scientists that have inspired me. How they realise certain things,

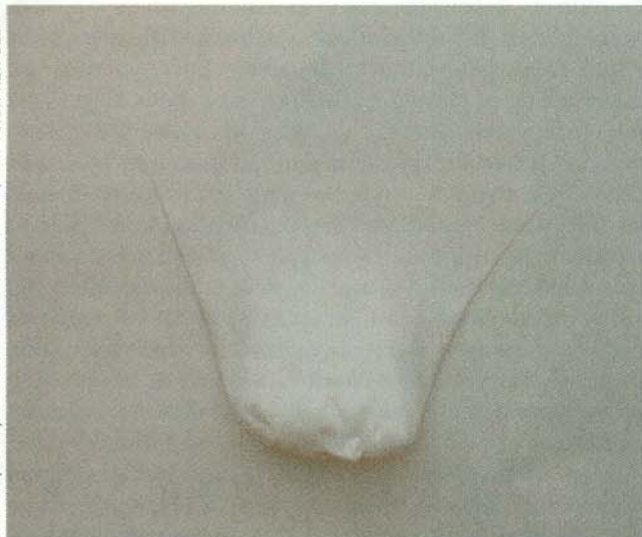


I remember, in my first show in New York, they asked, 'Where is the Indian-ness in your work?'... Now, the same people, after having watched the body of my work, say, 'There is too much of Indian philosophy in your work'

when nobody else has..." He "admires" the work of Nasreen Mohamedi, Fred Sandback, and James Turrell, artists who have in common tricks of perception in their works with Bala. Krishnamurti's philosophy has shaped Bala too, we learn, and he immediately illumines the connection for us, "There is a wonderful saying from Krishnamurti, which I remember vaguely, but it's like - The day you teach a child the name of a bird, he can't see the bird anymore. It's

because that curiosity is gone, you see it and you think 'peacock', 'crow', and the curiosity is gone. It doesn't mean, of course, that we should not know the name of the bird. We should be aware of it, but at the same time, we should accept the fact of our limitations. You should know the name of the bird and at the same time, when you look at the bird, you should not think, 'Oh, I know this bird'." Bala applies this to life too; when walking into a gallery, he tells us he "tries to be as open as possible", reflecting further, "I try not to think about it (what I'm looking for in this artist's show). The moment we think about that, we miss the point. I just try to see what I see. I do walk in with my pre-conceived notions, but I try and look at the work again and again. It might take me months or a few years to understand it and get rid of any baggage. I try to negotiate with it, try not to have an opinion and just see the work." He admits, "It is impossible sometimes." Balance often is.

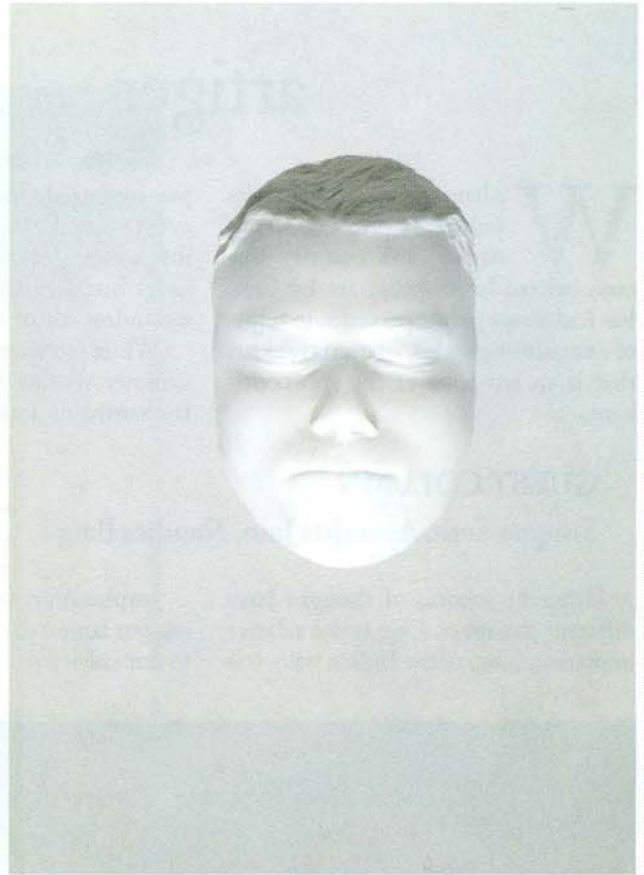
**B**orn in Tamil Nadu in 1971, Balasubramaniam received his Bachelor's degree in fine arts from the Government College of Arts, Chennai, in 1995. In 1998, he studied printmaking at EPW Edinburgh, UK, after which he pursued his love for the genre at the Universitat fur Angewandte Kunste in Vienna, Austria. He has travelled extensively and exhibited in France, Spain, Egypt, Japan, Malaysia, Finland, Norway and USA. Just back from New York, when we speak with him, where he was part of On Line: Drawing through the Twentieth Century at the Museum of Modern Art, Bala is now looking forward to moving further down south, here in India. He's just wrapped up the negotiations, he tells us, "I am planning to move out of the city and live in a small village. It's a tiny village on the foothills, in Tamil Nadu, called Ratnagiri." Guggenheim and Ratnagiri, it's "all the same earth", we're informed, and Bala has a succinct Bala analogy, "It's like breathing in and breathing out, both are important. I can be there and do my work quietly and then travel around in the outside world." The artist views the physical space as "only the practical aspect of executing whatever I need to execute then", the need to move to a quieter place stemming from his interest in



gardens. "I have a garden here (in Bangalore), and then I decided I could have a bigger garden, because I like gardens, and so I thought maybe I could move to a village", he states, simply. Time spent in the studio, working on a particular sculpture, often reveals new directions to move towards, "The next work might happen as an accident, or instead of accident, I should say, surprise. It's like when I was working on the metal sculptures, there was too much rust on the floor, so I was using the magnet to collect the rust. And while I was doing that, I had thoughts about another work, and Energy Field emerged out of that. And then when I was using a plastic sheet to collect the rust off the magnet and that's how Link happened..." He talks specifics, "The content, the subject, I would say, finds the way; it decides the medium, the size, the scale, the method. How to make it more appropriate for the viewer, is something I work on." At times, Bala revisits older works, because he's worked out a fresher approach, "Like, with the pulley wall, I've done it three or four times, and now I'm doing it again, because I feel I'm coming closer to what the work really wants to convey. If I feel it doesn't communicate, I will re-approach it. Even years later..."

**T**he tease, if you please, inherent to Bala's works, the "questioning spirit", has encompassed interrogation of art appreciation too, especially the big deal we make of it, with giant installations outdone almost simultaneously by their giant-er market prices. It seems as if speculation has seeped into the art world from the stock market. Bala created the evaporating sculpture, a work that actually, deliberately *depreciates* with the passing of time. The artist places it in context, "You can get the Bible for ₹10, or for free, or for 10 million, but that's irrelevant to the Bible, the content doesn't change. People can pay the price, but the value doesn't change. Nothing changes in the *actual* work, but the *perception* of it changes, such that the 'price' of it changes. The content doesn't change. Take any artist in history, the work was done then, whenever it was done and that's it. Does anything change in the actual work? Maybe the paper has faded, the colours have become lighter, but the content is the same. The price has changed because of the market and

other such factors, like demand and supply and exhibition history. So, it's perception. It is relevant and yet it is irrelevant to the work itself." We ask him how it's relevant, and he's quick to respond, "Well, it is relevant, because unless the work has certain quality, it won't happen in the first place. Why have Van Gogh and Ver-



A BALASUBRAMANIAM - IN, BUT OUT, COURTESY OF TALWAR GALLERY, NEW YORK / NEW DELHI

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meer found appreciation?" He'd rather not comment on contemporary Indian artists and addresses the perception of nihilism instead, in answer to those who find his art dark, "I think... Maybe for people who're interested in accumulating knowledge and getting conflicted more and more, for them, this can be dark. Because it is against that. Questioning what is true, makes them fall apart. The more and more one identifies with one's own conflicts, the more this becomes dark. When you find something that's difficult, and you cannot access it at once, it's dark..." And Krishnamurthi emerges, aptly, "Knowing is very different from knowing about. We're more focussed on knowing about, which is not as important as knowing. Knowing about is knowledge and knowing is experience." ■