

Alwar Balasubramaniam: The reclusive superstar

You can't pin down the 'Indianness' in his art. Yet few contemporary artists can match Alwar Balasubramaniam's rise

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Alwar Balasubramaniam at the Talwar Art Gallery, New Delhi. Photo: Priyanka Parashar/Mint

It is cold and windy in New Delhi on 30 December, but it's a day when spirits are somewhat lighter than usual—several bleak and hazy days later, the sun has made a half-hearted appearance. As we head towards the front garden of Talwar Gallery, a nondescript bungalow in the residential colony of Neeti Bagh in south Delhi, Alwar Balasubramaniam, a man from the sunny south, laughs when asked about his appearance: a cotton shirt with jeans, and rubber chappals. His reaction, however, suggests that the cold doesn't trouble him a bit.

There's little that the mild-mannered artist, commonly referred to as Bala, seems troubled by. The artist, who was in Delhi on a recent trip to discuss his forthcoming solo show, *Layers Of Wind, Lines Of Time*, with gallerist Deepak Talwar, is one of those rare individuals far removed from the worries of regular human beings—"In the 1980s when I was earning Rs.300, I was feeling happy and enjoying

doing my work; now also, I feel happy and enjoy doing my work". He's like a tonic for all those who meet him, instantly injecting in them his sense of wonder at the world—the starting point, so to say, for his art. Girish Shahane, curator and artistic director of the 2015 India Art Fair, describes him as “an extraordinary human being”. His first gallerist from 1998, says “there was a deep spirituality about this boy from the beginning”.

Now, nearly two decades later, Bala is considered one of the most important contemporary artists from India, has a strong international collector base, and his sculptures and installations have been shown, among other places, at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) and Guggenheim Museum in New York, US, and Mori Art Museum in Tokyo, Japan. “His practice is set apart from many (Indian) artists, in that it has an international address. That has meant that his work has been characterized less by an Indianness and more by a universality,” says Deepanjana Klein, Christie's international head of department, south asian modern and contemporary art. This question of a lack of apparent “Indianness” in Bala's works has been a source of much conversation over the years, with some even seeing it as the reason for his slow rise to prominence. He himself addressed the issue in an interview with the First City magazine in 2011, saying, “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 Indian philosophy in your work.’ They're looking for a superficial skin-level Indian-ness, which I'm not about.”

But as the market matured and collectors increased their knowledge of Indian art, other artists without this overt Indianness in their works—“my work is not directly about the social or political,” says Bala—also rose to global prominence. Now, most of the collectors of his work outside India “come to us because of the quality of the art and not the artist's passport,” says Talwar.



Gravity, 2008. Photographs
Courtesy Talwar Gallery, New
York/New Delhi

Bala's prices, according to Klein, have been increasing steadily. At The India Sale at Christie's auction house on 11 December, his fibreglass sculpture Gravity fetched Rs.1.10 crore, a world auction record for the artist. Klein's colleague in Mumbai, Sonal Singh, adds that Bala is high on the list of anyone looking at contemporary art in India. However, the 42-year-old artist remains largely unknown among the larger non-art viewing public, which can name superstars like Subodh Gupta and Anish Kapoor,

and pin down “artist” as the profession of a Bharti Kher or Atul Dodiya.

This has to do with the fact that Bala just doesn’t care to push himself forward, or to flood the market with his works. Much like Tyeb Mehta, he is not prolific, and Singh says Christie’s was fortunate to even get Gravity for sale—most of Bala’s works at the auction were his earlier flat works (paintings and prints). He is concerned purely with the experience of art-making. “He doesn’t want to be the next M.F. Husain. His ambition lies in his work,” says Kurien.

So unless he has a solo show opening, he prefers to stay off the radar; last year, he even chose to move away from Bengaluru to Tirunelveli (also called Nellai), the village in Tamil Nadu to which his family originally belongs. “I think artists are really the root of a tree. They can search for truth or reality in their own way and the gallery can support them—the outside part of the tree, where it is more about reaching the outside world, connecting with the outside world. That is the role of the gallery, no? Why does the artist have to do that?” says Bala, using one of his many nature-inspired metaphors.

“I know one thing,” he continues. “I enjoy doing my work and I don’t want to deal with the other things. When you enjoy doing your work so much, why deal with where to show, how to show, what to do? If the artist finds the right gallery which respects their work and gives them that freedom to do whatever they want to do, the artist can focus on his work.”



Untitled, 2004

This single-mindedness was on full display even before he became an artist. In the late 1980s, the Government College of Fine Arts in Chennai rejected his application three years in a row. “I was not getting good marks in school, and this (art) is what I enjoyed doing, and later when I came to know that there was a college that existed only for this, I jumped out of happiness. But three times I didn’t get the seat, so that made me sure that this is where I’m going to spend the rest of my life, whether I went into college or not, whether they gave me a seat or not,” says Bala.

He spent those years working with and learning from different artists, “not only from the so-called fine arts”, but also designers and signboard artists, at screen-printing units, and in the library. “It was not even a choice,” says Bala of his decision to be an artist. “This was the only thing I could do.”

Considering that he came from a lower middle-class background, this naturally worried his family, but Bala says that “in some sense, they liked the clarity of a young boy who says I want to do this irrespective of what happens”. He did eventually get into the college in 1990, and even studied printmaking in Scotland and Austria thereafter.

Bala continues to possess the determination to stick to what he loves, and shut out, as far as possible, things with the potential to shatter the calm. Deepak Talwar saw his work, tracked him down and started representing him since 2002 “(Showing) one or two works at group shows is fine, but for a solo, I like to have a comfortable relationship (with the gallerist), you know like I am with him (Talwar)” says Bala.

There have been two momentous events in Bala’s life in the past year, and at least one has had a direct bearing on the works that will feature in his new solo show, which comes after more than two years. The first was his move to Nellai (“I just love vast landscapes, when you can see the sky like a dome and land in a little curve; as far as you can see, there are no houses here”), and the second, the birth of his son, now nine months old (“it changes every aspect of your life”).



Shadow Of A Shadow Of A Shadow,2007

Clearly, he is enamoured of his son. “They are constantly learning. You feel somewhere we are stuck with our fixed ideas. They see detail; in a big room, a tiny dust (particle) is good enough for him to go and scratch on the floor. Or the way he sees the sunlight and tries to grab it on the floor makes you think how beautiful that state is. There are so many such moments in a day,” says Bala.

Funnily enough, this is precisely what Bala shows us in his own work—“how we miss seeing things, how it is important to be aware of little details around life”. In the Talwar Gallery garden, right behind where we’re sitting, is a massive sculpture from his series *Nothing From My Hands*. In its dips and waves, Bala makes visible to us the space and form between his two clenched hands. The invisible also makes its presence felt in works such as *Shadow Of A Shadow Of A Shadow*, where the artist starts with a cardboard box, casts and gives form to its shadow, and so on, continuing to highlight the spaces where light does not penetrate, till his sculpted shape becomes unrecognizable.



Kayaam (Detail), 2008

His work is as much about exposing the invisible or overlooked as about an exploration of the self. In many of his works, he casts his own body, capturing traces of the self, sometimes showing the body as a shell—for instance, in the visually stunning *Kaayam* (2008), where it features as collapsed skin, exposing the emptiness inside. In 2004 too, he explored the concept of dissolution of the self in an untitled work where he made a bust of himself with an evaporating compound, which would over time disintegrate and disappear as vapour in the air.

This element of surprise, says Talwar, is always present in Bala’s work. “He incorporates these very simple ideas or phenomenon, and makes us realize something about those that we either take for granted or dismiss. So there are these ‘aha’ moments when we see them. That sense of wonder, he has it as an artist, and lets the viewer have it too.”

For the forthcoming show, Bala looks at how form is created by energy, like the current of the wind or the magnetic field. His shift to Nellai, with its vast hilly landscape, his early morning walks there with his son, inspired him. “The rock formations are so amazing that I didn’t want to just cast them. These

forms are beautiful because they accept other energies; for instance, if a stone blocks the flow of water, the water rubs the stone which, over a period of time, gets the shape of the current of the water.”

He wanted to provide an environment where such forms could be created. For some of the works, he had several fans running, for a week or more, even two months. For others, several magnets placed together created an energy zone. Into these he would pour dust (chalk powder, plaster of Paris, scraped rust) and glue that would keep accumulating over time, finally giving a trace of the invisible, that is, the unseen current of the wind or the magnetic field.



Self in Progress, 2002

Bala has been exploring this line of thought for nearly two decades, but he will not call it a spiritual pursuit. “I really don’t want to have that label, no, no, no, no,” he says emphatically. “This search for an understanding of reality, searching for truth, searching for details in life which we are surrounded by all the time but which we ignore or take for granted, I don’t think these are separate from science or the spiritual aspects of life. All these things have a common ground. When Newton is talking about gravity, it is also a discovery of truth. So maybe we can call it a search for life,” says Bala.

And it’s a journey that is leaving its imprint on him all the time. There is no sense of possessiveness about the works he’s created. “Once you’ve finished it, it is finished anyway. It’s like walking and looking at landscapes is much more important than worrying about foot impressions. The process, the experience is with me all the time. I can still remember where each work was triggered, where the seed sprouted to a tree. It’s one continuous process. It’s not like it’s finished and gone. That led me to something else and that led me to something else. It’s like lineage in a way. It’s like all the work I’m doing is the grand grand grand grand son or daughter of work that happened 15-20 years back. So it’s still living.

Layers Of Wind, Lines Of Time will be on from 28 January-2 May, 1am-7pm (Sundays closed), at Talwar Gallery, C-84, Neeti Bagh, New Delhi.