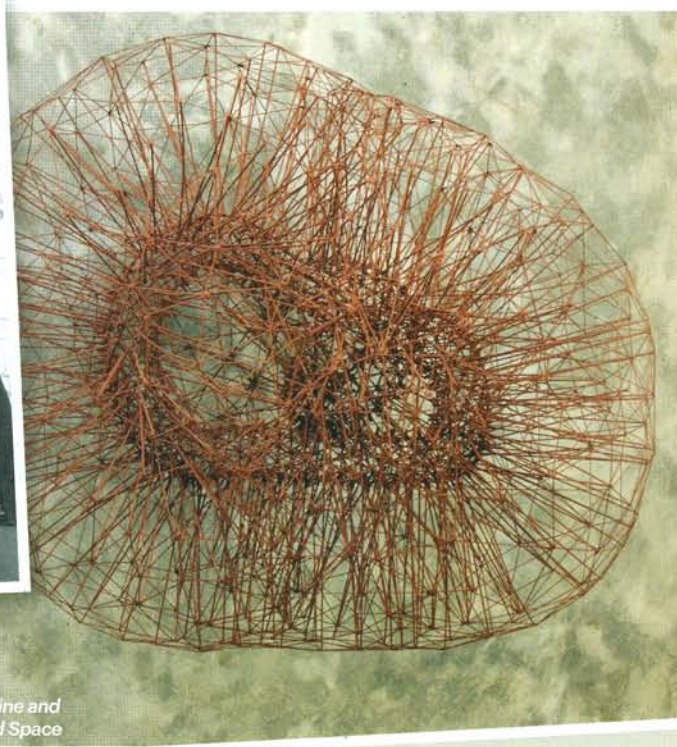
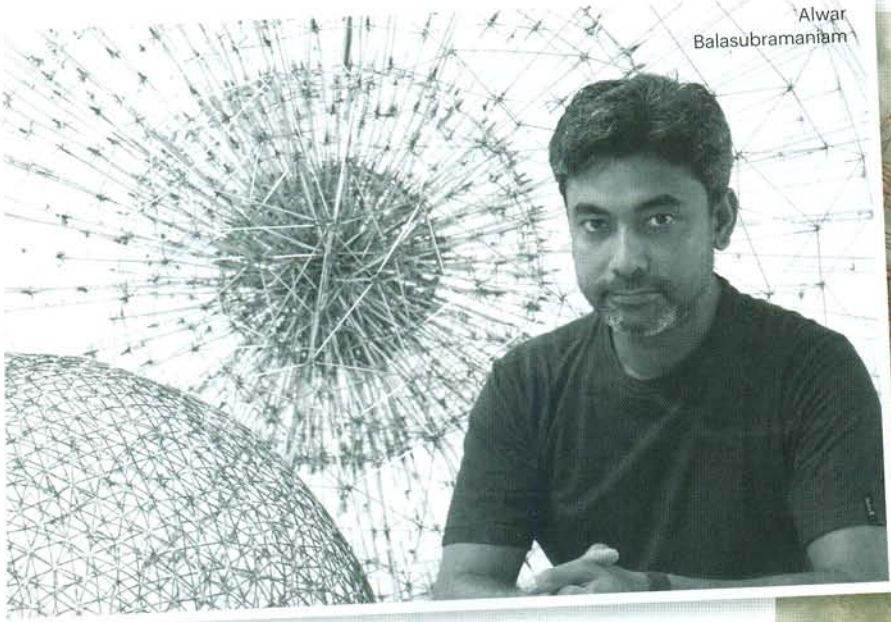


Alwar  
Balasubramaniam



Endless Line and  
Expanded Space

# 13 RAISING QUESTIONS

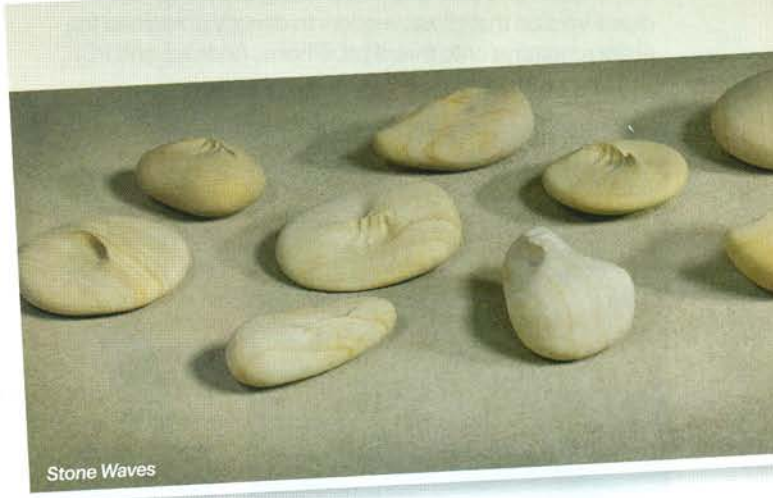
*'Do you know what you see?'*  
The art of A BALASUBRAMANIAM  
skillfully addresses this idea

By Deeksha Nath

In 2004, Bangalore-based artist Alwar Balasubramaniam made a sculptural bust of himself cast from sand, fibreglass, and evaporating compound. This is presently placed in an acrylic case and is slowly evaporating over time until some future date, when nothing of the original form will remain.

In this work one sees what Bala (as he is widely known) does best—experiment with different materials and techniques to undermine the formal structures and physical properties (form, weight, mass) of sculpture. Over the years, he has done this by constantly existing on the slim line that distinguishes, in his words, “that which is in, that which is out, and that which is in between”, ie the definite, the indefinite, and the indeterminate. This train of thought continued from 1997-'98 when he made *Open Secret*, using his cupped hands to mould and shape sculpture, thus making unconscious spaces visible. It is this essential quest that has defined the last decade of his work, exemplified by his exhibitions, *(In)Visible* (2007) and *(In)Between* (2009).

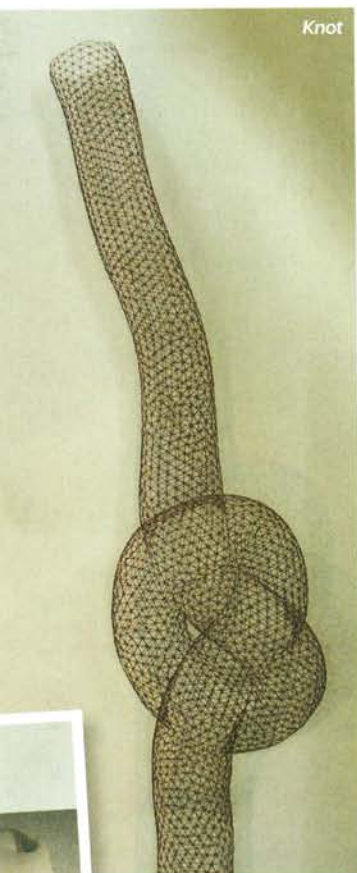
In his new solo exhibition, *Nothing From My Hands*, that opens at Talwar Gallery, New Delhi, this month, the focus remains on expanding the parameters of what we know and what we believe we know. In the installation *Stone Waves*, he manages to impart an impossible elasticity to large rocks by leaving the impression of a pinched hand, a punched



Stone Waves

fist, a poked finger into the stones. The work immediately begs impossible questions like, how does one pinch stone? How does one leave thumb prints or knuckle impressions on it? Bala gives voice to this wonderment. “The viewer is not able to fix the work by looking at it,” he says, the visual form defying cognitive knowledge.

In 2009, Bala showed an ingenious and intuitive work *In Between, In and Out* (2009) that marked a development in his desire to gain knowledge of the surface of objects and places by interacting, penetrating, or protruding. Conceived in three parts—an egg-shaped wooden sculpture on a pedestal, a welded metal frame of the wooden sculpture resembling an armature mounted on the wall behind the pedestal, and finally a wall-mounted glass frame containing the white fibreglass shattered cast of the wooden sculpture—suggests multiple ways in which an object is conceived/ created/ birthed. It was also on this occasion



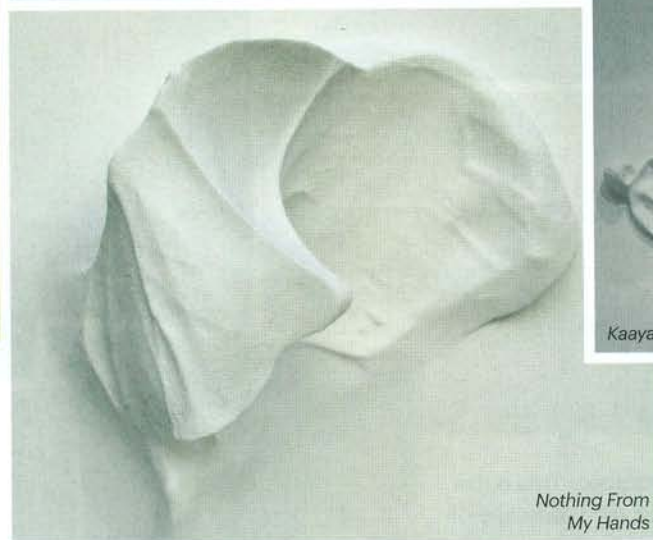
Knot



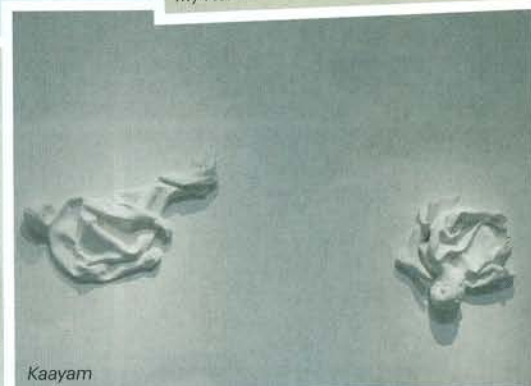
Kaayam



Nothing From My Hands



Nothing From My Hands



Kaayam

that he showed *Oomph* (2009), a large iron and brass wire sculpture, which casts sharp shadows around it, and suggested that Bala would move away from undermining definition in sculpture to enhancing it with greater use of line and light, and perhaps a material shift from fibreglass to metal.

In the present exhibition there are two striking works, *Knot* and *Endless Line and Expanded Space* that show the maturation of *Oomph*. The latter is especially fulfilling of the prediction. Bala has made one line of welded metal and expanded it outward by a foot, thus converting a line into an indeterminate three-dimensional object, a 'space' as he calls it. Testimony to the precision that is required to make all of Bala's sculptures and installations, the number of points on the line and of the spatial structure remain the same. *Knot* too subverts the one-dimensionality of line by creating a knot in a seemingly linear sculpture. The core resembles an embryo.

Previously, Bala has employed shadows and magnets to produce visual puns. With fibreglass, wood, acrylic, and magnet the artist created a wire tipped with a hook stretched taut between two adjoining walls in *Link* (2009). The surprising aspect is that while

*Bala's exhibitions are quiet spaces, bleached of loud attractions and popular narratives*

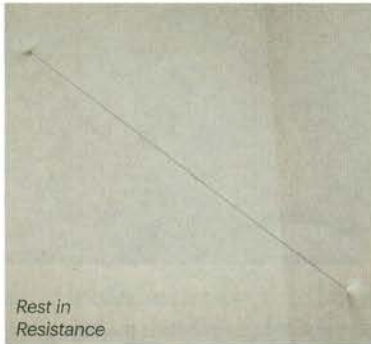
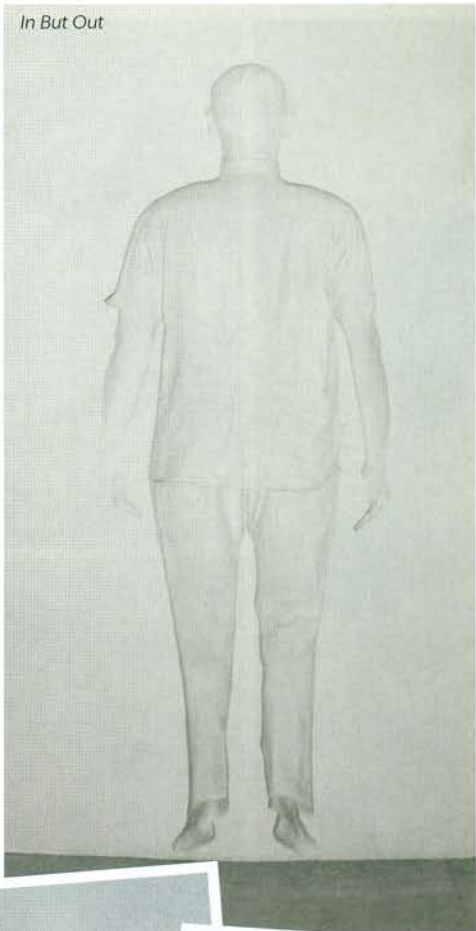
one end of the wire is embedded in the wall, the hooked side ends mid-air, a few inches away from the facing wall. Magnets are similarly used and cleverly disguised in *Energy Field* (2009) and *Untitled* (2009), where rust shavings clump together like mould of fungi on a smooth white surface.

Bala is known for embedding sculptures in walls to create a seemingly seamless protrusion or cavity in the flat white cube. *Shell as Body* (2007) resembles the creased, crescent-shaped opening of a conch seashell in an otherwise unmarked white wall. *Silent Sound* (2009) is a perfectly formed white human ear on the white surface of a blank wall. Key wall-mounted multi-part installations *Shadow of a Shadow of a Shadow* (2007) and *Kaayam* (2008) develop this interaction between sculpture and gallery surface further. In the former, three white cardboard boxes, made from fibreglass, wood, and acrylic are shown in various compositions. They are presented in a manner to suggest that the box is unravelling as it flies across the wall. In *Kaayam*, four deflated and crumpled white human figures, made using the same materials, are presented in an arch across a white wall. They resemble the shape and movement of a white crumpled paper as it is thrown across the air. The figures are fibreglass body casts of the artist, a method he employs repeatedly in his work.



Sk(in)

In But Out



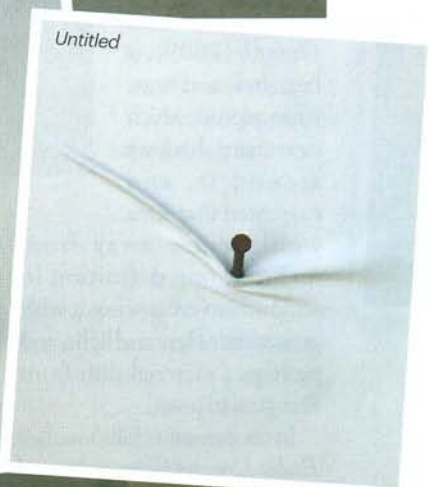
Rest in Resistance



Hidden Sight



Shell as a Body



Untitled

What is perhaps the most pertinent thing about Bala is that his language and concerns are unique in the landscape of contemporary Indian art. Born in 1971 in a village outside Chennai, Bala completed his Bachelor's degree in fine arts from the Government College of Arts, Chennai, in 1995, and moved on to pursue his love for the genre at the Universität für Angewandte Kunst in Wien, Austria. Having travelled and exhibited extensively in places as far as France, Spain, Egypt, Japan, Malaysia, Norway, and USA, Bala manages to leap outside of his context and engage primarily with the experience of viewing, perhaps an outcome of this early international exposure. A featured speaker at the TED conference in Mysore, Bala has been awarded the Fundació Pilar i Joan Miró's Award, Spain; the Grapheion Review Award at the International Print Biennial, Prague, and the 3<sup>rd</sup> Sapporo International Print Biennial Sponsor Award, Sapporo, Japan.

Though he makes small steps with each exhibition and there is a familiarity with his work, Bala manages to keep his audience engaged with his project to formally and visually 'know sculpture'. His exhibitions are quiet spaces, bleached of loud attractions and popular narratives. ■

Nothing From My Hands at Talwar Gallery, New Delhi, is on view from January 25<sup>th</sup> to April 27<sup>th</sup>.



The Tree Inside