

Ranjani Shettar: Making waves with wood

By Tanuj Kumar | July 18, 2017

In a new show, Ranjani Shettar creates wonders out of disparate materials like wood, wax and steel

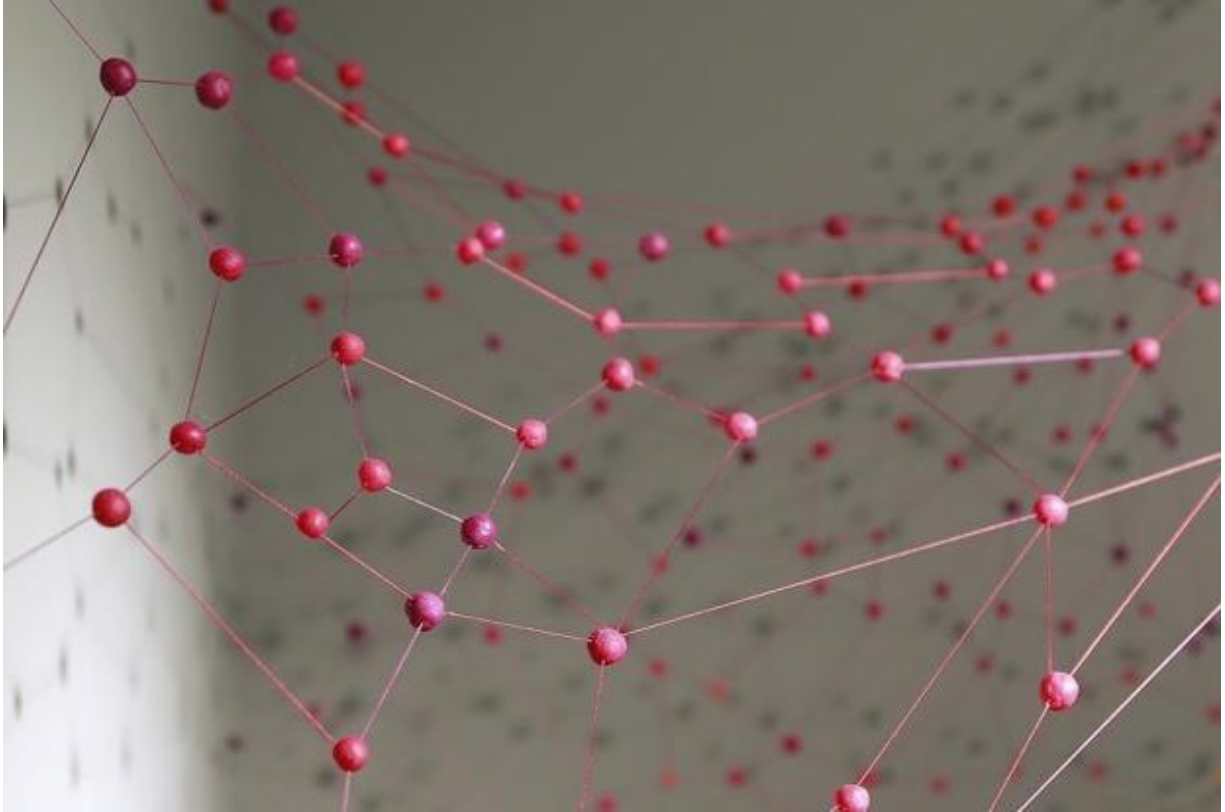


Honeysuckle and Mercury in a Thick Midnight Plot, 2016. Courtesy: Talwar Gallery, New York/New Delhi.

Ranjani Shettar: Bubble trap and a double bow, Talwar Gallery, New Delhi, through August 12

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There is probably no other art space in New Delhi like the Talwar Gallery. It sits quietly in the leafy neighbourhood of Neeti Bagh with no apparent signage, as if reluctant to announce its presence. A large white house in a residential area, it now houses a spectacularly intimate exhibition space where one can access art in a drawing room setting, and the effect is exquisite. Having retained its veneer of a house, you enter, as one would, by pressing the doorbell and on overcoming the inhibitions of ringing it, the treasures within are every bit rewarding.

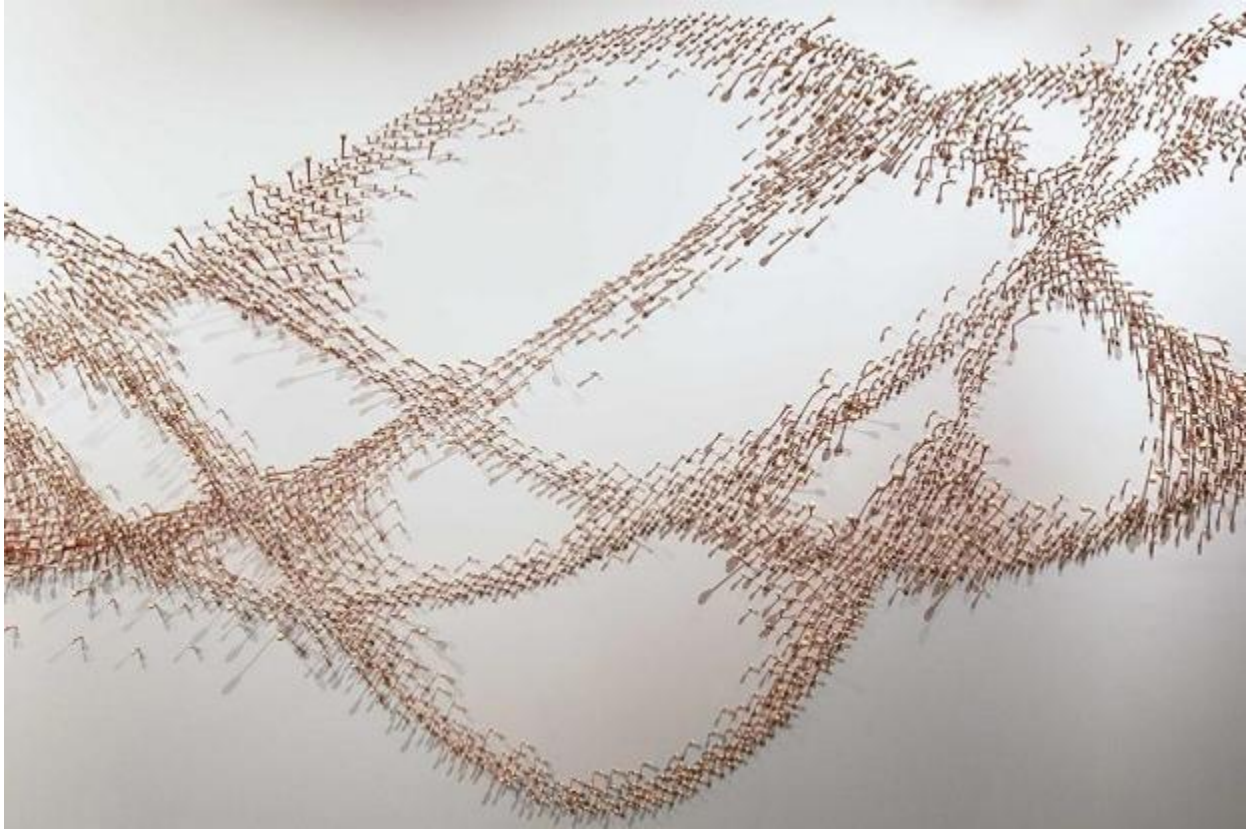


How long before another turn, 2016. Courtesy: Talwar Gallery, New York/New Delhi

Ranjani Shettar, arguably one of India's foremost visual artists, is exhibiting at the gallery till 12 August. In every respect, *Bubble trap and a double bow* is a perfect show. With just 12 works on display, it's a lesson in precision: small enough to allow quality time with each piece—a rarity today—and large enough to justify being called an exhibition.

In the first room lies a shapely log of rosewood out of which emerge seven sprouts made of teakwood, appearing to dance as you move around them and hinting they could be airborne any moment. However, a closer inspection reveals the steel bolts which hinge them with the log. With no attempt to hide the bolts, the organic wood finds a subversive counterpoint in the industrial steel, perhaps a commentary on urban India's wild sprawl into the forest cover, an environmental theme in line with Shettar's other work.

The anteroom next to it displays an installation resembling a cobweb, made of interconnected beads of coloured beeswax. An immaculate, intricate pattern is suspended in the air and seems like it could disentangle and fall at one touch. The lighting is dramatic—the piece seems to dance with its shadow on the wall as you move around it, and the quality of airiness and fragility lends it an immense poignant tenderness.



Morning Song, 2016. Courtesy: Talwar Gallery, New York/New Delhi

The star of the show, though, in my view, is in the basement covering a whole wall. *Morning Song* is a work of such breathtaking flourish that installing it could be considered an art in itself —performance art, if you will. The gallery assistant who helped put it up says it took almost three weeks and required drilling over 3,000 holes of varying sizes into the wall. The holes now hold wooden pegs and create a gigantic pattern of waves. The pegs could almost pass off as unnaturally straight cotton plant stems, referencing nature. Though somewhat intimidating, its sweep is thrilling in its majesty.

Works in different media make the show eclectic, from woodblock on henna-dyed muslin to gravity-defying steel sculpture. There is nothing explicitly “Indian” about her work, except perhaps a piece on the roof where three wooden wheels are connected by steel axles, making a circle, aptly named ‘Where in time is now’, an allusion perhaps to the Indian understanding of cyclical time, with no definite beginning and end.

Unlike the intimidating empty spaces of a white cube gallery, the setting here is the bedroom and living space, quite literally, and the cosiness can heighten personal response to an artwork. With less than a month to go before the exhibition closes, it would be a loss to miss experiencing this spectacle. With any luck, you would have the whole gallery to yourself, and as you traverse the house in deep silence, Shettar’s work is poised to bring you joy, coupled with a sense of awe and reverence.