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Installation view of RANJANI SHETTAR's *Seven Ponds and a Few Raindrops*, 2017, muslin, stainless steel, tamarind, natural dyes, 581.7 × 566.4 × 243.8 cm, at The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 2018. All images courtesy The Metropolitan Museum of Art

## Seven Ponds and a Few Raindrops

### Ranjani Shettar

By Mimi Wong | April 2018  
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The local became global with the arrival of Indian artist Ranjani Shettar's installation *Seven Ponds and a Few Raindrops* (2017) at The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, which brought a slice of her native country to one of the most international cities in America. Molded from steel and covered in muslin, the multidimensional sculpture filled the space with spidery, organic shapes that hung from the ceiling, with the rustic colors of burnt sienna and ochre—derived from foraged materials such as mud and plant root—revealing the regionality of Karnataka, the southwestern state in India where the artist lives and works.

At the same time, the work can be viewed in conversation with the Western art that physically surrounded it, including Anselm Kiefer's dark, pastoral paintings in the adjoining gallery, and Alexander Calder's mobiles on the floor above. The debut of Shettar's installation marked a shift for the institution, which has recently been endeavoring to acquire works by contemporary South Asian women artists. By intentionally creating this dialogue within The Met's Department of Modern and Contemporary Art, assistant curator of South Asian art Shanay Jhaveri wanted to "see how it reflects on the historical collections of the museum, and what ways we can rethink our art histories, or our received art histories, and to dismantle some of the silos in which these works have existed."

Like a line of poetry, the title *Seven Ponds and a Few Raindrops* may be read figuratively rather than literally, denoting an imagined landscape instead of an actual location. The immersive installation occupies nearly the entirety of the room. Changing air pressure, along with the constant stream of



*Seven Ponds and a Few Raindrops (detail)*

bodies moving through the gallery, exposed the forms' mobility as they slowly spun in midair, producing what Jhaveri referred to as a "site-responsive" work. Although the large, suspended pieces do correspond with the aforementioned "ponds" in number, Shettar's use of abstraction encourages the viewer to see her creation as something less rigid and more fluid. The porous bodies and unfolding arms or branches evoke images of aquatic plants such as algae, ferns and lilies floating across the water's surface. We may even see the structures as colonies or groups, not unlike corals or fungi. Further blurring the

line between flora and fauna, the shadows cast by the interplay of light on the individual sculptural parts loomed like arthropodan organisms.

Shettar's focus on the natural world intersects with cultural considerations as well. The artisanal quality of the hand-molded pieces can be attributed to a craft tradition known as *Kinhal*, originating from a village of the same name in North Karnataka. Shettar adapted the technique of staining the muslin with tamarind paste to create a textured "skin"—traditionally applied to religious idols—in her practice. Although historically performed out of necessity due to what materials were commonly available, her decision to locally source the madder plant root and mud she used to dye the muslin speaks to the holistic manner of her process. In this way, the work remains ethnographically specific, even as she incorporates industrial components such as steel and petroleum dye.

Elements of the manmade and organic, the modern and pre-modern, all come together in Shettar's art, harmoniously co-existing like a finely balanced ecosystem. "The work is resonant of certain traditions of minimalist sculpture, but it is emphatically very much grounded in her own subjective, lived experience—living where she does in India, in Karnataka, in nature; that kind of ethics guides her work," Jhaveri said. In both its sum and individual parts, *Seven Ponds* pays homage to the artist's cultural history, while simultaneously acknowledging its inextricable relationship to the land that produced it. An environment now under threat, rural India represents not only a place of inspiration for Shettar but also an ideal that urgently requires preserving.



*Seven Ponds and a Few Raindrops (detail)*

*Mimi Wong is the New York desk editor for ArtAsiaPacific.*

*Ranjani Shettar's "[Seven Ponds and a Few Raindrops](#)" is on view at The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, until August 12, 2018.*