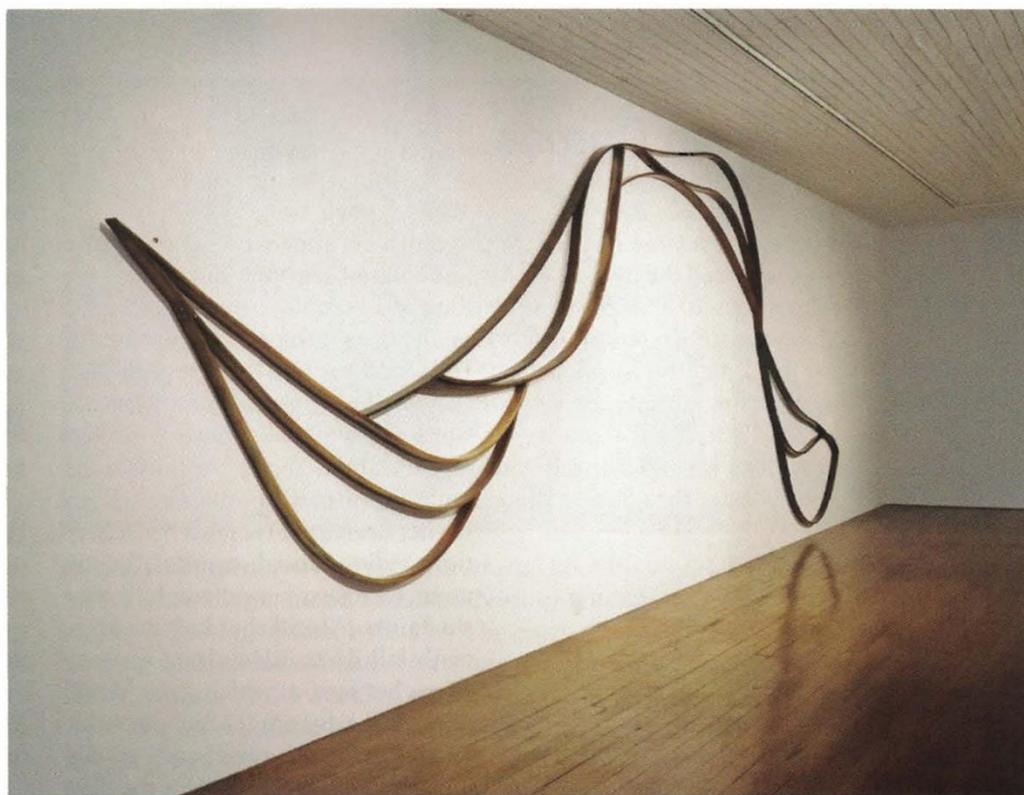
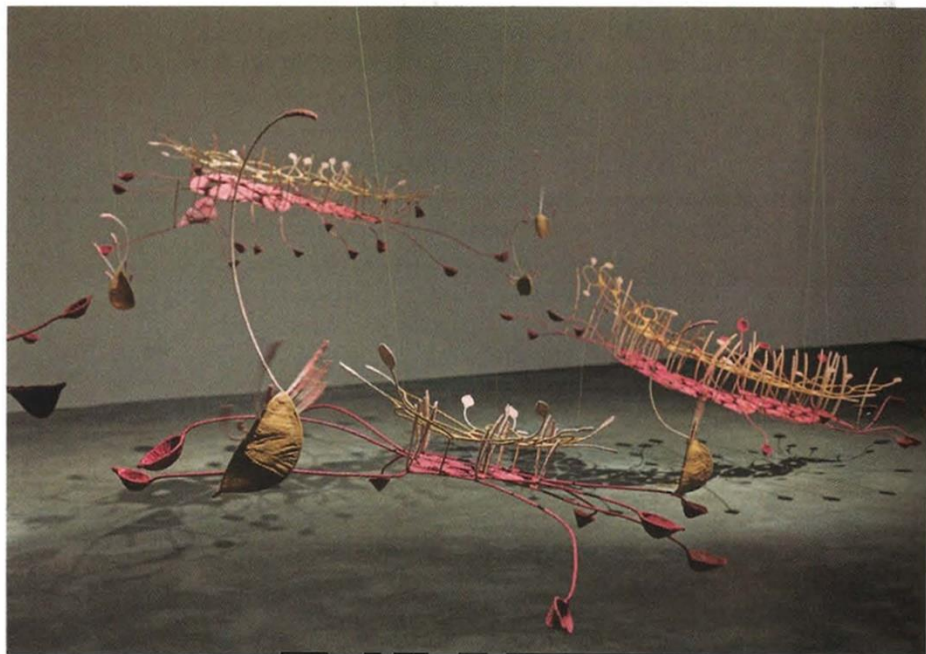


Below: Ranjani Shettar, *Seven ponds and a few raindrops*, 2017, stainless steel, muslin, tamarind, natural dyes. Installation view, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 2018. Right: Ranjani Shettar, *Meandering lines, searching rivers*, 2017, walnut. Installation view, Talwar Gallery, New York, 2018.



Ranjani Shettar

TALWAR GALLERY; METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART, NEW YORK

David Frankel

THE INDIAN ARTIST Ranjani Shettar first exhibited in the United States in 2003, just three years after getting her MFA in Bangalore, and has shown here steadily ever since. Among her New York appearances was a spectacular installation in the exhibition “On Line,” curated by Cornelia Butler and Catherine de Zegher at the Museum of Modern Art in 2010. I use the word *spectacular*, but what was most striking about the piece was its delicacy: A hanging net of small beads of pigmented wax strung on threads dyed in tea, it formed a voluminous but ethereal constellation in the show’s opening space. This tactful way of commanding volume with something almost immaterial yet vividly, sensually present has correlates in more familiar art: In the catalogue that accompanied the 2008 Carnegie International, essayist Max Andrews connected Shettar to the “alternative

modernisms’ of pioneering women artists such as Marisa Merz, Eva Hesse, Lygia Clark, and Gego.” There are indeed affinities between Shettar and these artists, reinforced in the case of Gego and, in certain works, Hesse by a common impulse toward the air. In the MOMA installation, and in an exhibition at the Talwar Gallery and a one-work show at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Shettar’s suspension of her sculptures is crucial to their antigravitational effect.

While Gego’s well-known *Reticulárea* works, begun in 1969, primarily emerged from the grid, Shettar is more organic and local in both her forms and her materials. The piece at the Met, *Seven ponds and a few raindrops*, 2017, is made of stainless steel, but its elements are wrapped in muslin stained with tamarind, following an Indian craft tradition and erasing the sensibility of metal. Hung from the ceiling in a loose arc, none of the work’s dozen or so objects touches the floor, instead casting intricate shadows on it. Each of the seven “ponds” has a lower level, perhaps the pond’s bottom, and a parallel upper one, perhaps its surface; the lower level is a flat biomorphic plane, the upper a web of loops. A softly bending stamen pokes up from the lower level through each loop, and filaments ending in earlike cups droop down toward the ground. The “few raindrops” take another cup- or leaflike shape; hung independently of the ponds, they spin gently with the movement of the air. The irregularity of its forms makes *Seven ponds* feel spontaneous and unplanned, as if it were a thing not designed but rippling and spreading. Yet it has an order—the formal rhymes between the drooping cups or pods and the raindrops, for example, suggest a connection, as if the one were a catchment for the other, and as if every element of the ponds’ system were a part of a functioning whole.

The Talwar show included another steel, muslin, and tamarind work, *How long is a mile on two wings*, 2017,

again made up of levitating biomorphic forms. Here Shettar also showed four pieces in walnut and repurposed teak, two hanging from the ceiling, two others mounted on the wall. The most dramatic of the latter was *Meandering lines, searching rivers*, 2017, a kind of drawing, around twenty-nine feet long and ten feet high, spliced together from curving lengths of polished walnut. Thonet on an environmental scale, the piece addresses the same feeling of watery flux that is so strong in *Seven ponds*, but its flowing lines can’t quite summon that installation’s sense of movement, and its drive toward simplicity and reduction offers less sense of a complex, mutable ecosystem. *Counterpoint*, 2018, a nine-foot-high pair of zigzagging teak bars seamlessly carpentered together out of shorter pieces, is more kinetic. Its potential for movement is both literal—it’s a hanging work—and intimated through its conversational relations of lines, angles, and shadows.

The constant in all these works is the natural world, which Shettar evokes sometimes directly and sometimes less obviously, by, for example, telling us that *Counterpoint* is made not just of teak, but of *reclaimed* teak. The earlier purpose for which the wood was used gives it a history that becomes part of the work’s texture; just as telling is the ethic of conserving natural materials, respecting them by not wasting them. A number of Shettar’s Western critics have placed her in the context of India’s rapidly technologizing society, to which her art can be seen as a kind of retort. Others have described her somewhat analogously as contesting the rigidities of modernist art history. I have no real quarrel with these ways of positioning her, but would add that she seems to me something other than merely reactive; her work is not, or not only, an answer to issues in the minds of Western writers, but constitutes its own delighted exploration of materials and space. □

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