

Bringing Nature Home

Artist Ranjani Shettar, 41, on her ongoing exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, her love for installations and why she takes inspiration from nature and tradition

Vandana Kalra

BEGINNING HER international career in 2003 with three works at an exhibition at Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, artist Ranjani Shettar now holds the distinction of being the first living Indian artist to have a solo at The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, with the ongoing exhibition of her 2017 installation *Seven ponds and a few raindrops* at the venue. Known for employing local craft traditions and the use of organic materials, her hand-crafted immersive installations are distinguished for arresting play of light and shadow. Represented in the collections of the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art and Museum of Modern Art, New York, her abstract creations are derived from nature and approach the ecological impact of rapid urbanisation. At her ongoing exhibition "On and on it goes on" at Talwar Gallery, New York, she infuses life into reclaimed wood. As she prepares for another solo at The Phillips Collection in Washington DC next year, Shettar, 41, speaks about her striking abstract installations, residing in the forest of Shimoga and taking inspiration from nature and traditional art practices:

In your installation *Seven ponds and a few raindrops* you use stainless steel wrapped in muslin cloth dyed in natural colours. You have been using this technique for almost a decade now. Could you tell us a bit about it? We first saw it in *Sun-sneezers blow light bubbles* (2007-08).

I make actual scale drawings for my pieces before giving them shape. For *Sun-sneezers blow light bubbles*, I had in mind this incredibly linear yet organic work that comprised numerous lines. I wanted another material that was linear, looked organic and offered stability to hold the form together, and steel seemed most appropriate. I use a craft technique of using tamarind to bind my fabric. *Sun-sneezers* had several intricate forms hanging from a filament to create a floating tracery. Over the years, the shapes have become more complex. I have also expanded my colour palette. In *Seven ponds...*, for the first time, I use three different colours together — by using mud, a byproduct of petroleum, and the root of madder plants — to emphasise the multiple layers. The suspended piece looks a part of nature. Installation is an extension of studio processes. This people is open to interpretations.

The way you envisage your work makes them appear weightless, as if they defy gravity. What is the idea behind it?

Sculptures are made with physical material and are bound by weight and gravity, but when I imagine them, they are hovering up in the air. I could only achieve that by suspending them, making them three dimensional. The moment you put them on the pedestal, or, on the floor, you are sacrificing one surface. In suspension, 360-degree view is like maximising the nature of sculpture. I first began suspending sculptures while in college, though it wasn't immediately a success. For it to look comfortable up in the air, I had to work on it. I had to think like an engineer. Even if they were heavy, they had to look light. The space and lighting makes a huge difference in the way the work is installed.

You drew a lot as a child. When did you



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decide that you wanted to be an artist, particularly a sculptor?

As a child, I studied in several schools across Karnataka but none of them had art in the curriculum. There was music, yoga, but no art. Perhaps, it helped to not have a curriculum. I loved working with clay. I took great pleasure in mixing colours, finding the shade I wanted. I just knew I wanted to be an artist. I wanted to express. My family, too, was very supportive. When I joined fine arts college (Karnataka Chitrakala Parishath), I thought I would be a painter, but gradually, I realised that my imagination was always three dimensional. It was hard for me to collapse it into two dimensions. Even though I did not have the technical facility or faculty to make it three-dimensional at that time, I developed skills to put across my ideas in that manner.

You are constantly experimenting with mediums, from using plastic sheetings, rope and rivets in *Home* (2000), to beeswax in works such as *Just a Bit More* (2005-2006). For your work *In Bloom* (2004), inspired by *bougainvillea*, you approached craftsmen in

Bangalore to make lacquered beads. The bronze sculptures in *Aureole* (2010) are melded in the same way as ancient Chola sculptures. If you could talk a bit about this fascination for different materials?

It would be easier to use materials that are already in use, but, for me, the ideas dictate how the work should be made. In *Home*, I was treating it not just as a shelter but also its mental, emotional and spiritual aspects. The process was difficult because I was breaking away from convention, using materials such as rope and straw that were not part of my vocabulary. But slowly, there was a metamorphosis. I had used wax in college to make bronze castings, but I found it to be so malleable and translucent that I felt that it need not be a transitional material. It could be part of the final outcome. I also use a lot of wood, which is conventional and classic, but for me it is the same as fabric — they weight equal to me in my practice.



ART IN THE AIR

(Clockwise from above) *Me, No, Not Me, Buy Me, Eat Me, Wear Me, Have Me, Me, No, Not Me* (2007) you used discarded cars as a metaphor for consumerism. You chose to exhibit it at a low-rise heritage area at the Sharjah Biennale.

The discarded cars were used as a metaphor for consumerism. I decided not to paint the car bodies, and the original colours were retained to give them an organic form. The pieces were woven together like baskets. When I was looking for a space to exhibit, most were white cube spaces, but this building took you back hundreds of years, even though it was located right in the middle of skyscrapers. I started thinking of consumerism and how the essentials in a domestic set-up were similar across the world a few centuries ago. We have come a long way since then — our desires have increased.

Collection of the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art; *Counterpoint; Spin;* and artist Ranjani Shettar



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I wanted to speak about this commodification. The cars had their own history of how they reached the junkyard — their stories were literally woven together and given shape.

How does it feel to be compared with Indian modernist Nasreen Mohamedi and Venezuelan sculptor Gertrud Louise Goldschmidt (Gego)?

When I showed my work in the West, people did make those comparisons, and it was brilliant to see that. I admire Nasreen's work and when people see that kind of a connection, it is very gratifying. At times, my works are also compared with Eva Hesse's, whose works I enjoy. But, when you see the works of all three of them, they are very diverse, and I presume, at different levels, my artwork have something to share with each of them.

Do you miss the hustle and bustle of a city in Shimoga (a forest area, 300-odd km from Bangalore), where you are based?

I like the peace and can commune with nature more easily there. If I want to work any time of the day I can do that. I don't need transport to go to my studio. I really don't have much to do in a city on a daily basis. Once in six months if I go to the city, my needs are taken care of. I do have a studio in Bangalore, which feeds the studio in Shimoga.