

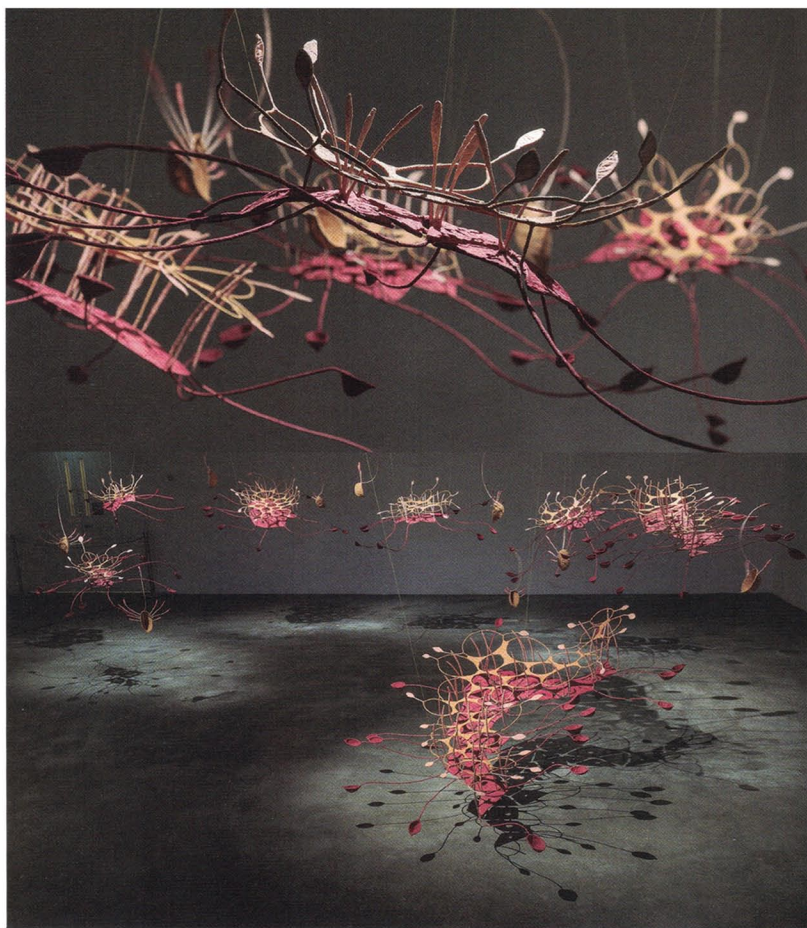
NEW YORK

Ranjani Shettar

Metropolitan Museum of Art

Though Ranjani Shettar, who turned 40 last year, is a mid-career artist (at least by Western standards), her work remains youthfully lyrical, and close to nature in ways that evade her closest American counterpart Sarah Sze, whose work is busier and more mechanical. Shettar's impulse feels conservationist and ecologically oriented, but it also responds to the works of Sze and Teresita Fernández. Shettar's use of materials in *Seven ponds and a few raindrops* (2017), her recent Met installation, is deliberately earthy, as captured in the descriptive title. Seven earth- and copper-colored amoeba-like forms, made from stainless steel covered in tamarind-stained muslin, hung from the ceiling. Constructed in two layers—the top perforated with open circles underlain by a flat, ground-like terrain—the ponds cast shifting shadows around the space. Leaf- or raindrop-like extensions made their way slightly beyond these supports—lighter, more earth-colored attachments drawn out from the open upper level, and darker, cupped ovals moving outward from the solid planes beneath them. The title clearly orients any interpretation toward nature, but the work also establishes itself as a nonobjective sculpture. Like much of Shettar's work, the forms fall somewhere between natural realism and abstract design.

Hung from a low ceiling, *Seven ponds* felt like something come from far away. And so it did. Unlike many foreign-born artists who show in New York, Shettar remains in India, close to her formal and personal origins. Most of her powerfully expressive works are organic,



Ranjani Shettar, *Seven ponds and a few raindrops*, 2017. Stainless steel, muslin, and tamarind dye, 2 views of installation.

referencing a rural setting even when hung in mid-air and not particularly resembling landscape, as in *Seven ponds*. Here, the installation not only balanced in open space, but also between modes of seeing. Contemporary sculpture consistently raids nature these days for both form and inspiration, to the point where such borrowing has become almost a cliché. Such is not the case, however, with Shettar's work.

The detailing of *Seven ponds* is exquisite. The delicate imagery works toward an overall subtlety across the installation. The ponds are arranged in a descending semicircle, with the lowest set close to the wide entrance. The work is quietly lit within a dominating darkness. It becomes clear that the raindrops are more than a few and that they circulate from one pond to the next.

Shettar has always been very good at working from specificity of detail to broader design and back again.

Seven ponds enters into a dialogue with works by artists worldwide who are imagining an abstraction tinged with environmental effects. In Shettar's hands, we clearly see a conscious attempt to keep the aesthetic of the earth alive, which is not without political implications. Rather than literalizing the issue, however, she engages in an imaginative reconstruction of what the ponds might be—envisioned with both imagistic precision and whimsical perspective. This is not a clash of opposites so much as it is a merger of distinctions, subtly, yet strongly voiced.

—Jonathan Goodman