

FRIDAY REVIEW



Art unconventional

Ranjani Shettar
pushes materials beyond
their traditional boundaries
Pages 6 & 7

Wood bends in her hands

Teak and rose lend themselves to the design dreams of Ranjani Shettar, whose works are on display at New York's MET and Talwar Gallery

Top drawer

Ranjani Shettar has achieved several milestones. She did her BFA (Sculpture) College of Fine Art, Karnataka Chitrakala Parishath, Bangalore and MFA (Sculpture) from Chitrakala Institute of Advanced Studies, Karnataka Chitrakala Parishath, Bangalore. Her works are in the collection of several top Museums of the World including The Metropolitan Museum of Art (MET), New York, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (SFMOMA), San Francisco, CA Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), New York, Kiran Nadar Museum of Art (KNMA), New Delhi, The Guggenheim Museum, New York and The Walker Art Center, Minneapolis

CHITRA BALASUBRAMANIAM

Birds in flight and their chirping, trees with foliage, meandering rivers... the quietude of Ranjani's work communicates a sense of well being and happiness. One of India's foremost sculptural installation artists, her works draw heavily from Nature. Wood, tamarind paste, lacquer, steel, natural dyes and cloth – all give a surreal shape to her imagination. What stands out in Ranjani's key to success is her ability to push the material beyond its traditional boundaries, to give it a form and shape that she perceives in her mind.

For her current show, *On and on it goes on*, at Talwar Gallery, New York, her preferred medium is wood. It is a wonder how wood, a sturdy material, is used to create fluid lines. For the work – *Seven ponds and a few raindrops* – at The Metropolitan Museum of Art (Met), New York, the combination – steel with muslin dyed in natural colours – is one that she keeps revisiting, giving it a different feel and depth each time.

Ranjani realised her love for sculpture two years into college. That she could express her inner thoughts through this three-dimensional medium so effectively excited her. And this Karnataka-based artist embraced it successfully.

Ranjani speaks about her journey, her solo presentations at the contemporary and modern galleries of The Met and her ongoing show at the Talwar Gallery.

The past couple of years have been extremely productive for you as an artist. How does it feel to show at the Met?

■ I was delighted when the project materialised. It feels good to be in that space and to see people walk in and spend time looking at the works. It is gratifying to see them enjoy what I have been making in my studio. It is productive to have shows since there is a vision and a culmination to a body of work. I am not someone driven by deadlines, but by ideas and inspiration. As an artist, one should keep working whether there is a show or not. Germination of the artwork happens in the mind and execution in the studio, which takes up most of my time. I should say that I have been fortunate that I got these wonderful opportunities one after the other at regular intervals. I work slowly and do everything myself. I work with my hands and am driven by the pro-

cess. So I'm not prolific. I would not want it to be any different. The primary joy for an artist is in the making of the artwork and everything follows.

Can you tell us more about 'Seven ponds and a few raindrops'?

■ It was completed in 2017 but there is a background. This medium is something I have been working with for a long time, since 2008, a technique I discovered out of necessity to match my ideas using steel, muslin and tamarind paste. I call this piece a culmination of sorts of all that was going on. The shapes have become more complex over the years. Here I have expanded my colour palette. I have been experi-

menting with natural dyes. Three different colours have been used in this particular installation that has seven large and nine small pieces. These can be adapted according to the space available. The transitory floating sense of Nature is achieved by suspending the pieces. Horizon-

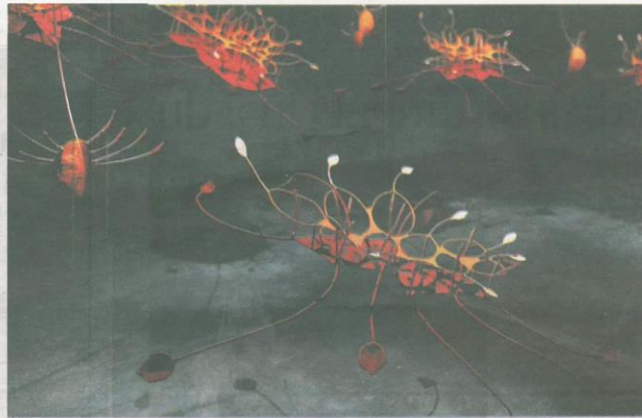
Advantage of solitude

Ranjani's studio is located 400 km from Bangalore in Shivamoga district, Karnataka. A village on the foothills of the Western Ghats, surrounded by forests, it gives her the freedom to dream and be far away from the urban space

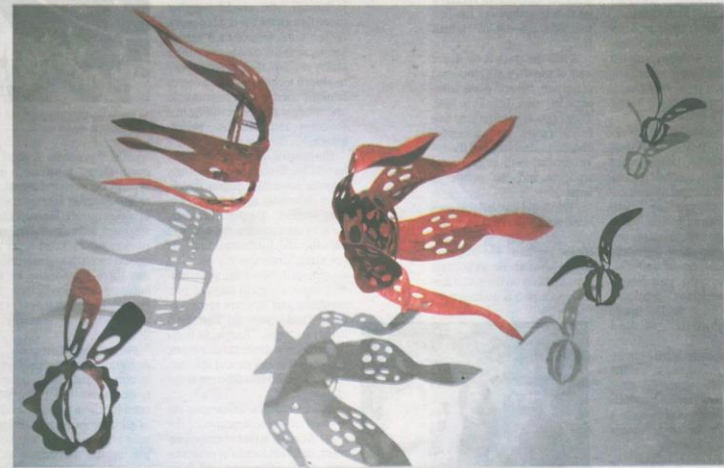
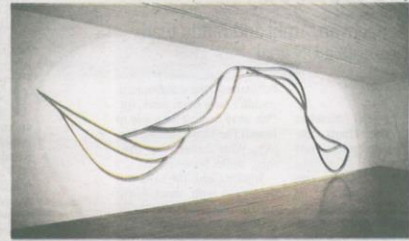
al space triggered the configuration of the pieces. I have worked more in vertical fashion, so this was a challenge and I enjoyed negotiating it. The piece is inspired by Nature. I live so close to the forest that I am inspired by it all the time. It was a labour of love. My pieces are generally open to multiple entry points and interpretations. For me, titling is a creative act, a parallel to creating sculpture. Here, the title is open enough to trigger imagination.

And what about 'On and On it goes', your current show at Talwar Gallery?

■ The show revolves round the cyclical nature of things. I have tried to show the momentum of things which is likely to recur. The works are already in momentum in this show. There is something to the piece before and after. It looks like it's going to recur. They are very playful in nature. I did not want to make it sound too philosophical. Wood is one of my favourite materials and I have been working with it for a long time. I have made a large scale bendwood sculpture – 'Meandering lines, searching rivers' – which



Drawn from Nature (Centre) Fire in the belly. (Clockwise from left) Seven Ponds... Meandering Lines... How long is a Mile... Spin, and Torque. (Left) Ranjani Shettar
■ PHOTOS: SPECIAL ARRANGMENT



spans about nine metres across. It has four sections which are joined, giving it a fluid movement. Making a paper maquette is one thing. Bending wood into those forms is something else. You have chosen wood as a medium to show movement when

actually it is solid and sturdy. How did you get around this?

■ I struggled with it for a long time. Sculpture is bound by physical laws – weight and gravity. I had to knock off the pedestal to achieve lightness and suspend them instead. I realised that it was possible to visually manipulate materials to look like they are floating. I figured how to work with wood in that manner. I begin with a solid block and choose a form which is fluid, I end up carving a lot, to give it shape, curve and dimension. In eliminating so much, I achieve a form which is contrary to the nature of the material – supple and elongated in form. I do the carving myself. I choose hardwood – teak and rosewood. They have a natural sheen and grains, which form interesting patterns.

What about 'Tendu,' which is a part of this show?

■ I was trying to stretch between two walls and show the tension. Corners always interest me. I feel there is a lot of tension hidden

there. The wall seemed to be pushing and pulling. So I wanted to use the tension between these walls in the gallery to create a sculpture. The form appeared to have split in the middle to form a hole, an illusion – is it the wall pushing the sculpture or is it the other way around.

What are you working on now and how are you taking this journey forward?

■ Next year I have a solo exhibition at The Phillips Collection in Washington DC for which I am creating a body of work in wood and other materials. The indoor gallery space that was part of the founder, the collector's residence, has been offered to me. It is both interesting and challenging as it is not a usual white cube that is neutral. It will help me push the boundaries. I don't live in the hub or the centre of art. I am far away in my studio. It helps me focus. It is a small world and I do not want it to change. It is my own sphere and I am not under pressure, so it is not daunting.

