



# IN- SIDE OUT- SIDE

BY PARNI RAY

ARTIST RANJANI SHETTAR'S WORK GIVES YOU AN UNMISTAKABLE GLIMPSE OF THE EARTH'S ABUNDANT BEAUTY RESTING INSIDE AS THEY MANIFEST IN SCULPTURES THAT SEEM TO ORGANICALLY EXIST ON THE OUTSIDE

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TALWAR GALLERY, NEW YORK / NEW DELHI

Ranjani Shettar's sculptures are often described as large. But although many of them stretch across a vast expanse, they tend mostly to float in, rather than occupy space. Many of them hang mid-air, casting deep and sinuous shadows around themselves. Gauzy and delicate, they cling to walls and ceilings and remain inexplicably taut and upright. You walk in and around the works and, although briefly, inhabit their unique atmosphere. As a viewer you are as struck by Shettar's play with light as with her understanding of the extents of gravity.

Her preferred materials – beeswax, wood, stone, tamarind seed paste, saw dust – are all sourced from her immediate surroundings and range from the mundane to the unexpected. It is evident that she enjoys working with organic elements. Even her works, which don't directly emulate nature, somehow induce connections with the natural world. In *Varsha*, an artist's book created for the Library Council of the MoMA, however, Shettar attempts directly to seize the experience of the rainy season. Her portrayal of the monsoon builds on the same atmospheric elements her works rely on.

We spoke over two hesitant phone sessions, she from her home in Bengaluru, I from mine in Kolkata. We had a good talk, even as I struggled to note down each of her carefully chosen words. Certain questions would light her up, and even over the telephone I could feel the heat of her enthusiasm. Others would quieten her, limit her response. Perhaps, these come through in this conversation and give a sense of Shettar's practice, her distinctive process and also of her, the person.

TUNTOROO,  
HAND-MOLDED WAX BEADS, COTTON THREAD,  
WOODEN BEADS AND PIGMENTS  
131" X 188" X 135", 2014



SUN-SNEEZERS BLOW LIGHT BUBBLES, STAINLESS STEEL, MUSLIN CLOTH, TAMARIND KERNEL POWDER PASTE AND LACQUER, 192" X 288" X 168" (VARIABLE), 2007-2008

**EXCERPTS FROM THE CONVERSATION -**

**Parni Ray:** You identify yourself as a sculptor and, typically, sculptors create tangible 'things'. But while physicality is an important aspect of your oeuvre, most of your works are perhaps best described as 'environments'. Do you begin with the intention of creating an ambience when you start a piece? Or is it usually an idea or the material?

**Ranjani Shettar:** Each work is different and even though I have been doing this for a while now I am still evolving my vocabulary and even my methodology. When I start a work I tell myself I know everything about it, I have researched and planned it. But then as I go along, the material reveals itself and I realise I know very little. It's the details of a work that I enjoy the most and I never plan details; one cannot. As far as inspiration goes, I am inspired by all the three elements you mention. Sometimes I am inspired by an idea, sometimes by material, often by an ambience I want to recreate. Usually, it is all three, in varying proportions.

**Parni Ray:** Is your preference for natural materials a conscious choice?

**Ranjani Shettar:** I became aware of what has been described as the 'organic' element of my works much later. I guess I select the materials I use in keeping with the person I am. I am not comfortable with a lot of artificial waste; you won't find me heaping leftover plaster in my studio, for instance. This, I am sure, dictates a lot of my choices as an artist, especially with regard to the materials I use. '*Sun-Sneezers Blow Light Bubbles*' (2007-2008) might be a good example in this regard. Although I finally used fabric and screen for the work, initially I'd thought about using raw hide, because I was looking to achieve a certain form of luminosity. But when you use raw hide in your work, that artistic choice is a comment; it says something about you as an artist and the work. To me, raw hide meant violence and I chose not to work with it and experimented instead, and for a while, with other materials.

**Parni Ray:** You also often stress on your relationship with light. I remember reading a review somewhere which described your work as an 'ongoing investigation of the relationship of light to living things'. It seems very apt. Your studio space is also awash with sunlight...

**Ranjani Shettar:** I am a daytime person and my studio gets a lot of natural light. It's always fascinating to see different materials interact with sunlight in different ways; beeswax has a certain translucent sheen, for instance; wood, stone... all of them play with the light in different ways. The way a work looks in my studio is very different from the way it looks in the gallery, and the difference is mainly due to the lighting. Often, different light setups end up making my works look very different even in a gallery space. Viewers who have seen one of my works in a certain location often do not recognise it when displayed elsewhere. Once, while setting up *Just a bit more* (2005-06) for the fourth time, I think... I was being assisted by someone who had previously helped me set up the same work for a previous show. Midway, he suddenly asked me when I had made the work (*laughs*)! I had to point out that he had seen the work before and had even helped me put it up; it just looked different.



VARSHA (DETAIL)

**Parni Ray:** Have you ever considered showing outside a gallery space?

**Ranjani Shettar:** (pause) Hmm... I have had some of my works shown outdoors. *'Me, no, not me, buy me, eat me, wear me, have me, me, no, not me'* was, for instance, displayed outside at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art and the Sharjah Biennial. But on the whole, most of my work tends to be so delicate that I am afraid they aren't robust enough to be left to the elements.

**Parni Ray:** Speaking of MoMA, I recently learnt that you also made a book, *'Varsha'*, with them.

**Ranjani Shettar:** Yes. MoMA asked me to make a book for them as part of the project I was doing with them. *Varsha*, the book which eventually emerged out of this, is a collection of prints and is about, as the name suggests, the monsoon.

**Parni Ray:** Prints?

**Ranjani Shettar:** Actually, apart from sculptures I have always enjoyed making prints. I like wood cut prints in particular and have always enjoyed Japanese wood cuts. I usually find it difficult to negotiate the two-dimensional space, because I tend to think three-dimensionally, but I enjoy the physicality involved in print making. Therefore, when MoMA asked me to make a book for them, I immediately thought of prints.

**Parni Ray:** Were these the prints that you had previously worked on?

**Ranjani Shettar:** No, this was a new body of work. I felt that although I work with natural and local materials, craft procedures, and so on, I haven't yet dealt yet with the geographical particularities of where I live, and this seemed like a good chance to do so. Monsoon is a big part of where I am from, as is rain in

general and star charts and the lunar calendar. These elements have always been around me and even though I have been fascinated by them, I hadn't yet thought of an artwork around them. The book project seemed like a good opportunity to delve into this realm.

**Parni Ray:** So it was a discovery of sorts?

**Ranjani Shettar:** I had to research quite a bit for the project because I didn't know much about rain stars and calendars, which I wanted to look at through the book. *Varsha* begins with early monsoon and ends with the end of the season. Each rain has personality, you know; each is different from the other. I wanted to utilise the structure of the book format to forward a narrative about rain. In the book I cover 16 rain stars, each of which correspond to a specific time during the monsoon. I got a chance to work with various technicians for the book, such as binders and various craftspeople... the book cover, for instance, is in brass and I collaborated with a craftsman who works with the technique of Bidri, which I used for the cover. But I was keen on it because I wanted the cover to depict the night sky, when all the 16 rain stars come together. It is extremely heavy. Thanks to the metal cover, the book weighs about 5 kg! Thankfully, I did not have to handle the shipping!

**Parni Ray:** You mention that you aren't at ease on two-dimensional surfaces, but what about drawing? Your works appear to rely greatly on drawing. Many of them have even been described as 'drawings in space'...

**Ranjani Shettar:** I have never really thought of my works as drawings in space but am quite convinced by curators and writers who describe it as such! I never really draw or paint because I think I am always thinking in three dimensions and I find it difficult to collapse my thoughts onto a flat surface.





**Parni Ray:** If you think about it though, some of your sculptural pieces are actually on a flat surface, even if they have projections that extend them into three-dimensionality. I am thinking in particular of your work *'Touch me not'*, which is really an intricate drawing on a wall, not with a pencil or a brush, but with wooden stalks. I have been eager to know about the process which went into the work. Did you really tear down two of your studio walls and have them shipped to Melbourne?

**Ranjani Shettar:** When I was younger, I was more concerned with making than showing. It took me a while to realise that once my works are done they will likely have to be shown somewhere. It took me further time still to gather that they would possibly be shown not just once but over and over again. I never feel, 'Ok I know how to install my works'. Creating *'Touch me Not'* was a painstaking process and sometimes, especially while putting it up, I wished I hadn't made it! In Australia, I was showing the work at the National Gallery of Victoria and for the show, yes I did have a part of my studio wall cut down into squares and shipped, as you mention.



PORTRAIT OF RANJANI SHETTAR  
WITH DETAIL OF AUREOLE, CAST BRONZE, DIMENSIONS VARIABLE, 2010,

**Parni Ray:** This in itself seems like an absurd feat, but it is also a testament of the meticulous planning that goes into each of your works. The wall panels you had to ship were where the work had been conceived/made/provisionally installed in your gallery. Each of them had hundreds of carefully numbered holes; the work was installed by inserting the protruding wooden stalks into these, each stalk corresponding to a specific hole. I mention the procedure because I have seen it in a video online and the method of putting the work together struck me itself as a work of art.

**Ranjani Shettar:** Yes, putting up *'Touch me not'* was a very tough process. There were many things to coordinate in Melbourne, as there tends to be when opening a show. Putting up this detailed work, which

required so much concentration, was extremely difficult. This, even though I have put up the work several times before and worked on it for over a year. But, you know, when I pack up a work, I tend to forget about it. Not quite forget; forget is not the word... it's a bit like trying to draw your mother's face or even your own face from memory. You know it and have seen it all your life but you can't quite depict it. It's a bit like that. But then at one point as I go along with my own plans and calculations, while setting up a work the second or the third or however many times, suddenly it comes alive, it has a life of its own, and it is then that I step back and say 'Ok, I am done'. It is for that moment that you remain hungry and create works again and again.

TORQUE, ROSEWOOD, 97" X 18" X 13", 2013-2014



A hunger that probably is the true testament of Ranjani Shettar's rare vision and diverse practice. Shettar lives and works in Bengaluru, but tries to stay as far away from the main city as possible. In 2014, she showed *Night Skies and Day Dreams* in New York, USA, and *Between the Sky and the Earth* in New Delhi,

both with Talwar Gallery. Earlier she has exhibited at the National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, The San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, The Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston, and The Modern Art Museum, Texas, USA.