



Ranjani Shettar's sculpture *Lagoon*. Photos courtesy the artist / Talwar Gallery



Sun Sneezers Blow Light Bubbles.



Touch Me Not.

Up in the air

The sculptor Ranjani Shettar's airy creations are making waves. **Kavitha Rao** catches up with the artist at her studio in Bangalore

"I often take longer to pack my sculptures than to make them," says the 35-year-old Indian sculptor Ranjani Shettar. Not surprising, if you consider her striking installations are usually room-sized, suspended in mid-air and have myriad tiny, handcrafted parts. Besides, Shettar lives in the small town of Sagar in southern India, yet shows her work in locations as diverse as San Francisco, New York, Melbourne, Sharjah and Singapore.

"There are no proper art packers in India, so I spend months packing my sculptures and drawing charts of how they are assembled," she says. "It's like a jigsaw puzzle."

Shettar's star has been steadily on the rise. Beginning her international career in 2003 with just two sculptures at the Talwar Art Gallery in New York, she has progressed to group and solo shows at several venues, including the Institute of Contemporary Art in Boston, the Carnegie Museum of Art in Pittsburgh, the Liverpool Biennial, the National Gallery of Victoria in Melbourne, the Hermès Foundation in Singapore and MoMA in both New York and San Francisco.

In 2007, Shettar also created a special sculpture *Me, no, not me, buy me, eat me, wear me, have me, me, no, not me* for the eighth Sharjah Biennial. Shettar handpicked the low-rise Heritage area, which recreates traditional Arab architecture, as the site for her modern work. Woven out of scrap steel from old cars and a marked departure from her usual airborne creations, the sculpture is a comment on consumerism. It is now in the permanent collection of MoMA in San Francisco.

All this international acclaim has not made her any more keen for attention. It takes several calls and emails through her New York-based gallery before pinning her down for a meeting. When we finally meet in her part-time studio in Bangalore, filled with half-finished sculptures that look like props for a sci-fi movie, the slight and unassuming Shettar sheepishly explains that she often has no email or mobile phone reception back home in Sagar. And she doesn't miss them. "Living in a

small town is the closest I can come to getting away from it all."

Much of Shettar's work is inspired by her small-town surroundings. Her ethereal, fragile constructions reference light, water, dewdrops, birds and sunshine with titles such as *Sun Sneezers Blow Light Bubbles* and *Vasanta* (Hindi for spring).

Roobina Karode, the director of the Delhi-based Kiran Nadar Museum of Art, which recently acquired one of Shettar's sculptures, says: "Against the effects of urbanisation in a high-tech Bangalore, Ranjani's work is refreshing, employing traditional craft techniques of India to arrive at a contemporary, visual expression."

Yet Shettar does not like to emphasise her nationality. Unlike many of her peers, who use bindi (the dot worn by many Indian women on their foreheads), steel utensils, cow dung and other recognisably sub-continental motifs, her work could be from anywhere.

"Am I Indian? I suppose it depends on how you see Indian-ness. When I was starting out, I did hear from some gallery owners that my work should be more Indian. Luckily, I don't get that now. My roots find their way into my work sometimes, but it's never a conscious decision," she says.

She often uses traditional materials in her sculptures, such as tamarind kernels, muslin, beeswax or lacquer, but she is just as likely to use stainless steel, latex and fishing line and, once when she was travelling in Texas, mesquite wood.

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"I use whatever material suits my purpose. I like to work with my hands rather than with tools, so most of my materials are very tactile. For my sculpture *Just a Bit More* [now in MoMA New York's permanent collection], which features hundreds of beeswax pellets, I formed every pellet by hand." Shettar is also fascinated by suspension. Most, though not all, of her sculptures are hung from the ceiling. "I want people to surround it, walk around it and see it from every angle."

Shettar keeps a very low profile in her home country. So far, her sculptures have never been displayed in Bangalore, and very rarely in India, because most private galleries don't have the space for her monumental work. But many Indian sculptors, after years of struggle, are finally being recognised, both overseas and back home.

The Delhi-based Bharti Kher's sculpture of a slumping elephant covered with thousands of bindis, *The Skin Speaks a Language not its Own*, sold at Sotheby's in London for US\$1.5 million (Dh 5.5m) in 2010. It is now in the collection of the Kiran Nadar gallery. Meanwhile, the sculptor and artist Subodh Gupta's massive stainless steel sculpture *Line of Control* was shown in the London's Tate gallery to much acclaim, and has recently returned to India, again acquired by the Kiran Nadar gallery. A sculpture by the Mumbai-based Sudarshan Shetty sold for a reported \$153,000 at Art Basel last year.

Is Shettar the next big thing in sub-continental sculpture? She may be, but she firmly refuses to talk about money, and bats away all attempts to discuss her market value. After her international shows in Mumbai and New Delhi, she likes to take things slowly. "I don't want my work to be known for its price, and I don't want to do 10 shows a year. It's very important for me to preserve my creativity, to retain that romance."

And as the interview wraps up, and she immediately returns to tussling with wrought iron, it's clear that she has.