

Five artists, Alwar Balasubramaniam, Asim Waqif, Ranjani Shettar, Skarma Sonam Tashi and Sumakshi Singh, interpret the theme of in their own unique ways at the India Pavilion at the Biennale Arte 2026.

A

SPACE

LIKE

HOME

ALWAR BALASUBRAMANIAM

RETURN TO

THE SOIL

Artist ALWAR BALASUBRAMANIAM's recent works are akin to a living landscape, observes REEMA DESAI GEHI.

The landscape surrounding Alwar Balasubramaniam's commodious, self-built studio in Tirunelveli, in the western part of Tamil Nadu in India, undergoes dramatic shifts throughout the year. For several months it appears lush, nourished by seasonal rains. Yet as summer approaches, the terrain begins to dry. By April, the land turns pale and brittle; salt crystals surface, and the fields lie parched beneath the sun's piercing heat. Come May and June, the transformation is complete.

The arrival of the monsoon reverses this condition. Rain first falls across the mountains of the neighbouring state of Kerala before gradually reaching the plains of Tirunelveli. The land responds almost immediately: dry soil darkens, vegetation returns, and fields regain their vitality. This cyclical movement—drying, waiting, receiving rain and becoming fertile—repeats year after year.

For Bala, as the 55-year-old artist is also known, this annual rhythm offers a powerful way to reflect upon the theme of the India Pavilion at the Biennale Arte 2026—*Geographies of Distance: remembering home*. “When I thought about home, rather than approaching the idea in a purely personal or nostalgic sense, I began to think about it symbolically. Soil itself waits for rain; rain departs and returns. In that continuous cycle of absence and renewal lies a deeper meditation on belonging, memory and place,” he explains, drawing our attention to the work *Not Just for Us* (2026), made of earth, resin and paddy grains. The invitation to participate in the India Pavilion emerged after its curator Dr. Amin Jaffer encountered Bala's earlier work *Drift*, which was displayed at Talwar Gallery in New Delhi as part of the 2022 exhibition *Mirror on the Ground*. That orb, featuring a striking fissure formed from compacted soil, already foregrounded the artist's engagement with landscape and earth as both material and metaphor.

Unlike many of Bala's previous works, such as *Body as Shell* (2011–15), where the artist recast a plaster form of his own body using fibreglass and moulded rubber before realising it in sandstone within controlled studio environments, the sheer scale of this installation required the process to unfold outdoors. This shift in working conditions produced unexpected encounters. The work called for an extraordinary quantity of earth: nearly seven tonnes of soil gathered from the land surrounding the artist's studio. Using mechanical excavation, the soil was collected and transformed into panels. Owing to the substantial weight of the material, the work had to be constructed in sections rather than as a single continuous surface. To stabilise the earth, while bearing in mind the humidity in Venice, the soil was combined with resin, allowing the fragile material to retain its form while preserving its natural textures and tonal variations.

The resulting surfaces retain the appearance of raw earth while acquiring a structural durability suitable for exhibition. Once the soil panels were laid out in the open, the surrounding environment began interacting with them in unexpected ways. Birds perched on the surfaces. Monkeys climbed across the panels; caterpillars, squirrels, even peacocks appeared, leaving marks and impressions behind. The soil itself contained dormant seeds and microorganisms, naturally attracting other forms of life.

The artist did not resist; he simply observed. "Gradually, I began to recognise that these interactions were shaping the work itself. Instead of trying to prevent it, I allowed it to happen," he says.

Working outdoors ultimately reshaped the conceptual framework of *Not Just for Us*. Those faint traces remain embedded within the finished installation. "At first viewers may simply see soil and cracks in the wall. But if they spend time with the work, they may notice the marks left by animals, the textures of the earth, the traces of life embedded within it," says Bala. "In that moment, they may reflect on their own relationship with the land and the many forms of life that share it. And perhaps they will realise that the earth is not just for us."





The area where the work is situated is intimate rather than monumental. Two columns frame the wall on which it is installed. “Because of this architecture, the work almost appears as though it belongs naturally to the space. I like that quality. I prefer when the artwork feels integrated with the environment rather than imposed upon it,” he says.

Bala’s other work at the pavilion is an oval form, also titled *Drift*, composed of compacted soil and conceived as a complementary element within the space. It is the first work one encounters upon entering the venue for the India Pavilion—the 14th-century Isolotto, a former warehouse. “I also incorporated paddy grains into the surface of the work. The region where my studio is located is known for rice cultivation. In fact, the district’s identity is closely tied to paddy fields,” shares Bala. “Rice grains here are treasured and often preserved for future planting. By embedding them in the work, I wanted to symbolise the idea of continuity—of life carrying forward into the future.”

It becomes evident that, for Bala, home is both personal and universal. “The soil I used for the work comes from the land around my studio. In that sense, it is personal. It is literally the ground beneath my feet,” he says. “But soil also connects everyone. I sometimes think about how we divide the world—countries, regions, communities, families. These divisions become smaller and smaller.”

The artist has long found inspiration at his home-cum-studio, Nathikarai (‘river bank’ in Tamil). In fact, to understand Bala’s recent practice, one must experience the landscape from which it arises. He traded city life in 2013 to move to his village, where he now lives with his wife and two sons. Over the past 13 years, sometimes the work is about the landscape; at other times the landscape itself becomes the work. In *Rain in the Midnight*, exhibited at Talwar Gallery’s New York outpost in 2016, Bala harnessed forces of nature—rain, wind, earth and fire—to shape materials such as sand, terracotta and wood. These works appear as though they formed naturally over millennia, while Bala’s hand remains present yet subtle, like wind guiding particles into place.



A defining attribute of Bala's practice has been evident since early works such as *Self in Progress* (2002), which featured sculptures cast from the artist's own body. Here, Bala blurred the boundaries between form, presence and environment. Across painting, sculpture, drawing, printmaking and installation, he pushes the boundaries of material by making the invisible visible—transforming air, shadow, breath and negative space into tangible, perceptible forms that challenge assumptions about solidity and presence.

In the seminal untitled camphor works of 2004, he explored the intersection of material, perception and the ephemeral quality that defines human life. The 2009-10 exhibition *(In) Between* included works such as *Kaayam* (2008) and *Shadow of a Shadow of a Shadow* (2007), where Bala pushed the limits of material perception by excavating the invisible. In *Flown Away* (2023), indigo pigment itself becomes a collaborator, shaping surfaces that reveal process and time rather than static form.

In this sense, the recent installations *Not Just for Us* and *Drift* reflect a broader cycle of formation, transformation and disintegration. Rather than aspiring to the permanence often associated with monumental sculptures, the work embraces the fragile, transient nature of its materials. "Soil erodes, dissolves, shifts and reforms under the influence of wind, water and time. Human bodies, too, emerge from the earth and ultimately return to it," he explains.

For Bala, these long-standing preoccupations ultimately gesture toward a larger interconnectedness. "Soil, water, plants, animals, humans—everything exists within the same cycle," he says, before pausing to conclude. "Perhaps the challenge is to remember, not just intellectually, but emotionally and spiritually, that *that* connection is home." [•]



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RANJANI

SHETTAR

ORCHESTRATING A GARDEN SYMPHONY

Somewhere between intuition and precision, RANJANI SHETTAR transforms everyday materials into ethereal installations, says ANINDO SEN.

Ranjani Shettar's sculptural practice of more than two decades is evocatively informed by nature and its shared ecologies. As a sensory antidote to diminishing attention spans, her abstracted sculptural assemblages absorb the visitors' attention, inviting them to pause and reflect on the environment they cohabit. While creating her pieces, she tends to work both deliberately and intuitively (with her materials and techniques), leaving room for chance and discovery. She crafts the individual pieces by hand in her studio, transforming them into captivating installations in-situ where they are exhibited. As presentations, the works seem to float in the air, often occupying the space sublimely as material and metaphor in response to their surroundings.

While Shettar was born in Bengaluru, her father's job entailed frequent relocations for her family across India. She spent her childhood in multiple smaller towns in Karnataka, comforted by nature's embrace and an idyllic life. "Rather than feeling uprooted, it was something that we as a family looked forward to. Looking back, I realise that it left a lasting impression of how I want to live my life, even though as a child I may not have been cognisant of it. But later it helped me make the decision to move away from the city," recalls the 49-year-old artist. "As a child I was so attuned to my surroundings and the changes of the seasons. While living in Bengaluru as an adult, I felt a deep longing to reclaim that."

Around 2003, when Bengaluru was consumed by the IT boom, to Shettar, it felt like the city was growing at a breakneck pace. So rather than move to a neighbouring city like Mysuru or Tumkuru, she and her husband, Srinivas Prasad, also an artist, relocated to a quasi-rural setting in Malnad, almost 400 kilometres away from Bengaluru. Nestled in the Western Ghats, the then-sleepy little town of Sagara sat surrounded by lush vegetation and forest

cover not far from Jog Falls, one of India's tallest waterfalls. The retreat to the countryside afforded Shettar and her husband a reconnection with nature that they yearned for. Significantly enough, it also gave her a larger studio where she was able to imagine and create many of her expansive installations over the last two decades.

In her formative years, Dadaism had been a defining influence on her work. "When I came across the movement as a young sculptor, it expanded my vision of what could be done. It allowed me to give myself permission to do anything in any form, and in many ways provided the bedrock of how deep, far and wide I could go in sharing with the world my perspective."

Institutional recognition for her distinct material explorations and visual language followed. *Sun-sneezers blow light bubbles* (2007-08), an early career highlight, was her first work in stainless steel and fabric—materials that she has revisited in her installation at the India Pavilion at the Biennale Arte 2026. That work travelled to museums in the United States, showing at The Institute of Contemporary Art (ICA), Boston, The Modern Art Museum in Fort Worth, Texas as well as to Japan where it was exhibited at the Art Tower Mito. While these opportunities enabled her to fulfil her early large-scale sculptures, they also allowed her to learn more about the material possibilities with steel and fabric while experimenting with forms and spatial ideas. Both aspects were to become central to her practice in subsequent years. In hindsight, the work is revealing about how Shettar has made ethical choices in her practice. "I wanted the sculpture to respond to light in a manner which meant looking for material that was translucent. A convenient and locally grounded option was rawhide, which is commonly used in the heads of Indian drums. But I wanted the same aesthetic sensibilities without the vestiges of violence. That is what led me to choose muslin, a fabric that has since been vital to my practice."

Seven ponds and a few raindrops (2017)—another key point of inflection in her practice that she presented at The MET Fifth Avenue in New York in 2018—





allowed her to explore more complex ideas. Working to make her sculpture respond to the horizontally skewed space at the gallery, she suspended the amorphous, biomorphic pieces in tandem with their lingering shadows to create the gentle, paradoxical effect of material weightlessness. She also applied organic dyes on the muslin cloth to give her sculptures a decidedly colourful turn, while using tamarind paste as a binder, both novel to her sculptures at that time.

A more recent project that earned her much critical recognition was *Cloud songs on the horizon*, a set of five sculptural installations that she exhibited inside the glass-roofed greenhouse at the Barbican Conservatory in London in 2023. For Shettar, casting ethereal shadows was, by now, structurally inherent to her visual language. So a venue with ambient natural light, without the comfort of neutral surfaces that walls in a gallery otherwise provided, posed obvious challenges. Rather than being bogged down by that conundrum, she embraced the possibilities that the urban garden with its diverse flora had to offer. What resulted was a compelling, spatially responsive installation where her sculptures blended organically and yet stood out, reimagining the Anthropocene as a future imbued with reciprocity.

Under the same sky, her work for the India Pavilion, is a culmination of her practice till date, incorporating key strands of her past research, learnings and expressions. “I have focused my exploration more on the tension between form, shape and volume than just the material or colour,” reveals Shettar. Wood, wax and thread, which she has used in the past, are absent as is a more pronounced colour palette that one witnessed at the Barbican. Instead, stainless steel and cotton fabric are bound together in monochromatic off-white, topped by a sheen of colour from softly reflective lacquer.

Made from more than 50 hanging components of varying sizes, this installation, like many of her earlier works, is suspended from above, in this case from the beams of the Tese Dell’Isolotto in the Arsenale. While perhaps not the most expansive, it is one of her densest works, where many layers





come together in a tightly knit assemblage. “The way I see it—I have created the physical elements akin to musical notes in my studio back at home, and once I bring them all together in-situ in Venice, I transform them to complete the piece as a visual symphony. I see them ultimately as musical notes suspended in air, harmonising and playing off their interconnectedness,” explains Shettar.

The numerous elements which come together—ranging from purely abstract to more representational forms—are an oblique reference to the sheer diversity of forms and behaviours found in nature. What also does seem to inform her practice are the teleological underpinnings where everything in nature has a use and purpose.

“For this project, I have been inspired by a variety of flora from tropics closer to home to the Tundra, along with landscapes like swamps and sand dunes,” she shares. “My curiosity here stems from how ecosystems are marked by the co-existence of synergistic collaborations as well as Darwinian struggles for survival.”

For Shettar, the idea of home is not a fixed notion but more a state of mind, while belonging is profoundly rooted in nature. Through *Under the same sky* she evokes the idea of a shared, universal kinship as a response to the wider theme of the India Pavilion. [•]

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