

# BUILDING BEYOND BOUNDARIES : NATURE AS CANVAS

As artist Alwar Balasubramaniam marks a decade at his studio near Tirunelveli, he invites us into his sanctuary, a space he built himself.

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Time seems to dissolve entirely at Alwar Balasubramaniam's studio located in a village near Tirunelveli, in the western part of Tamil Nadu. "We measure the day through the process of tracing the sun, from sunrise to sunset," smiles Bala, as he ushers us into the compound where his home and studio are located. Named Nathikarai ('River Shore' in Tamil), it is set amidst lush, verdant surroundings.

At 53, Bala's artistic practice—an intersection of the self and the environment—is a natural extension of the studio he has built. "My wife and I decided to move from Bengaluru in 2013," he recalls. "We contemplated over the ideal environment in which our children could grow up. One of the reasons this place felt familiar was that our guru is from this region, and I was born here."

Bala longed for a sense of coexistence with nature; in returning home to his ancestral village, he found his calling. "The ego often creates a divide between us and nature, as though we are somehow separate from it. But, in reality, we are an intrinsic part of it," he emphasises.

After much deliberation, the couple eventually moved to the village where they both started constructing a small school. He says, "When we want to contribute to a larger cause, we often wait for personal fulfilment. But we realised that this would never be easy—there would always be something lacking—time, funds, or energy. So, we decided to build the school first." After its completion, his attention turned to building his house, with the studio integrated into the living space.

As we approach the print studio marking the entrance to his workspace, Bala adds, "I wanted the studio to be part of the area where I live, allowing me to build gradually." Bala's approach was unconventional. "I didn't want to follow a fixed plan. Instead, I lived here and gradually figured out what worked for me," he says. "The studio was the last space I built."

From 2014 to 2017, the construction evolved incrementally. Many contributed to building it, including people from neighbouring villages.





“At first, we couldn’t find a local architect. If we brought someone in from Bengaluru or Chennai, their schedules were too busy. I prefer a steady but slow pace,” explains Bala. “I’d often say: ‘I don’t have a set plan yet; let’s just build something and see how it goes.’”

None conceded and Bala undertook the arduous task independently.

The ceiling posed a major challenge. Bala insisted on creating an open, unobstructed space. Instead of a typical Roman-style arch, he chose a shallow arch for the roof. “A deeper arch would have raised the ceiling too high, so we tried a fusion version of the Guastavino arch in most areas. When you see the structure now, it’s hard to imagine the weight, but building it step by step, brick by brick, it all stays in place.”

Conventional options involved either concrete or metal-welded structures. “But I wanted a hundred-foot-long open space with no beams or columns in the way. Most people said it wasn’t possible,” he says. Bala, however, remained persistent; the absence of obstructions was crucial for his sculptural work. “I wanted to engage with my pieces without any hindrances.”

He embarked on self-directed learning through online tutorials, books and hands-on experimentation, drawing inspiration from old village houses and temple architecture. The three-year-long process was both challenging and rewarding. Bala made use of timeless materials—stone, brick and lime. His research, particularly into Adobe-style architecture from Mexico, Spain, India, and parts of Africa, influenced his approach. “I realised these ancient techniques could help with the brutal summer heat here,” he notes. He experimented with local soil, making bricks from it, and then fired them. “Initially, we bought bricks, but later we made our own using local clay, drying and firing them,” he says, pointing to handmade bricks of varying sizes.

The process of brick-making felt akin to sculpting. Bala minimised plastering to preserve the simplicity of the materials. “We used the

‘rat trap bond’ technique, which leaves air pockets inside for insulation, reducing heat.”

Even before the house was fully complete, the family of three moved in. “Every morning, I’d walk around and plant trees, figuring out where the studio would be situated.”

Bala likens the land to a blank canvas for experimentation. “We might say, ‘lychee or apple won’t grow here, jackfruit might, pomegranates could,’ but when you try, you realise that plants, like all life, are more committed than anything else. They remain rooted through all weather conditions.”

The studio emerged within this environment, bathed in natural light and surrounded by greenery.

Navigating through the three studio spaces—print, painting and sculpture—Bala says, “I believe art, cooking, and building, are all forms of expression, all interconnected. People ask how I switch between mediums. For me, mediums are just a way to convey. If I know, I will do it, or else I will learn and do it. The learnings always keep me moving.”

In hindsight, Bala recognises how the act of building the space influenced his practice. “Working on the drawings for the house gave me the same satisfaction as collaborating on a site-specific work or exhibitions. Both were about realising a vision.”

For printmaking, Bala designed and built his own press. “You can buy the available etching presses in the market, but I wasn’t satisfied with them,” he says. The studio is not just for creating artwork, but also for crafting the necessary tools.

Fixing and constructing tools is integral to Bala’s creative process. While many artists view such tasks as distractions, for him, they often lead to breakthroughs. He recalls a piece involving extensive grinding: “Afterwards, the metal fragments were difficult to clean. I needed a stronger magnet and eventually found one that could pull the shavings from six to eight inches away.” This discovery sparked the idea of incorporating magnets into his work. One such exploration resulted in the



seminal work *Rest in Resistance* (2007), where two fishing hooks meet from opposite sides of the wall, capturing the energies of invisible forces — “areas where things exist, but we can’t see them.”

Much like Bala’s studio.

Bala’s work has undergone several transformations since his first professional presentation at the Bharat Bhavan International Print Biennial in 1997. However, it was in 2014, when he moved to this village, that his practice was profoundly impacted.

His 2022 show *Mirror on the Ground* at Talwar Gallery in New Delhi and *Touch of Air, Traces of Time* at the gallery’s New York outpost in 2024, reflect how the studio and its surrounding land have significantly shaped Bala’s practice in recent years.

Large canvases depicting the vastness and splendour of nature are now central to his practice.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, his son had remarked, ‘You teach me how to draw the surroundings, but none of your artworks are like

this!’ This innocent observation inspired Bala to capture the feeling of the landscape rather than its exact likeness. His subsequent works, though initially resembling conventional landscapes, are far from realistic. “At first glance, they may seem like landscapes, but up close, they are not. There are no distinct paddy leaves or fields. It’s about capturing the essence of the landscape,” he says.

Bala’s exploration deepened further as he began using the land itself in his art. He collected earth from the surrounding area. The earth’s well-defined colours — orange, red, brown, black — became a critical feature of his creative process. In his sculptural practice, Bala moved from stone to brick and cement. “I began making blocks from brick and cement, layering them and carving into them,” he explains. He also experimented with tiles and terracotta forms, often burying them in concrete before carving them. These works, focused on construction and deconstruction, continue to influence his practice.

Currently, Bala is focused on metal casting, revisiting a medium he first explored 20 years





ago. “It feels good to work with, especially after working with clay and stone so often,” he shares. He is also going back to an unfinished red painting project and a sculpture from five years ago.

Ephemerality and the impermanence of the human body have long been recurring themes in Bala’s over-two-decade-long practice. His work also speaks about the invisible afterlife—traces left by the body or the environment. “Traces are visible, but what if something leaves no mark, like a bird’s flight? The bird travels, but its path remains unseen,” he reflects. This exploration of the unseen has become an important theme, as he investigates what exists beyond immediate perception, like the elements—wind, water, fire.

Bala’s time at the studio oscillates between periods of manual work and long stretches of quietude, observing the natural world. “In the mornings, my son and I sit on the veranda and watch the village activity. There are about 20 houses, and the river separates our land from that of the nearby village. From the front of the house, we can see a tractor pass, a dog bark, or children play. It’s like watching a movie,” he says with a glint in his eye. “Even when I’m alone, I just watch, and time passes. Sometimes it sparks new ideas, but often, it simply helps me reflect on what I’ve already seen. Not everything needs to be new. Water, when it settles, becomes clearer. Similarly, inspirations need time to distil before they mature.”

His typical day, however, begins around 4.00 am to make time for learning. After a walk, and breakfast with his family, he heads to the studio, designed for diverse activities. “I don’t focus on one thing all the time,” he explains. “There’s a space for drawing and printmaking, one for larger projects, and a quieter area where I sit in reflection. The studio is unpredictable—every day brings something new.”

He cites *Shadow of the Shadow of the Shadow* (2007), where the work evolves in stages, sometimes changing form until it feels complete. The invisible also makes its presence felt in the work; Bala starts with a cardboard box, casts and gives form to its shadow, continuing to highlight the spaces where light does not penetrate, until the sculpted shape

becomes unrecognisable. “The non-visible space between the shadow and the object became the object itself. As I started working on it, the sculpture began to create the shadow and then the sculpture of the shadow created its own shadow and so on...,” he says.

After spending hours exploring the expansive campus, all powered by Artificial Intelligence—from the lights to the fountain—Bala suggests we retrace the steps of his morning walk. The sights and sounds inspired a series of untitled etchings featured in his New York show. The zinc etchings were created from direct drawings or photo references, and then translated onto plates. “It took about a year and a quarter to complete them,” he notes, with inspiration drawn from both his walks and drone photography. “My son and I often flew the drone together, capturing the changing light over paddy fields, banana and coconut trees, and other landscapes.”

The prints also feature subtle details, such as tractor lines from ploughed fields and abstract shapes evoking haze, cracked earth and other natural forms.

Over the last eight years, Bala’s approach has shifted from “working about nature to working with nature.” His recent works have become more collaborative, allowing nature itself to play an active role in their creation. “Nature does its own work, and I do mine,” he says.

This evolution has led him to explore what he terms “landscape” or “landwork,” where the interaction between the artist and the elements is central to the process.

He observes how water flows, noting that it “makes its way and finds its level,” regardless of human intervention. “If there’s a block, it waits for the level to rise and continues its journey,” he explains. This focus on the interconnectedness of nature and life is evident in all his works, where each element is part of a larger system.

Around sunset, as we walk back to the studio, he pauses to reflect on the self and its relationship to existence. Gazing at the paddy fields beyond the gate of his home and studio, he shares,





“Everything is one, yet we like to divide—every field, every subject. We’re conditioned to see them as separate, but for me, the self and existence are one.”



ALWAR BALASUBRAMANIAM  
*Sunshine on a cloudy day*  
Gold leaf and fibreglass  
31" x 42" x 10"  
2024  
Image courtesy of Talwar Gallery, New York | New Delhi