

NEW DELHI

A. Balasubramaniam

TALWAR GALLERY

Tricks with light and shade were A. Balasubramaniam's favored means of deception in "(In)between," an exhibition of screenprints and serene sculptural interventions. Take *Link*, 2009, a fragile length of thread, fitted with a silvery hook at one end and suspended between two adjacent white walls in a small room. The superfine string and its shifting, alternately curved and straight lines of shadow were difficult to tell apart; like wavering pencil marks on a blank page, they conspired to redraw the dimensions of the alcove. Was it square, rectangular, triangular? The answer depended on your perspective.

Elsewhere, too, the Bangalore-based artist probed the boundaries of the visible. *Shadow of a Shadow of a Shadow*, 2007, a white-on-white sculptural wall installation, tracks the play of light on a cardboard box. The first of the work's three components delineates the shadow of the box, the second traces the shadow of its shadow, and the third is unrecognizable: This is the shadow's shadow. What Balasubramaniam gives with one hand he takes away with the other. If *Shadow* imbues the intangible with existence, *Kaayam*, 2008, seems to drain the breath of life out of a figure: Four white fiberglass mock-ups of the artist's body are squashed on the wall like deflated balloons.

Much respected in India, Balasubramaniam has been somewhat overshadowed (to use his own conceit) internationally. Perhaps this is because, while many globally prominent Indian artists use obvious indicators of "Indianness" in their work, Balasubramaniam does not offer such sociological references. In his art, selfhood is elusive. *Gravity*, 2009, is a ghostly white fiberglass cast of the artist's face embedded in a wall. Now you see him, now you don't. Here, existence is fleeting, and the threshold of identity permeable. In the gallery's basement, visitors could peep into the mysteries of germination. *Oomph*, 2009, is a reddish-brown sculpture of welded metal bicycle spokes. This rusty latticework looks like a cross between a porcupine, prickling in anticipation of danger, and a spiky oversize seedpod, bulging as if with magical secrets. Unfortunately, the "sacred seed"—in Hinduism, a symbol of the divine beginning of consciousness—is by now a tired trope in the work of environmentally concerned Indian sculptors (Valsan Kollerri). More circumspectly poised in the struggle between artistic and natural creation is *Untitled*, 2009. Here, a glittering substance, resembling at once moss and mold, oozes from the edges of two white canvases, forming a bridge that links them. This dark meeting point evokes both art's correlation with the life force and the inevitable decay that awaits even the most pristine surfaces. Puzzling as it is, *Untitled* extends Balasubramaniam's oeuvre because it incorporates the idea of growth into the delicate spatial insertions usually associated with him.

However, Balasubramaniam was at his best when engaging with the impersonal architecture of the gallery. And the slighter his incursion, the stronger its impact. *Shell as Body*, 2007, is a tiny incision in a gleaming white wall; echoing the crenellated edges of a seashell, it harbors a hollow center. Examining this fold from close quarters, one experiences a vertiginous sensation. Will the room turn in on itself and vanish within the fissure?

A. Balasubramaniam, *Shell as Body*, 2007, fiberglass, wood, and acrylic, 18 x 21 x 8".

