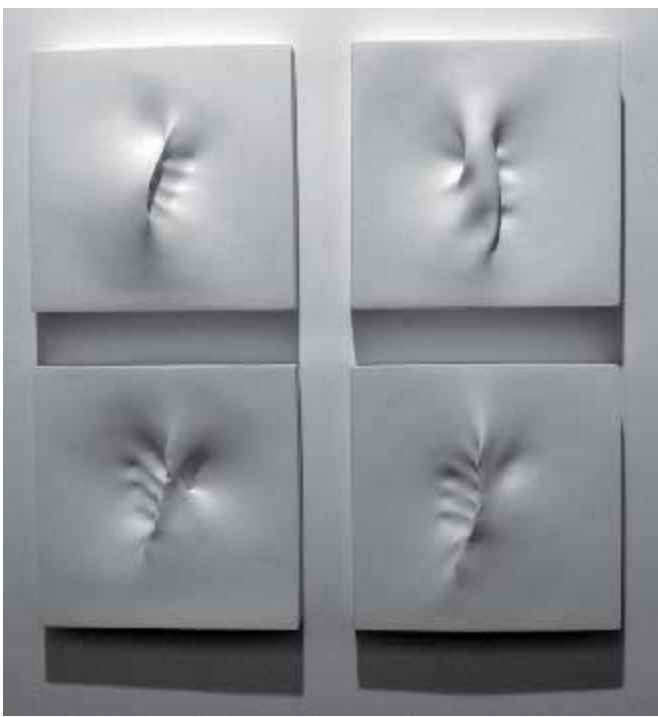


ASIAN ART

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Active in the international art scene for the past ten years, A. Balasubramaniam, or Bala as he is better known, has followed an interesting and challenging artistic path. A visual artist in the most extensive sense, Bala is at the other end of the spectrum from Frank Stella who stated about his minimal pieces 'what you see is what you see'. Not so with Bala, who never randomly creates a work of art. There is always an objective, a questioning, and a revelation behind the piece that he wants to communicate to the viewer. His talent lies in being able to use art as a medium to draw our attention on scientific, architectural, or aesthetic aspects that surround us in daily life. Born in India in 1971, Bala is part of the group of artists from India whose following has grown steadily. After working for sometime in print, he has opened new avenues using fibreglass, amongst other media, to complete his pieces. At the crossroads between installation, sculpture, and painting his work is very much related to the body, with the artist casting from his own body. Bala's goal is to bring new perspectives to the forefront, forcing the viewer to break away from preconceived notions, and see the reality under a new light. In this interview, he talks about his artistic journey, and discusses his approach to art with the Asian Art Newspaper.



Hidden Waves (2008), set of four, 12" x 12" x 4", fibreglass and acrylic

Asian Art Newspaper: Can you say a few words about your early career?

A. Balasubramaniam: I studied in India where I completed my BFA. Later, I was offered a fellowship, which I accepted, and I started as a printmaker. Initially, the fellowship was supposed to last six months, but it actually went on for almost a year. During that time, I made a lot of prints, and I applied for some residencies. I had the opportunity to study in Vienna, which I did for one semester whilst still focusing on printmaking. Later, I started to question the medium of print and the considerable amount of time I was spending on it, and I almost stopped working for a year. Within that year, I did very little work, but I kept thinking about the real importance of print as a medium. After that, I was offered various residencies and fellowships. I continued to question the limitations of printmaking on one hand, and on the other began exploring new avenues. Looking back, one cannot say that during this transitional period I decided on one medium over another. If one sees the works together with the medium I selected, it becomes clear that my choice was always based upon the project with which I was dealing, and not on whether I was familiar with that specific medium. Even now, my approach has not changed: if the subject requires a new method, I will learn it in order to complete the work.

AAN: You spoke about the limitations of print. Can you be more specific?

B: Whatever the medium with which I have worked, I have always tried to extend the boundaries. I also attempted to do this in printmaking. For example, there are some prints with a scorch mark of the sun on a paper. What happened is that the paper was capturing the exact purity of the sun because whatever could be seen on one side could also be seen on the other side at a focal point. Consequently, the scorch mark was nothing else but focused sunlight, and sunlight is nothing else but the portrait of the sun. Therefore, I was getting a trace of the fire. To answer your question precisely, when I say that there are limitations within the medium of print, it is not that I was struggling within these limitations. I was simply trying to extend the boundaries. I kept thinking why have boundaries and constantly try to extend them? Then, I thought, why not just accept that there are boundaries? Basically, I felt that I needed to do whatever was meaningful in respect to the subject with which I was dealing.

AAN: Once you decided to stop creating prints, what was your next step? Fibreglass sculptures, or were there a few intermediary steps?

B: I did many different types of work after moving away from printmaking. I began using fibreglass when I was experimenting working with my body. I thought there had to be a medium that would cast from plaster that I could handle easily. To me, fibreglass offered a lot of possibilities and although I do most of my work in fibreglass, I also complete pieces in other media.

AAN: What are these other media?

B: There was a time when I was very interested in the concept of trace. It is a fascinating subject—the way humans understand history. They look for traces—information left behind. Trace is a concept that evolves over time: when I was trying to capture a trace of my being in this body, I had to realise that if I cast the body at that precise moment, it would be different three years later, as by then 'I' may be still the same, but my body would be different. The casting at one moment in time is almost like a three-dimensional photograph. Traces are not always a very reliable concept, as certain actions leave no trace (a bird flying in the air), whereas others, for example, a footprint in the sand, will disappear over time. That led me to look more closely at the notion of the visible and invisible. If a footprint could disappear, I wanted to find a way—and a medium—to communicate through my work these changes that happen over time. I thought that fibreglass had limitations, because I did not think it conveyed this notion of the 'invisible' to which I was trying to refer. I had to find a new medium, which could really illustrate it. Initially, I could not find the right medium, and I did not work for some time, but I still kept looking for possibilities within the art media. The closest I could come was the substance used for toilet air fresheners, which evaporates over time. I tried to learn that medium, but nobody wanted to teach me because these air fresheners are manufactured in factories, and everyone was concerned I was going to become a competitor, and start a toilet freshener business! Therefore, I decided to take another approach: I went to the smallscale industries development programme and asked them for advice to open an air refreshment company. They gave me a proposal, the contacts and provided me with all the methods to do it. I told them I had a small budget, but they taught me anyway. Later, I used this knowledge for my artwork.



Untitled (2004), detail, 24" x 20" x 18" (each of 2), cast from self, sand, fibreglass, evaporating compound, acrylic, wood.

All images courtesy of the Artist and Talwar Gallery New York / New Delhi

AAN: With the works that would disappear over time, did you experience any difficulties with collectors or commercial spaces?

B: When you create a work, this does not matter. You do not have to think about how it is going to be, and who is going to buy it. My New York gallery, for example, never asked any questions when I said I would do a work for my show that would no longer exist in a few weeks. I have never had any problems. Collectors have the piece in their collection although the work is almost gone. In some cases you may be able to extend the period, but you cannot hold it. It is the same thing with age: we can go to the doctor, and have some treatment. The doctor may be able to extend your life, but usually only for a short period of time.

AAN: Earlier you mentioned the word 'traces', and how humans create their history through traces. As an artist, is it not important for you to leave a trace through your work?

B: When I say trace, every act is a trace, whether we accept it or not. For example, we do not walk for the purpose of leaving a trace. We walk and the trace happens. I am questioning the human perception and our way of understanding reality. We conceive the whole world through the five senses, and we all know that these offer some limitations. Therefore, my question is with these limited senses, how can we talk about what is real and how can we really understand it? I deliberately use the 'real real' because a dream is real, too; the colour in the sky is real, too. If we take a cup and its shadow, the shadow is real, nevertheless it does not exist. For me, it is not all about trace, it is also about the present, the now—and how that may change in the future. I do not deliberately set out to make traces. Whatever I am doing is a trace of my art, of my body. I understand that whatever I do is a trace, consequently I do not deliberately have to create them. Now I am beginning to become interested in the space between the traces. For example gravity is something we cannot see, rather it is something that we experience. As a visual artist, I question all these things: gravity, electricity, or natural light. We see gravity through something else, as we see light through something else. When an apple falls from the tree, we do not see the apple or the ground, we see something in between. I am into the invisible, but doing the work is naturally becoming the trace of a thought.

AAN: Your approach to art seems to combine philosophy with aesthetics.

B: Water is water, but a chemist will look at it one way while an artist may see it as light. We divide things that are not really divided. Art is almost like a pendulum between the visible and the invisible. The invisible cannot be understood in the same way as we understand the visible. I would explain it by saying that the invisible is higher than the visible. Even by just looking at the universe, the visible objects are floating in the invisible. Art is something that is connecting the two: a pendulum and a bridge.

AAN: Was it a deliberate choice to create your fibreglass wall sculptures in white?

B: Initially, I started to do them in white because the gallery space was mostly white. Later, I carried on because it is the closest colour to light, and we all know that light has all the colours. That did not prevent me from also questioning my use of white. I never have any fixed idea. As always, it all depends on the work.

AAN: From art school onwards, are there any major influences you would name?

B: I do not consider myself exclusively a visual artist. Therefore, my influences range from Newton, Galileo to Turrell or Chillida.

AAN: Some people see a connection to Surrealism in your work. What is your opinion?

B: Surrealism is often linked with automatism. What I am trying to do is not about automatism, it is more about being conscious. Being conscious is living that moment, and not just letting happen whatever will come. I do not want to be categorized too quickly. Some people will call my work sculpture, others will call it minimal, it is not about what it is, rather it is about what people care about. It can touch conceptualism as it can touch minimalism. All people, depending on where they are coming from make different associations. Some people, even some critics, associate my work with that of Rachel Whiteread. Although I understand her approach, I could not disagree more.

AAN: What about the associations linking your work to that of George Segal?

B: When I am making the work, it is not about making a human sculpture, it is about the frozen moment in this life, questioning what is happening in me. People and critics, have so much knowledge, sometimes it is just very hard for them to come out of that knowledge in order to understand something or someone else's ideas.

AAN: Where is your work taking you?

B: Right now, my concern is the visible/ invisible, and making the viewers aware of what they are missing in normal life. I am a visual artist who is trying to capture the invisible in the visible. At first, I was very interested in the subject of trace. Our entire history is based on traces, on a documentation of the past. In that respect, I often keep wondering what would happen if somebody lived today and did not have any of that documentation?



Hidden Sight (2007), 22.75" x 20.5" x 3", fiberglass, acrylic and wood



Outreach (2008), 52" x 28" x 32", fibreglass and acrylic