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## Ranjani Shettar

### Talwar Gallery *New Delhi*

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Abstraction hasn't figured prominently in modern Indian art, critics often interpreting it as a foreign visual language. It's an observation that has been vindicated by recent survey shows in both India and abroad, which filter the country's art through the prism of its social and political transformations. The works presented in these exhibitions often take the form of hyperrealist life-size sculptures of middle-class subjects, popular culture-inspired collages or video installations themed around Hindu-Muslim tensions. Yet the artistic production of a new generation of artists increasingly departs from engagements with South Asia, in both content and form. In this context, the young Bangalore-based Ranjani Shettar has carved a unique position for herself: she approaches the social and ecological consequences of India's rapid urbanisation from the vantage of non-figurative art, engages with traditional material and seeks inspiration from the country's threatened natural environments, rather than its urban setting.

The centrepiece of her exhibition of eight new works at Talwar Gallery was a slender stainless steel installation covered in muslin and tamarind paste and suspended from the ceiling (*Scent of a Sound*, 2010–11). The dazzling interplay of twirling lines spanned the gallery and curved around the edge of its outer wall. Its starting point in one corner of the room was a concentration of small leaf-shaped ledgers soaked in brownish lacquer. From there, the armature expanded into conic shapes and arched over visitors. Downstairs, another installation, *Aureole* (2010), consisted of 15 flat bronze sculptures which were horizontally aligned to the wall at regular intervals. The flaky green patina of the flame-shaped cut-outs contrasted with the shadows cast on the rest of the wall and on the floor.

Shettar's work is delicate, but never meek or discreet. Take *Lagoon* (2011), for example: garlands of turquoise, purple and blue lacquered wood pellets and skittles accrue into abundant, cascading bundles. Its title brings to mind a baroque profusion of

Murano chandeliers and expands upon the artist's previous experiments with suspended bead arrangements reminiscent of burgeoning trees, cobwebs and constellations. Other works included a series of three wrought-iron sculptures, 'Kinetics' (all 2009), which were inspired by the tools of Shettar's studio. The first one comprised three metal blades twisted into minute variations; the second followed the concave axis of a skipping rope, and the third and most accomplished presented three different configurations. In each piece of work, metal ropes, hung to the ceiling and framed by solid wood handles, sagged, spun and rebounded.

Admittedly the tool as work of art is a familiar motif, but 'Kinetics' also alludes to various Modernist artists to which Shettar has often been associated, in particular Gego and Eva Hesse. Her inclusion in international group exhibitions, such as the New York Museum of Modern Art's 'On Line: Drawing through the Twentieth Century', reinforces these connections. As India is a country which lacks major art infrastructures, Shettar's recognition has come primarily from US institutions such as the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art and Boston's Institute of Contemporary Art. But works such as 'Kinetics' can also be compared to the contained geometric abstractions and sculptural tracings of Nasreen Mohamedi and Zarina Hashmi. While they worked with line and drawing and were partly trained abroad, the methods and processes Shettar uses are culturally encoded. In *Aureole* bronze is melded in the same way as in ancient Chola sculptures, while the lacquered wood and tamarind paste of *Lagoon* are used for the production of toys in South India. Much has been made in India about artists rooting their practice in indigenous artistic traditions, which Shettar's work does, yet at the same time, it resists easy categorization and breaks the axis along which Indian art is commonly discussed.

**Devika Singh**

June • July • August / frieze / 205