

Sunday Herald art & culture

ARTIST PROFILE

Recycled waste and the magic of installation art

Reema Moudgil

The cycle of need, consumption and rejection is the definitive theme of our world and in her work, installation artist and sculptor Ranjani Shettar explores and revisits the objects, ideas we have rendered useless.

Many stories can be sifted from what the world discards. Much can be gleaned from wastelands where the refuse of modern living lies, waiting to be recycled or rejected once again. The cycle of need, consumption and rejection is the definitive theme of our world and in her work, installation artist and sculptor Ranjani Shettar explores and revisits the objects, ideas we have rendered useless.



Though industrial elements like metal, wire, PVC pipes appear frequently in her work, what she creates with them are ironically beautiful, hand crafted forms using incongruous elements like tamarind kernel paste, lacquer, delicate swathes of muslin. Her quasi organic shapes mimic the limpid harmony of the natural world, wistfully recalling the beauty we are replacing with machinated structures and a culture of waste.

Not surprisingly, her work has resonated loudly across America where consumption and waste are predominant themes. Her solo shows have been hosted by the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (SFMOMA), The Modern Art Museum, Fort Worth, Institute of Contemporary Art (ICA), Boston, Talwar Gallery, New York, Fine Arts Center, University of Massachusetts. The artist who was till recently based in Bangalore now works from Shimoga and recalls how her journey to international acclaim began. "My father spotted my talent and encouraged me as a child and things happened over the years. I studied at Chitrakala Parishat to get my bachelors and masters degree in fine arts." She refuses to speculate whether her international success is an exceptional event. Or if contemporary Indian art is stuck in a morass of sameness and is currently suffering from the lack of robust inspiration.

She instead chooses to say, "All works are judged in retrospect and one can never really judge something when it is being created. I can only speak for myself. Art is a necessity for me. I see myself through art."

About the balance she has struck between elements from traditional crafts and a contemporary sensibility, she says, "I speak a contemporary language through my work but I am very interested in how things are crafted. Everything inspires me.

Craft traditions, industrial methods of construction, all artistic processes. I always try to understand how different elements relate to each other." Working with traditional elements in a modern context or incorporating kasimi (black dye) with stainless steel is not something she does intentionally to make a point. But she is sensitive to the fact that traditional crafts are gasping for life. She says, "Crafts which have lasted for generations are dying. When I use crafts, I am fascinated by the discipline that goes into them but ultimately, each work dictates how it will evolve."

Her perception of the world she lives and works in also affects her art. She agrees, "I do not make direct political statements through my work but yes, am a product of society and my work is bound to be reflective of it. Nature is a big preoccupation with me. How it changes or is changed. Ecological issues affect me and it shows in my works." Ranjani concedes that there is a limited audience for installation art and adds, "Institutes play a role in initiating people into art and slowly change is happening."

She, however, is forever enjoying the various stages of being "full and empty" as an artist. She says, "Every phase is interesting. It all begins with an idea. Then the research into it begins. I start exploring materials, techniques and then to see a piece travel from the chaos of the studio, and lit up in a gallery is an incredible joy. From being attached to a creation to watch it from a distance is unique and I never tire of the whole cycle."