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Artist Ranjani Shettar shows one of her sculptures at the Focus exhibit.

Ranjani Shettar molds media for Modern Art Museum exhibit

By GAILE ROBINSON / *Special Contributor to The Dallas Morning News*

FORT WORTH – Ranjani Shettar could work with more expensive materials, but she prefers the mundane scraps she finds scavenging her neighborhood near Bangalore, India. And she could use power tools, but would rather use her hands. With bits of fabric and strips of junked cars, she crafts ethereal human-scaled shelters and webs.

On a recent December day, though, she is not hands-on. All she can do is point traffic-cop-style directing a forklift driver. She is standing in the middle of a gallery at the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth, and her work is strewn about the floor waiting to be hung. Ms. Shettar's sculptural pieces are the subject of the museum's Focus show that opened Sunday. She has a great deal to say about hands and handcrafting. When she was recorded earlier this year at the 55th Carnegie International exhibition, she said: "Many things are possible with hands. Just the way the hand is engineered, it's very adaptable, and I like to use them."

This was the forum in which Ms. Shettar began separating herself from group shows and started displaying solo potential. After her three-gallery Focus show at the Modern, she moves on to the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art for a solo exhibition of new works.

Here, Ms. Shettar's delicate work bubbles up from the floor or steps along the walls as if it were outfitted with anti-gravity boots. Her palette of strings, beeswax, muslin, metal and wood is woven, twisted or carved into things of great beauty.

"It may not be art material," she says. "It could be anything." The refinement she coaxes from her pieces makes them look as if they were caressed into their final shapes.

A series of wood carvings that came from a single teak log resemble casts of animal footprints taken from the shoreline of the communal watering hole. They are as smooth and undulating as poured cake batter, denying the physical manipulation it took to get them from fallen log to polished perfection.

Another piece she brought to Texas is Sun-sneezers blow light bubbles, named for the involuntary reflex of sneezing when confronted with bright sunlight. The connected golden bubbles that seem to float midair are made of stainless-steel hoops covered in tamarind kernel powder, muslin and string. "I was trying to create a sculpture that is joyous and lighthearted," Ms. Shettar said. The result: The bubbling froth seems to catch the breeze and buoyantly lifts to the ceiling, completely denying its solid state. She captured joyousness and lightheartedness, too, by allowing her hands to disconnect from her brain. Ms. Shettar has said, "I believe hands have their own intelligence."

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Continues through Feb. 8 at the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth, 3200 Darnell St. 817-738-9215.
www.themodern.org.