



Ranjani working on Touch Me Not.

Beeswax, resin, muslin, tamarind kernel paste and lacquered beads, wood, sawdust, silicone and latex – add a little light and shadow, and you have the ingredients for a magician’s cauldron. Ranjani Shettar however, transforms these materials into mediums, creating artworks instead of fairy tale potions, while retaining their innate magic. Consistent to Ranjani’s growth as an artist has been her tryst with material, her intuitive understanding of it and its alteration in her hands into spectacular moving, throbbing worlds. The fragility and strength of a material, its capacity to attract and narrate, and to change the atmosphere, its willingness to lend itself to her vision are some of the criteria that influence the selection.

There is no singular explanation for the work of Ranjani. In their representation and abstraction they conjure multiple experiences and meanings for a viewer. The materials with their own history and socio-cultural context form as much part of the work as the overall concept, symbolic representation or narrative intended by the artist. In that sense Ranjani’s works operate at several parallel levels, generating a continuum of associations, and drawing out spontaneous interrelations between natural and man-made, hand-made and industrial,

real and imaginary, individual and plural, craft and art – made for interpretations that engage the viewer with thoughts ranging from the physical evaluation of the work’s many parts, to inspiring contemplation on life, the universe, and its functioning. Perhaps they reflect the artist’s own cognitive processes while art-making, translated into the work and transferred to the viewer at a moment of empathy.

Studied in retrospect, Ranjani’s choices became apparent immediately after her academic years, when she created the ‘Container and Content’ (1995-2000) body of work. She began to explore natural processes of pollination, birth, growth and decay, all the while stepping outside conventional sculptural practice of ‘reducing’ blocks of stone, wood and clay, and delving instead into the process of structurally crafting - sewing, fixing, gluing, pinning - building three dimensional compositions. Material ranging from cloth to butter paper, and polyester to straw and wire metamorphose into pod, nest and seed-forms constituting changed realities and dramatized hierarchies. The artist Michael Craig-Martin once said

“The world in front of our eyes is extraordinary. The difficulty is in seeing what is in front of our eyes. The difficulty for the artist is in acknowledging what he (she) sees.” Ranjani notices and sensitively acknowledges through her work the most taken-for-granted phenomena, avoiding cliché’s in representation and reliance on verbal explanations, rather intercepting life’s (small and big) truths within her work and therefore letting them ‘be’. She admits that the chance exposure to the Dada movement, particularly Dada poetry (with its downplay of the role of meaning and logical thinking) liberated her artistic practice from a lot of limitations, some self imposed and others imposed by academic conventions.

Ranjani’s forte is, and has been, to create graceful unity out of many separate pieces – objects or sculptures. Here repetition, and the rhythms evoked by plurality became a part of, and strengthen the conceptual and formal structure of her work, negating any feeling of fragmentation. Even individual units like ‘1000 Room House’ (2000) and ‘Flow into me’ (2000) are constructed to allow the movement of air and light through the visibly divided sections. One of the turning points in her career came with the work ‘Tillana’ discovering the effects of gravitational forces on tiny beeswax beads hung on lithe cotton thread. This abstraction of a classical music composition led to a series of larger and more ambitious works celebrating lyricism and resonance or *dhvani*, as the sublime attribute connected to the arts is expressed in Indian philosophy. ‘Vasanta’(2004) with strung beeswax beads in hues of yellow, blue and green refers to the uplifting and tender qualities of spring, and also

the *raag vasant*, a melody embracing every nuance of the season. Extending in curving pillars from floor to ceiling, ‘Hoomalae’ (2005), also made up of coloured beeswax nodes and thread, surrounds the viewer with what the artist expresses as the sudden shower of petals considered a spiritually blessed occurrence. Ranjani remarks on the serendipitous echo of thought this series of works shares with the ‘drawing without paper’ works of German born Venezuelan artist Gertrude Goldschmidt ‘Gego’ (1912-1994), whose work she came across later, and admires deeply. But where Gego’s constructions were sharp silhouettes, almost aggressive in their wiry joints, Ranjani’s work is soft and rounded, generating a nourishing quietude that evokes the feminine. ‘Just a Bit More’(2005-06) with its seven stretched thread-networks of apparently countless blue nodules produces an ethereal effect, taking over the entire space in between, the light bouncing off the dappled surfaces simulating water droplets. Though the arrangement may seem random, the installation (like the others) is actually a perfectly calculated configuration of space and geometry put together almost entirely by the artist herself, down to the rolling of each bead. The ascent on process is binding in her work, from visual idea, to planning and construction, and installation – and a shift in material increases the necessity of collaboration. In ‘Waiting for June’ (2008-09) she worked with blacksmiths to create wrought iron structures shaped like bowls

Ranjani Shettar. *Me, no, not me, buy me, eat me, wear me, have me, me, no, not me.* Mild Steel (cut out of old car bodies), metal paste, 2006-2007.



Ranjani Shettar. *Sun-Suckers blow lights bubbles.* Stainless steel, muslin cloth, tamarind kernel powder paste, lacquer. 16'x24'x14'(variable), 2007-8.



waiting to collect the (monsoon) rain, and set together they symbolically represent the parched, hard, scorched earth – suggestive also of the process of burning the material to mould it.

With the now famous ‘Me, no, not me, buy me, eat me, wear me, have me, me, no, not me’ (2006-07) Ranjani experienced first hand the pains and tribulations of the recycling industry in India. The five yawning, water-organism/basket like structures were meticulously woven together from strips of automobile bodies junked in various yards in Bangalore. The eboxy (called metal paste) used for patching worn out automobiles fascinated her, and she smeared it thickly inside each unit, underlining the futile existence of supposedly utilitarian objects that have no purpose, and dwelling on the complex interplay of consumerism and multiple economies.

What is most intriguing about her use of materials is her ability to use dual approaches - either enter into the texture of the material and be completely guided by it - exemplified in her wood cut prints like ‘River Dance I’ (2007), essentially exploiting the grain of different types of wood, and ‘Liquid Walk on my Wall’ (2008) where the natural flaws in the smoothed teak blocks pre-designate the order of the shapes on the wall; or camouflage it to look and behave as other more natural material – as in ‘Me, no, not me...’ and ‘I am no one to tell you what not to do’ (2006) where silicone rubber impersonates natural algae and the work talks of the strange interdependence of pest and host, obliquely signaling juxtapositions of natural and synthetic, urban and rural, industrial and handmade. The role of material as metaphor is important in her work; her employment of natural materials is more of an aesthetic choice than an ideological one, though she doesn’t discount the latter’s validity. She explains the practical benefits of being able to predict chemical reactions of organic substances when combined as opposed to synthetic or industrial ones, also experientially drawing a parallel between the mixing of materials and the blending of spices in a kitchen, both of which require an intuitive sensibility to produce the right result.

Ranjani positions herself as an observer, and neither

burdens her work with the activist voice nor a lamenting or critical tone while subtly examining sensitive subjects like urbanization, industrialization and environmental depletion. Her work is most often backed by an idea triggered by a discovery or enquiry, or a philosophy. In titling a work, a process that builds up while the work is in progress, she creates a metaphoric stepping block for the audience that wants to pass from a purely visual appreciation of the work to a conceptual plane of understanding. ‘Sun Sneezers Blow Light Bubbles’ (2007-08) is literally a work full of light, the buoyant forms defying their internal construction from steel armature. It is an arresting, happy image, filling one with wonder – like most of her installations do – though it is amazing that such a thing as a sneeze from sun-allergy can be visualized so. ‘Touch me not’ (2006-07) an installation of myriad glazed beads pinned to the walls in groups forming waves of imagined movement captures exactly the essence of the sudden shy response of the fragile plant to touch.

In the ten years Ranjani has been publicly displaying her work, it has matured in every facet – in style and execution, in the finer aspects of material and finishing, and overall in the translation of her innermost visions into an art of incredible stature and harmony. In presentation as well she has learnt to optimize the experience of her work, through meticulous lighting and positioning, even exploiting the incidental production of shadows. Her work has been exhibited in museums and galleries around the world, including the Museum of Modern Art, San Francisco; the Institute of Contemporary Art (ICA) Boston; the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, USA; the Sainsbury Centre for Visual Arts, Norwich, UK; and Biennale’s in Sydney, Sharjah and Lyon. In India her work is exhibited at the Talwar Gallery, New Delhi.

Bangalore would like to claim Ranjani as her very own, but the artist has taken her place in the barrier-less world of art, where she belongs; contented in making magic with material.

Photo courtesy: Talwar Gallery, New Delhi/New York