

"I tend not to separate the manmade and natural." Ranjani Shettar wishes gravity away, (almost), with FIRST CITY

TOUCH

Wispy shapes hang from the ceiling, defying the stark white cube gallery space that houses them. Droplets seem frozen mid-fall. Silvery spider webs cast delicate shadows. A swarm of bees grates, wavy, against a wall. Playful with the

conventional suggestions of sculpture - a sense of weight, a comfort in solidity, an awe of gigantic proportions - Ranjani's sculptural installations present art as nuance, a realisation as much as a visualisation. In that, they are much like her muse, her genre of storytelling: Nature. Like a dew-scented morning in a forest, her works evoke fragile emotions; a memory embodied briefly, an experience recollected fleetingly, a spell of magic - ephemeral, chimerical and radiant. "I am a romantic," she says, "I pick up bits from nature to piece my story together in my own way. It could be a genetic disorder, a breeze in the paddy field, or blood vessels in living organisms. I use it as a language. Sometimes I tend to look at certain things in a lighthearted manner; sometimes they could evoke an utterly serious thought or idea in me."

The encounter with Ranjani's works is similar to the face-off between urban living and nature. She agrees, talking of how the two experiences fuel her art, "Urban living makes me long to connect with nature. Living with nature calms my

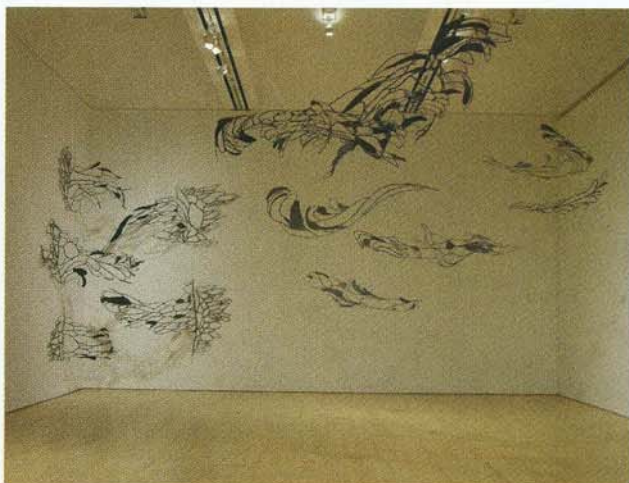
Urban living makes me long to connect with nature. Living with nature calms my nerves and also makes me want to be in the urban set up to pick up pace and function sometimes. I can navigate this effortlessly.

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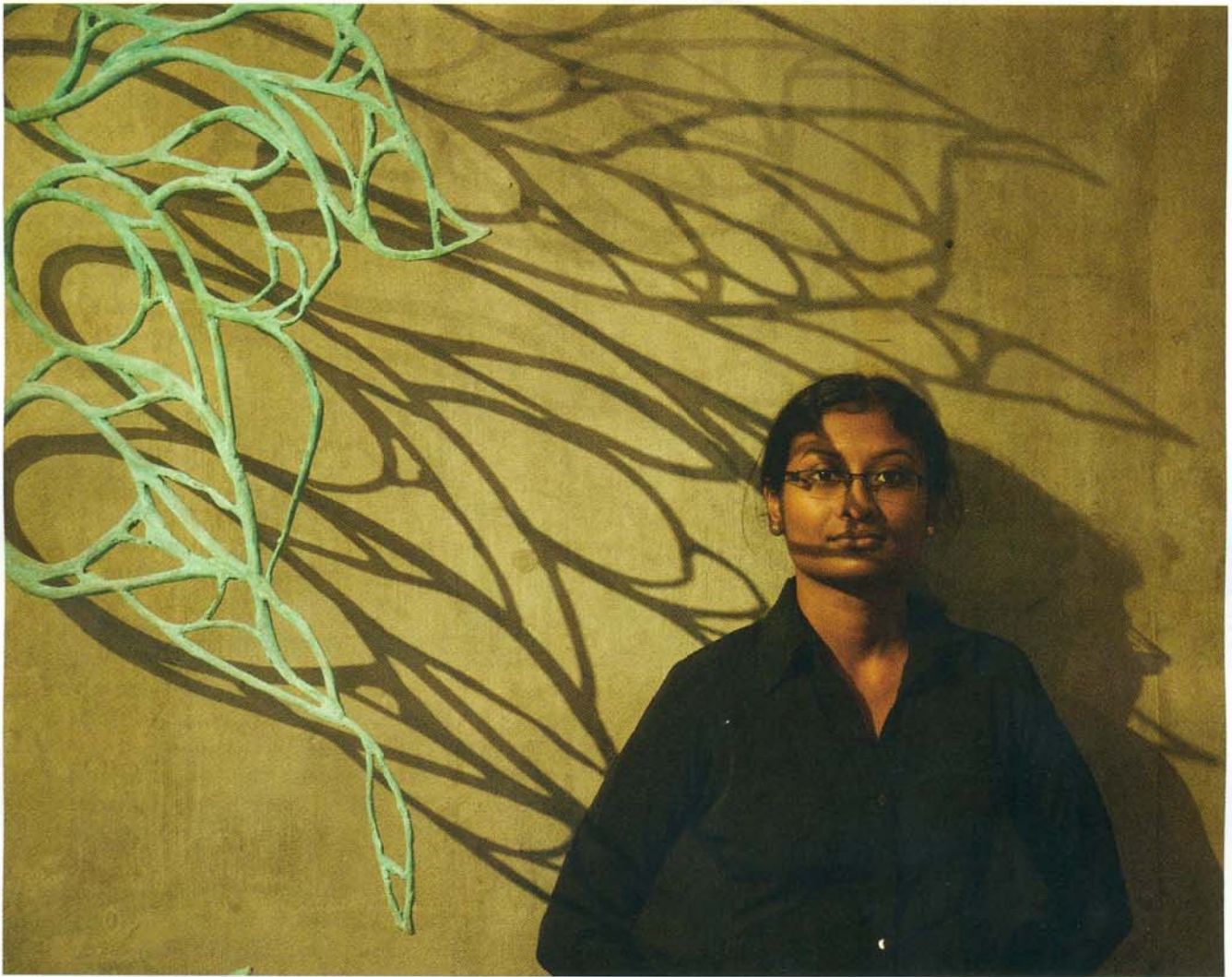
nerves and also makes me want to be in the urban set up to pick up pace and function sometimes. I can navigate this effortlessly. One makes the other experience richer." As a student, she learnt to make sculptures with conventional materials. But when Ranjani sought to express herself, she would often turn to other more fragile materials, so she could evoke the riveting connect between nature and art. Today, her works are distinctive in the way she turns to manmade objects (muslin cloth, PVC pipes, used car bodies) and combines them with natural pigments (tamarind seed paste, beeswax, thread dyed in tea, lacquer) to create artworks that are both familiar and puzzling. They have a



SUN SNEEZERS AT MODERN ART MUSEUM, FORT WORTH, TEXAS



SING ALONG AT SFMOMA



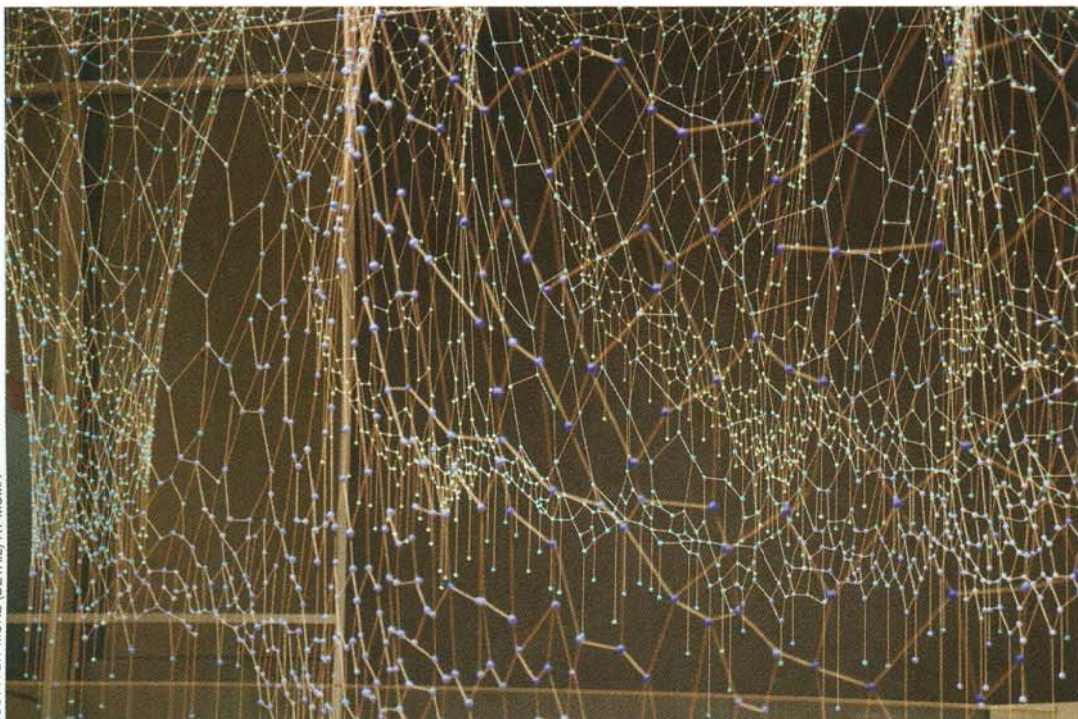
sensation familiar from life, but they present themselves as art nevertheless, “I could never separate life and art,” Ranjani nods, referring now to her student days when she first began thinking, speaking, making art. “That made me use things from my surroundings very naturally in my art; it may be thread, plastic sheets, sawdust or wax. I tend not to separate the man made and natural; I see them in one spectrum, as objects or materials from my surroundings. It is in the way a material is used that can create an environment that looks untouched by the human.”

In an exhibition of works that are wilfully artful or deliberately invective, Ranjani’s artworks often come across as if untouched, like formations that are organic. And yet, on close inspection, they reveal a loving and precise handcrafted-ness. “I like to use my hands to make anything,” she confesses, “Even when there is a way to make something mechanically, I tend to do it by hand. I like the raw quality of handmade objects; I like it when the experience of my touch can be felt. I like the immediacy of touch.” The methods she uses, such as weaving, juxtapose this immediacy with time-worn wisdom, “I often rely on ancient methods of making things, because they are refined when passed on from generation to generation. There is a beauty in how cow dung is used on the floor in the courtyards, there is a beauty in how dishes are cooked

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or presented, there is a beauty in how things are traditionally packaged for consumption - banana leaf cups, cheese, *idlis* cooked in turmeric leaf packets. I have been a keen observer of all these things since my childhood. All these experiences guide me unconsciously in forming my works.”

The tactile is both the viewing experience as well as the guiding impulse for her works. Sculpture excites her because of its exaggeration of physicality, “I like to go around what I make. I almost never stay in one position to make my artwork; I find it limiting to sit in a chair and work. I like the tactile quality of sculptures; I like to feel my artwork. For me, space is real and flatness is virtual. I like the physicality of



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forms." An experience of a used cars junkyard in Sharjah led her to make *Me, No, Not Me, Buy Me, Eat Me, Wear Me, Have Me, Me, No, Not Me* for the Sharjah Biennale in 2007. Used car bodies, moulded into strips, were woven into basket-like shapes - like stories of many cars woven together. *Just a Bit More*, her work exhibited at MOMA (the Museum of Modern Art) recently, is as translucent-vivid as the memory of spring - beeswax and pigment globules hanging in intricate showery structures, on tea-dyed string. Often, in this way, the experience of viewing her works becomes inseparable from their physicality - gravity, lightness, translucence become imbued with emotion. As if the physical attributes of the work of art are evoking an emotional equivalent in the viewer. "You are right," she says about this strange serendipity, "My work is about experience, and it deals with gravity. I am drawn towards light and translucent forms. Sometimes I tend to make my works feel like there is no gravity. I want to float my pieces in the air; it is actually the gravity that holds them together in their shape and form." Her works become a purveyor of her own experience, "I forget the viewer while making a work. I am mostly experiencing it for myself. When it comes to displaying, I begin to think of how to make my experience with the work available for the viewer, how best to put it across so the viewer gets to experience what I

experienced while making it myself."

The weight in Ranjani's works is often merely the weight of feeling, the affective aspect of art, rather than its intellectual import. "Memory is an important component in experiencing my artwork," she says, revealing how she uses it as an integral material to create, "I tend to rely on past experience, of being in a particular environment, to construct my present works. I take a very long time to come up with an

artwork; it usually takes years. I allow time for an experience to grow on me into a tangible form. I usually do not know how an experience is shaping my future artwork. Only when I have made an artwork and think of it retrospectively do I know how old the idea is, or where it is coming from."

Often, her memory-ideas unravel as repetition, as a phrase, as music - bound in an idea, but fluid and light. Many of her works were assembled while listening to particular music, and unconsciously replicate their patterns, "My formal knowledge of music is not very deep; however, I appreciate and listen to classical music, Indian and western. On a day when I immerse myself in this kind of music, I find myself more expressive, better at my vocabulary, verbally and visually. When I am making a work like *Touch Me Not, Just a Bit More, Drum Beats*, or my *Bird Songs*, musical melody and rhythm are parallel, in a way. The pauses between phrases are the space between components. Silence and negative spaces are as important for me as sound and positive space; my logic of using space is somewhere parallel to *taala*." Running parallel with the harmony in her works, are the contradictions her works' titles evoke. She chooses to name them carefully, enjoying the unique expression that words can provide. "I do not think of titles as a guiding idea or defining experience for a viewer," she thinks aloud, "My titles and my artworks are not one and the same; at times they are parallels. Giving a title is like writing an incredibly short poem for me."

Sun Sneezers Blow Light Bubbles, her 2008 work reads. It appears haiku-like, changing meaning with every angle. Its wiry muslin-lacquer-steel structure glints like a pale gold dream landscape now, a winged mythical creature in a moment from now. A waking dream, a happy paradox, which Ranjani probably stood back and smiled at, before turning her mind towards a new sensation. ■