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FORT WORTH / MODERN ART MUSEUM OF FORT WORTH

## *Ranjani Shettar*



*Sun-sneezers blow light bubbles*, 2007-08, stainless steel, muslin cloth, tamarind kernel powder paste, lacquer, dimensions variable, Courtesy Talwar Gallery New York/New Delhi

“Focus: Ranjani Shettar” showed the Bangalore-based artist caught in a moment of transition, much like the mix of sculpture on display. A recent darling of United States museums devoted to showcasing emerging artists, Shettar is on a trans-American run of institutional solo exhibitions, including “Momentum” at Boston Institute of Contemporary Art in 2008 and “New Work” at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art in March.

At the mid-point of her tour, the Tadao Ando-designed Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth and its “Focus” series of compact exhibitions seemed to be a perfect showcase for her installation-based practice. Shettar’s abstract, meditative forms share a sensibility with Ando’s seamless blend of concrete, water, steel and sky. Both artist and architect shape space with a sensitivity to natural form; both transform mundane materials into transcendent effects. Shettar’s works shown in Fort Worth similarly evoke a broad spectrum of organic, human-made and perceptual metamorphoses.

In *Sun-sneezers blow light bubbles* (2007-08), the change represented is between liquid and air or liquid and light. The “Sun-sneezers” of the title refers to the genetically determined phenomenon by which some people sneeze when looking into direct sunlight. Shettar imagines the resulting “achoo” as a room full of floating, clustered bubbles- stainless steel rings measuring an inch to a foot in diameter, wrapped and tied together with tan muslin cloth. At about eye-level or just above, the bubbles break into spray-like forms. The rings stretch into irregular ovals and fan outward like arched wings; the orbs could be both exploding and splashing.

*Liquid walk on my wall* (2008) suggests a move between solid and liquid states. Across two adjacent walls, Shettar mounted seven barrel-sized pieces of carved Burmese teakwood at heights of seven to eight feet off the floor. Polished to a high gloss, each amorphous wood piece takes on the appearance of a viscous blob. Together, they resemble a trail of sputum or, following the title, a path of puddles. The work also evokes a school of fish or a fungal growth. The latter reading is reinforced by the appearance

of a “parasite” attached to the teakwood itself: clusters of white, purple and turquoise beads. As a result, Shettar shifts not only states of matter and image associations but also our sense of scale.

A similar effect is achieved in *Puddle* (2008). Shettar smeared pigmented beeswax in wave-like curls on 32 white canvases ranging from five-by-five inches to one-foot square. The framed canvases were hung edge-to-edge on a single wall, the individual curls-red-orange to yellow-green and blue-white- are arranged to resemble a wavy rainbow. The liquid wax becomes solid mark becomes optical phenomena.

The exhibition’s most complex work, *Me, no, not me, buy me, eat me, wear me, have me, me, no, not me* (2006-07), explores the elemental connection between air and earth. Five steel vessel-like forms, varying in size from the volume of a potato sack to that of a small cave, are scattered about the floor of a single gallery. To make these forms, Shettar reclaimed automobile paneling and, slicing it into thin strips, wove, welded and pasted the resulting colored and rusted bands into undulating, cornucopia-like structures. However, echoing the title, these baskets remain empty, filled only with space. Open at both ends like floral tubes or sea polyps, they suggest release as much as capture, as well as narratives of digestion, growth and decay.

“Focus: Ranjani Shettar” made clear that Shettar’s individual works are richly layered. They shift between a diversity of metaphors and, moreover, they always come in groups. Shettar conflates, rather than juxtaposes, natural and cultural processes- *Me, no, not me...* simultaneously evokes industrial recycling, traditional handicraft and the representation of biological forms. What she makes visible are not distinctions between nature and industry, art and craft, or fantasy and reality, but the potential for, if not the underlying reality of, continuity between them. With this in mind, an opportunity seemed missed that Shettar’s exhibition was isolated in three whitewashed galleries and related only conceptually to the framework of Ando’s architecture.

**Kurt Mueller**