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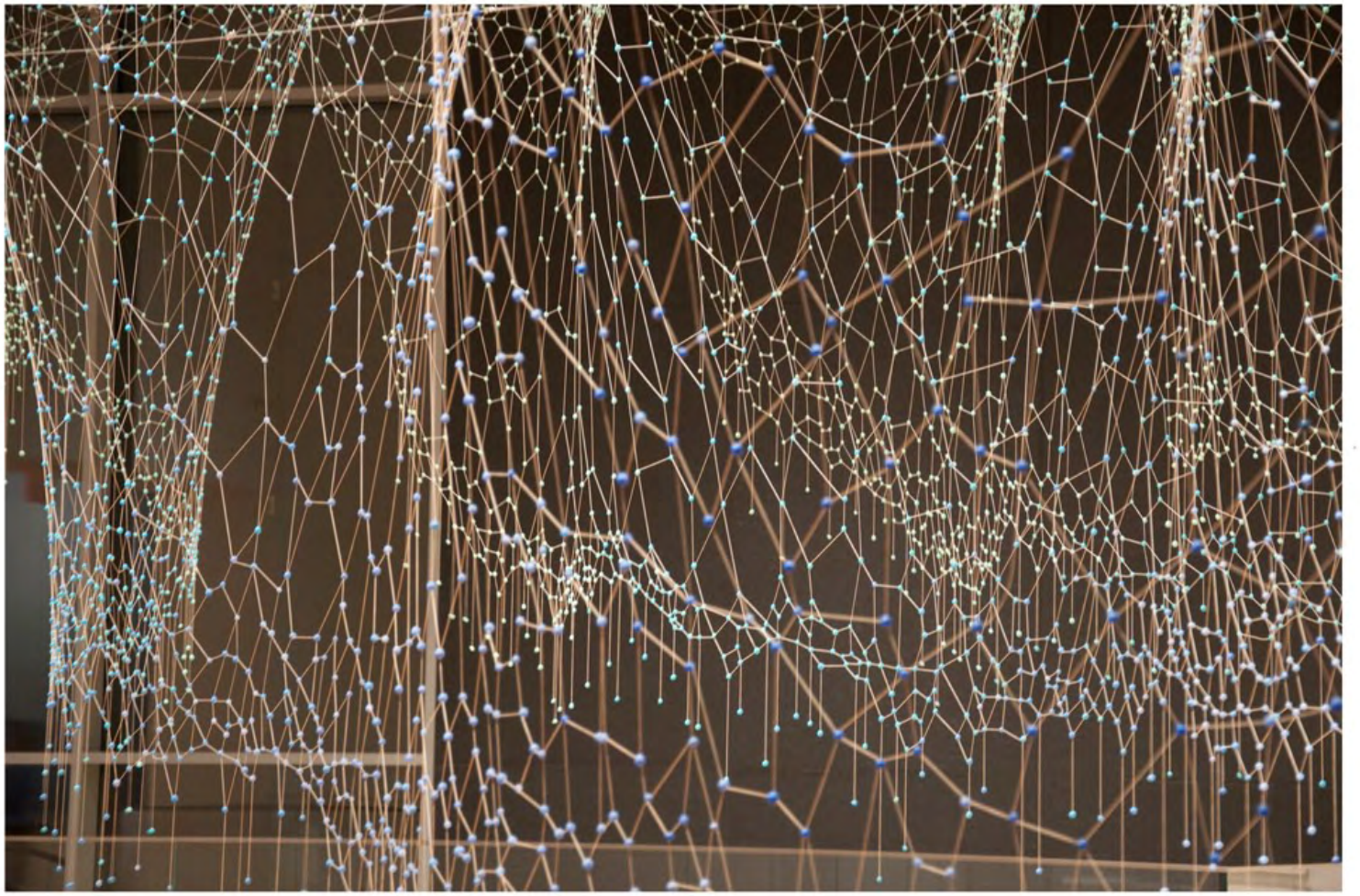
Up in the Air

Ranjani Shettar

Ranjani Shettar did her Masters in Sculpture from the Karnataka Chitrakala Parishath, Bangalore, in 2000. Since *Indian Spring* at Talwar Gallery, New York, in 2004, which was her first solo abroad, Shettar has had nearly a dozen exhibitions and has been invited to participate in group shows around the world. **Nivedita Magar** speaks to her about her practice and process.

Ranjani Shettar. *Fire in the Belly.*
Wood, automobile paint and fishing line.
120" x 156" x 137". 2007.



Above: **Ranjani Shettar.** *Just a Bit More* (Detail). Hand moulded beeswax, pigments, thread-dyed in tea. 36" x 24" x 12". 2006. Collection of the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), New York.

Facing page: **Ranjani Shettar.** *Sing Along.* Muslin dyed in Kasimi, tamarind kernel paste, shellac, stainless steel. Dimensions variable. 2008 – 2009. Collection of the Kiran Nadar Museum of Art, New Delhi.

Nivedita Magar: What prompted your decision to pursue the medium of sculpture and what would you say were some of your early influences?

Ranjani Shettar: I feel more comfortable working with three dimensions than with two. I want to be able to walk around what I am creating, feel the material and the space in which the work is taking shape, and enjoy the process. What I like is solving problems of space, material and balance, all of which are very physical aspects of the process of art-making. Perhaps, it is for these reasons that when I began my engagement with the creative process, it was sculpture that seemed the most suitable medium.

Like most of my peers at college, I started out using conventional materials and methods. Even as a student, my works were 'floating'; they were delicate, light and sat uncomfortably with heavy, pedestal-based sculpture. Towards the end of my Bachelors, reading about Dadaism and the spirit of subversion that the movement stood for, had a lasting impression on my approach to sculpture. I realised the importance of academic training but also understood that it did not have to end there, that I could make my own rules and set my own standards. Although not a direct visual influence, it was Dadaist thought and poetry that I found very empowering. An early 20th century European art movement might seem distant from my own time but it freed me to draw on the skills I already had to arrive at the expression I wanted to, and encouraged me to take my immediate environment seriously as material and context.

N.M.: Which works would you say reflect this shift in approach? Would it relate to your use of traditional treatment processes like Kasimi dyeing and to the employment of tamarind kernel paste in some of your more recent works?

R.S.: It was while I was pursuing my Masters that I started finding my own language. I had started experimenting with cheap transparent material like plastic sheets, tubing, electrical wires and so on, in works like *Camp* and *Spectrum*; later, in 2000, these experiments matured into works like *Thousand Room House* and *Flow Into Me*.

My use of the tamarind kernel paste was prompted by a specific motivation. When I conceived of *Sun Sneezers Blow Light Bubbles* in 2007-2008, I wanted to make forms that were generous and flowing yet light. An extension of my early fascination for lightness and translucence was my desire to recreate the tautness of skin stretched across a frame. Although raw hide stretched over a metal frame would have worked well, I realised that a material as charged as leather really did not fit in with my way of thinking and working. So I opted for woven fabric instead.

Sing Along (2008) was inspired by the song of the koel. I wanted it to be black but did not want to use commercially dyed black fabric. In art school, I had watched and followed the process of Kalamkari dyeing. Kasimi, an iron acetate dye made with rusted iron filings, jaggery and water, is used to outline the images in Kalamkari panels. This organic method and its connection to traditional dyeing practices appealed to me.

N.M.: You employ a wide variety of materials and treatment processes in your practice. To what extent do your conceptual concerns influence your choice of material?

R.S.: As far as the spectrum of my material choices is concerned, I have something very tactile like wax or clay at one end and car body metal sheets or silicone rubber at the other. When I have an idea, I choose from this range, allowing the concept, the material's pliability and what it represents, to influence my choices. I choose a material for various reasons like how it lends itself to my imagination of a form or an idea as also for the meanings it will impart because of its history.

I grew up in small towns all over Karnataka, where people regularly handcrafted household objects and things of everyday use. There was a sensitivity for material, colours and textures. The techniques and materials I employ in my practice are often drawn from the reservoir of those early memories.

I have always enjoyed the methods employed by traditional craftsmen and like to draw on some of their processes. For instance, I drew on the doll-making technique of using tamarind kernel paste and sawdust to treat the fabric for *Sun Sneezers Blow Light Bubbles* although it was only after a process of trial and error that I could arrive at a formula that suited my purposes. Even in the case of *Sing Along*, I experimented with other organic dyes like those extracted from pomegranate skin and areca nut before settling on Kasimi.

N.M.: Going by some of your thematic concerns, choice of materials, the manner in which you adapt traditional processes and your choice of titles like *Hoomalae*, it seems that your practice draws from and is deeply rooted in your immediate environment. With your primary representatives – Talwar Gallery – being based in New York (and New Delhi) and most of your work being shown at international venues, how important is the question of local representation for you? How do you reconcile having a Bangalore/Sagara-based practice with enjoying a distinctly global viewership?

R.S.: We live in a world separated by physical and mental barriers and connected by communication. Although I am low-tech and not a fan of gadgets, the biggest boon that this technologically advanced age has granted me is the freedom to live in a little village. A decade ago, it would have been difficult to operate in this setup as easily.

I like to partner with a gallery which is in ideological accord with my process and choices. It does not matter what the physical location of the gallery is as long as it is possible to work together seamlessly and efficiently. I have been able to exhibit locally and globally with Talwar Gallery and it works out well for both of us.

N.M.: Your consistent engagement with light, spatial dynamics and 'floating' forms is quite evident in your seemingly buoyant sculptural forms. Could you elaborate on your choice to suspend or wall-mount your works as you do with *Fire in the Belly* (2007) and *Vasanta* (2004)?

R.S.: While some of my earliest work employed conventional materials and display strategies, on the ground or on pedestals, there was always a desire to push the work's ability to balance. Even as a student, I tended to make sculptures that were precariously poised. My dad, who is an engineer, would tell me about the centre of gravity and explain why a piece may not work. All the same, I would want to push my work to its tipping point. Suspending a sculpture, lifting it off the ground and having it float in space seemed like good modes of testing balance. The process of suspending my sculptures fired my imagination: I could create an illusion of weightlessness. This seemed the best way to play with gravity at different levels.

In *Fire in the Belly*, heavy, massy wooden forms appear to be very light because of their suspension, whereas with works such as *Vasanta* or *Just a bit more* (2006), gravity is key in holding the forms together and maintaining their shapes. With some suspended works like *Transitions* (2003), *Fire in the belly* and *I am no one to tell you what not to do* (2006), I am also working with the element of chance at play.

Left: **Ranjani Shettar.** *I am no one to tell you what not to do.* Carved mesquite wood, cast silicone rubber, fishing line. 360" x 300" x 144". 2006.

Top: **Ranjani Shettar.** *Heliotropes.* Vulcanized latex, steel, cotton thread. 168" x 65" x 85". 2005 – 2011.
© Ranjani Shettar.
Images courtesy Talwar Gallery, New York / New Delhi.

N.M.: How important is the process of titling a work for you?

R.S.: Different kinds of works take shape as a result of different states of mind. If *Hoomalae* (2004-2005) and *Vasanta* are projections of a romantic, works like *Me, no, not me, buy me, eat me, wear me, have me, me, no, not me* (2006-2007) or *I am no one to tell you...* represent a criticality. Titling my works is a very enjoyable part of my practice. While my works are all visual, titles allow me to add a layer of verbal expression with scope for poetry.

N.M.: How would you describe the thematic and formal progressions in your practice since your first solo, *Home*, in 2000?

R.S.: Thoughts have interconnections which may sometimes be visible on the surface but not be so obvious at other times. My works are reflections of my thoughts and so they are also interlinked somewhere deep within. What I am doing today has its seeds in my earlier works. It is an organic extension of what I did a decade ago. Of course, I have since experienced and explored the world a little more: my works are a result of that. AI