

New Work: Ranjani Shettar



## New Work: Ranjani Shettar

March 21–July 7, 2009

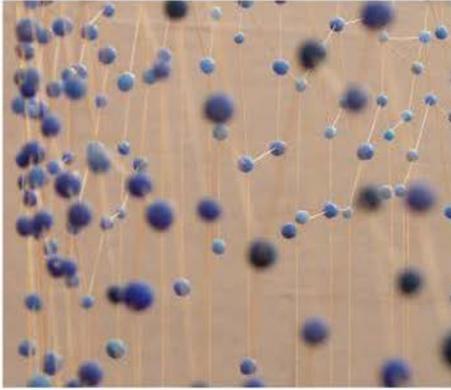
More than forty years have passed since minimalist artists first began incorporating the space of the gallery into their artistic work, but the impact of sculpture that reflects the inherent possibilities and limitations of its setting has hardly diminished. This practice is fundamental to the work of the artist Ranjani Shettar, although her focus is not solely on the display environment or even the notion of sculpture as it is understood in this realm. Rather, for Shettar the immanent aspects of her sculptures are central, and the viewer is meant to discover, or realize, something that is manifested by them. When we take in her installations and come to understand that “something,” we become part of the work, inextricably entwined with its meaning within the space it inhabits. This experiential aspect—the overlap that occurs between perceiving the work and being a part of it—is integral to Shettar’s approach and the significance of her sculptural installations. They explore the tension that exists between experiencing artistic forms in real space and the way that observing them leads to an idealized form within the consciousness of the viewer.

Unlike many contemporary Indian artists currently exhibiting their work internationally, Shettar has maintained close connections to Bangalore, India, where she was born and educated. Her artistic vocabulary is akin

to those of postminimalist artists such as Martin Puryear and Eva Hesse, insofar as she explores a variety of materials and displays an interest in both handwork and the conceptual dimensions of art objects. Although she professes a keen interest in and admiration for these predecessors, they are not influences strictly speaking. Shettar’s installations are crystallizations of her own thought processes. Her ideas about the natural world are the basis for her sculptural forms, which are at once rigorous and poetic. In many of her works, such as *Just a bit more* (2005–6) and *Touch me not* (2006–7), one can perceive complex systems, networks, and interactive structures. Yet their handmade details suggest a lyrical view of the value of human activities in our hypermediated era. The sculptures featured in this exhibition—*Me, no, not me, buy me, eat me, wear me, have me, me, no, not me* (2006–7), *Waiting for June* (2008–9), and *Sing along* (2008–9)—also activate the spaces in which they are placed, but the beauty of their forms is more readily apparent and the viewer is transported by them.

This moving quality is perhaps the most salient characteristic of Shettar’s work, and to understand the architecture of it is to uncover another layer of meaning in her art. *Sing along* refers to the koel, a breed of bird





Above and right: *Just a bit more*, 2005–6 (details).  
Pigment, beeswax, string, and tea

Left: *Waiting for June*, 2008–9



common in Southeast Asia and Australia. Aspects of the sculpture allude to this bird's song, its black color, and its peculiar habit of laying eggs in the nests of other birds. Yet there is a paradox apparent here; what we see when standing in the gallery is a group of objects that do not immediately reference the source of the artist's inspiration. There is an organic process for Shettar that extends from her initial concept to a sense of how to realize it in physical form, and eventually to the creation of the work. Whether or not this process is clear to the viewer is not essential to the success of the installation or to our enjoyment of it. More important is our recognition of the quality of the forms and the subtlety of their interaction. In this way she invokes the ideals of Postminimalism while conveying her views of the relationship between the world and the work of art.

Shettar is inspired by traditional practices of craft making that have developed over centuries rather than over the course of a single artist's career. Her works blend elements of modern life with techniques that stem from time-honored traditions. In *Sing along*, for example, she uses muslin that she has coated with tamarind kernel powder paste—a traditional glue utilized by toy makers in the village of Kinnala—and colored with a black dye known as *kasimi*, based on an artisanal recipe still in use today. She wraps the muslin around the frame structure and in some places across it to form solid

segments that create a network of curvilinear shapes. She painstakingly merges the various elements to produce sophisticated and elegant forms, a cascading array of curves that seem to splash into the space of the gallery. Despite the complexity of the arrangement, the work connects to the viewer through its sheer physicality and the lyricism of its presence. It is the particular quality of Shettar's sculptures that they do not speak their meaning directly, but rather reveal themselves through each viewer's experience.

The complexity of Shettar's work derives in part from the craft traditions she references and the universality of the objects she creates. With its intricate woven texture, her sculpture *Me, no, not me* resembles a series of conventional baskets, ubiquitous objects that retain specific associations with preindustrial handwork. Yet Shettar wove these forms not from natural fibers, but from colorful strips of metal that she salvaged from discarded automobiles in a scrapyard near Bangalore. Additionally, she interlaced the strips over a steel framework, so what at first seems to be an organic grouping of handmade objects derived from a craft tradition proves to be entirely industrial in nature. The artist's own account of her journey to the scrapyard is one of the discovery of a world normally invisible to individuals such as herself. Although the work is not intended to be didactic, part of the significance of *Me, no, not me* is rooted in this collision between traditional

nodes of production and the detritus of the globalized, hyperconsumerist economy. And yet the context that gave rise to the work is no more than the background against which the depth of its meaning emerges.

The baskets display both an immense weight and a sense of lightness. The frames are made from steel tubes and the basket forms are woven with handwrought, sometimes colorful, metal strips lined with a paste that seeps out from between the pieces. Hammer marks are apparent, suggesting the brute force that went into their creation. Shettar changed the appearance of the metal by reworking it and in so doing obscured its origin; she considered this essential to the creation of the project. A vivid beauty emerges from what were once twisted wrecks, bringing new meaning to the inevitable decomposition of all things in this world, whether living or inanimate.

Placed on the terrace of SFMOMA's new Rooftop Garden, *Me, no, not me* evokes myriad associations. It calls to mind the cars in the parking garage beneath the Rooftop Garden; it connects to California's storied car culture; and its cut-and-welded forms link the art of the present with modernist sculpture of the early to mid-twentieth century, harking back to the time when artists such as Julio González and David Smith first began to employ an acetylene torch. These associations imply a kind of contingency, a relationship between people, ideas, and works of art that is not fixed or predetermined but that emerges from experience, from connecting one thing to another. If there is any essential element to Shettar's overall practice, it is this. Just as the five parts of *Me, no, not me*, or the scalloped disks of *Waiting for June*, can be placed in multiple configurations, and just as we can stand in many different positions in relation to *Sing along* and still perceive the beauty of



Above: *Sing along*, 2008–9 (detail of work in progress)

Left: *Touch me not*, 2006–7 (detail).  
Pigment, wood, and steel



*Me, no, not me, buy me, eat me, wear me, have me, me, no, not me, 2006–7*

the pieces, the meaning of her sculptures is dependent upon the experience and circumstances of the individual viewer. What one person knows and brings to each work is different than what another will discover, and the artist explores this situation of differentiated consciousness. The great generosity of Shettar's works is that there is no one fact or reference that we must understand in order to make sense of them. No matter what terms we bring to the exchange, the pieces extend themselves to us and reward our engagement with them.

**Ranjani Shettar** was born in 1977 in Bangalore, India, where she continues to keep a studio. She resides in a nearby village in western Karnataka. She received a BFA and an MFA from Karnataka Chitrakala Parishath, Bangalore. She has exhibited internationally since 2003 and has been featured in numerous group exhibitions, including the 2006 Sydney Biennale; the 2007 Sharjah Biennial, United Arab Emirates; the 2007 Lyon Biennial, France; and the 2008 Carnegie International, Pittsburgh. She has had solo exhibitions at the Fine Arts Center of the University of Massachusetts, Amherst; the Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston; and the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth.

#### Works in the Exhibition

*I am no one to tell you what not to do,*  
2006  
Wood-block print  
95 x 39 in. (241.3 x 99.1 cm)

*River dance 1,* 2007  
Wood-block print  
53 x 26¼ in. (134.6 x 66.7 cm)

*Me, no, not me, buy me, eat me, wear me, have me, me, no, not me,* 2006–7  
Steel and metal paste  
Dimensions variable

*Sing along,* 2008–9  
Steel, muslin, kasimi, tamarind kernel powder paste, shellac, and lacquer  
Dimensions variable

*Fissure in the stone wall,* 2007  
Wood-block print  
77 x 47 in. (195.6 x 119.4 cm)

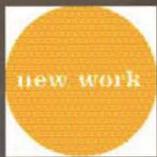
*Waiting for June,* 2008–9  
Wrought iron  
Dimensions variable

Except where noted, all artworks and images are courtesy the artist and Talwar Gallery, New York/New Delhi

Reverse, from left: *Me, no, not me, buy me, eat me, wear me, have me, me, no, not me,* 2006–7 (detail). *Just a bit more,* 2005–6 (detail). *Sun-sneezers blow light bubbles,* 2007–8 (detail); steel, muslin, tamarind kernel powder paste, and lacquer; courtesy the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth; photo: Rachel Cox.

The *New Work* series is organized by the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art and is generously supported by Collectors Forum, the founding patron of the series. Major funding is also provided by Martha and Bruce Atwater, the Mimi and Peter Haas Fund, and Robin Wright. Media support provided by *San Francisco* magazine.

Printed on Endeavour Velvet: 50 percent recycled, 25 percent postconsumer waste, acid-free, processed elemental chlorine-free (ECF), FSC-certified.



San Francisco Museum of Modern Art  
[www.sfmoma.org](http://www.sfmoma.org)