

SUSPENDED ANIMATION

Kamayani Sharma observes Ranjani Shettar's darkly captivating sculptures stretch, dangle and climb at the Bhau Daji Lad Mumbai City Museum.



Stepping into the Bhau Daji Lad Mumbai City Museum between the 2nd of December 2012 and the 17th of February 2013, one would have beheld a wild tangle of burnished wood dominating the centre of the Industrial Arts Gallery. Lending its name to Ranjani Shettar's first show in Mumbai (curated by Museum director Tasneem Zakaria Mehta) and arguably the best work on display, *High Tide for a Blue Moon* brought to mind a flash of lightning arrested mid-crackle and preserved in the museum. Made of coffee wood that referenced Shettar's mother's recollections of Coorg and coated with electric blue

automobile paint, the gnarled dendrite sprawled across the middle of the gallery. *High Tide's* nerve-like structure, surrounded by glass-encased artefacts, took charge of the space and orchestrated a variety of simultaneous experiences with the materials in it – the shock of encountering an unexpected form, the tension between orderly history and untended fantasy and the overlapping of the museum's public and the artist's private memories.

Upstairs, in the Kamalnayan Bajaj Special Exhibitions Gallery, *Lagoon* with its tropical blue chandelier of lacquered wooden beads

Ranjani Shettar. *High Tide for a Blue Moon.* Wood from coffee plant and automobile plant. 128" x 228" x 91". 2012. Images courtesy Dr. Bhau Daji Lad Mumbai City Museum. Artwork courtesy Ranjani Shettar/Talwar Gallery, New Delhi/New York.

resembling exotic fruit somehow came off as an exercise in shadowplay when contrasted with *Remanence from last night's dream*. This odd little work comprised a block of wood 'sprouting' green lacquered beads reminiscent of traditional Indian toys. At once grotesque, overrun with pustules as it appeared to be and touchingly discreet in a hall taken up by a showier work, the

piece expressed a dignified nostalgia for the abandoned that was deeply stirring.

It was in the last two rooms that Shettar's famous gravity-defying sculptures were mounted. While the sun-sensitive vulcanised latex tubes of *Heliotropes* threw menacing shadows, approximating the look of rotting flesh and forcing the viewer to contend with death and decay, *Tunes for a winter morning* was installed on the opposite wall in a pattern that had something of the lilt of musical notes. Its cursive stainless steel wires and spindly shells wrapped in muslin and tamarind kernel powder paste brought together the industrial, the decorative and the artisanal, and left demure impressions on the wall. The face-off between the works became charged when one considered the context of the museum, even though it could barely make its presence felt at this point. The savage display of ageing, peeling skin

Ranjani Shettar. *Tunes for a winter morning.* Stainless steel, muslin cloth and tamarind kernel powder paste. 260" x 12" x 97". 2012.

and the unthreatening cobweb performed a double act of oft-competing femininity in a traditionally masculine domain that exists to guard tradition and heritage but has also been breached.

The almost hyperfeminine *Scent of a sound* emphasised this conversation between bastions of male history and the mark-making of the interloper (or perhaps initiate?) with materials and forms that have a history of being considered too delicate to hold court in an institution responsible for an aggressive display of might. Occasionally compared to Calder's mobiles, the stainless steel wires (wrapped in muslin, tamarind kernel powder paste and lacquer) suspended from the ceiling were twisted into large, exquisitely complicated shapes of wings and petals such as one might see in jewellery design. The work fulfilled its title's promise of synaesthesia as the viewer negotiated the hanging figures, their ominous silhouettes and a cluster of leaf-like bits jutting out of one corner of the wall.

As arresting as the works were, all made between 2005 and 2012, a dialogue between them and the Dr. Bhau Daji Lad Mumbai City Museum did not really occur, to the detriment of the show-as-intervention. This became especially apparent in the Special Exhibitions Gallery; once inside an area that recreated the atmosphere of a conventional white cube, one found that the museum struggled to assert itself. It was only *High Tide* which, apart from its blatant monumentality, commanded one's attention and its surroundings because it enabled a dialogue between the art on display and the permanent collection of objects around it. Confined to the rooms at one end of the upper floor, the eerie beauty of Shettar's other nature-inspired sculptures did not haunt the museum building as a way of responding to its architecture or its past as a custodian of the industrial. It led the viewer to ask whether the intention of an intervention in a space as multi-layered as a museum could at all be reconciled with the fervour of a representative solo exhibition.

