

THE MORNING AFTER THE NIGHT BEFORE

Sheela Gowda's *Battarahalli Corner* lays out a festive space and brings alive its ironies, notes **Jaideep Sen**.

Years after Sheela Gowda introduced cowdung as an important artistic medium, her work remains as much, if not more, culturally rooted and relevant. Gowda, who is now approaching 60, has retained her place among an important crop of urban Indian artists by staying true to her own, deeply personal motivations.

By blurring the boundaries between two- and three-dimensional conceptualisations, Gowda's new work extends the idea of engaging with viewers *inside* the gallery space, without relying on video projections and multimedia installations. Appreciating Gowda's art is a cerebral exercise but also an exercise in witnessing a play of materials and textures. As one of India's most critically acclaimed avant-garde artists since the 1990s, she retains an organic connection with life, evidence of which is found in most of her work.

Battarahalli Corner, from the 12th of September to the 23rd of October, at Gallerysye, Bengaluru, is a modest introduction, if not a devoted obligation by the gallery, to Gowda's art, as she continues to gather steam and make art about socially pertinent issues. The show offers a glimpse of the artist's elemental and deconstructivist style, while sticking close to what one might call the Indian sensibility – one that is outwardly agnostic and integrally activist.

For the uninformed viewer *Battarahalli Corner* might seem timed for the festive season. It is Gowda's way of offering an understanding of 'Indian' life in a manner that is significant and cryptic. Compared to her last solo in the city, which demanded attention to its complete title, *Suboversee*, *Ambarish TV, Highcourt, Battery, Naatikotbambari and others* (2011), *Battarahalli Corner* is not as impactful or as powerfully symbolic. *Suboversee...* offered a blow to the nose, a knuckle rap, a pinch to the ear. In *Suboversee...*, Gowda had directly taken on hard-hitting matters pertaining to the media: misrepresentation, the abuse of power and the fine line that divides social significance from devious, often violent, motivations with political undercurrents. Gowda's work, over the years, has frequently drawn from turbulent national events creating a relevant response that speaks not only to gallery-going folks but also to people leading 'ordinary' lives in cities and villages.

Let's take a look at the current show. In the central hall of the gallery, which is a quaint, restored bungalow in the leafy neighbourhood of Langford Town, the scene looks like that of the morning after a festive night. The hall, a living room-like enclosure, leads one to confront a shamianna: a shamble of tent poles,

riser pipes and scaffoldings stretched from the tall corners of the gallery's colonial-styled ceiling of wooden beams down to the floor. The impression is that of a spent stage, a residuum of a suggested collective experience. The weak structure seems to be crumbling under the weight of its own purpose, perhaps even suggesting vandalism. This arrangement is held together by triangular red streamers and an odd litter of stage paraphernalia.

The rest of the show is split between three snug rooms of the gallery with wood as the primary medium. The arrangement that lends the show its title *Battarahalli Corner* sits in a different room like a shrine made of a stump of wood set against a diagrammatic backdrop that urges you to consider different positions of aligning yourself with the piece.

A printed handout for viewers speaks of Gowda's "longstanding engagement with structures of formal artistic language, abstraction and representation, both in the pictorial and three-dimensional sense". "The works," says the note, "intend to heighten a viewer's experience of what is perceived, so that, observing what are often found objects, one is led to question and apprehend multiple meanings embedded within materials." While most of her work features a grounded sensibility and an inviolable, integral oneness with nature, *Battarahalli Corner* interprets the idea in equations of geometry, materiality and temporality.

In the gallery's antechamber, a good point to circle back to, two scraps of carpeting are laid on the floor in positions that are at an angle to each other. A wooden composition on one side combines a rotten trunk, a neatly cut wooden pedestal and two branches into a standing depiction of nature's resilience. In the other room, another life-sized assemblage stands with an earthen pot balanced on it. The artist's note explains that the piece is a take on "a woman carrying a pot – a common subject of painting in India". On the wall, behind the sculpture, is a bleak canvas of a harmoniously symmetrical landscape, with serpentine roads winding along a stylized water pool. The arrangement is complemented with another wooden fabrication, alongside a framed graphic of a human figure seemingly climbing out of a hole, or perhaps, a tunnel. It's all deceptively simplistic, replete with unremarkable scrounged oddments and laden with rustic detail. By staying clear of LEDs and electronic gimcrackery, Gowda might be alienating a yuppie crowd, but that's just the crowd that needs to come around to see her work more often.



Sheela Gowda. Untitled work from *Battharathi Corner*. Metal, fabric and rope.
Dimensions variable. 2015. Image courtesy Galleries4.