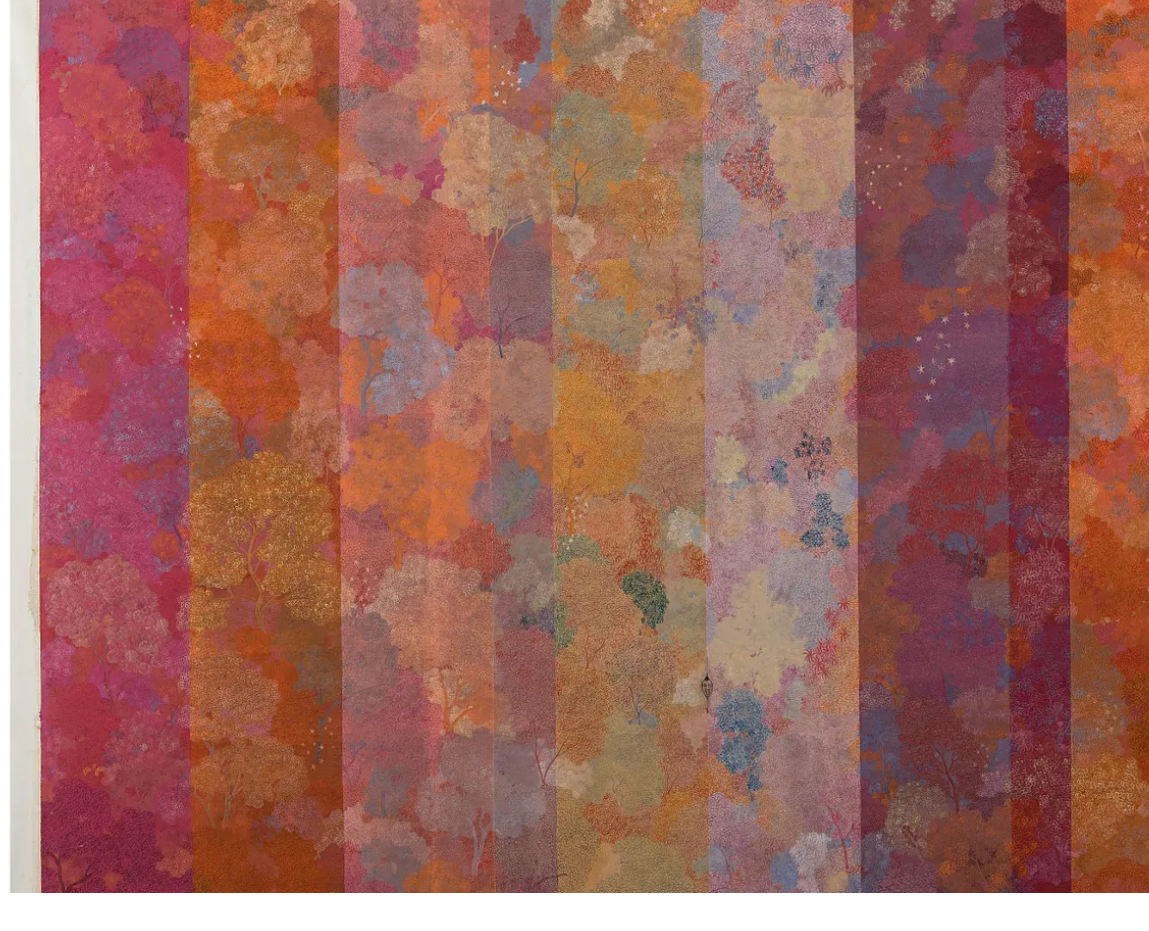


## CULTURE

# Varunika Saraf reflects on violence and history in extraordinary solo show

Caput Mortuum, currently on view at Chemould Prescott, gets its name from the iron oxide pigment which resembles dried blood

By Uma Nair  
26 November 2021



Varunika Saraf's solo show, *Caput Mortuum* at Chemould Prescott, is the stuff of a visual diarist. Between her passion for drawings and her love for watercolour and wasli, the seamless array of works weave the visual and the verbal, in the context of a paradise lost in its physicality.

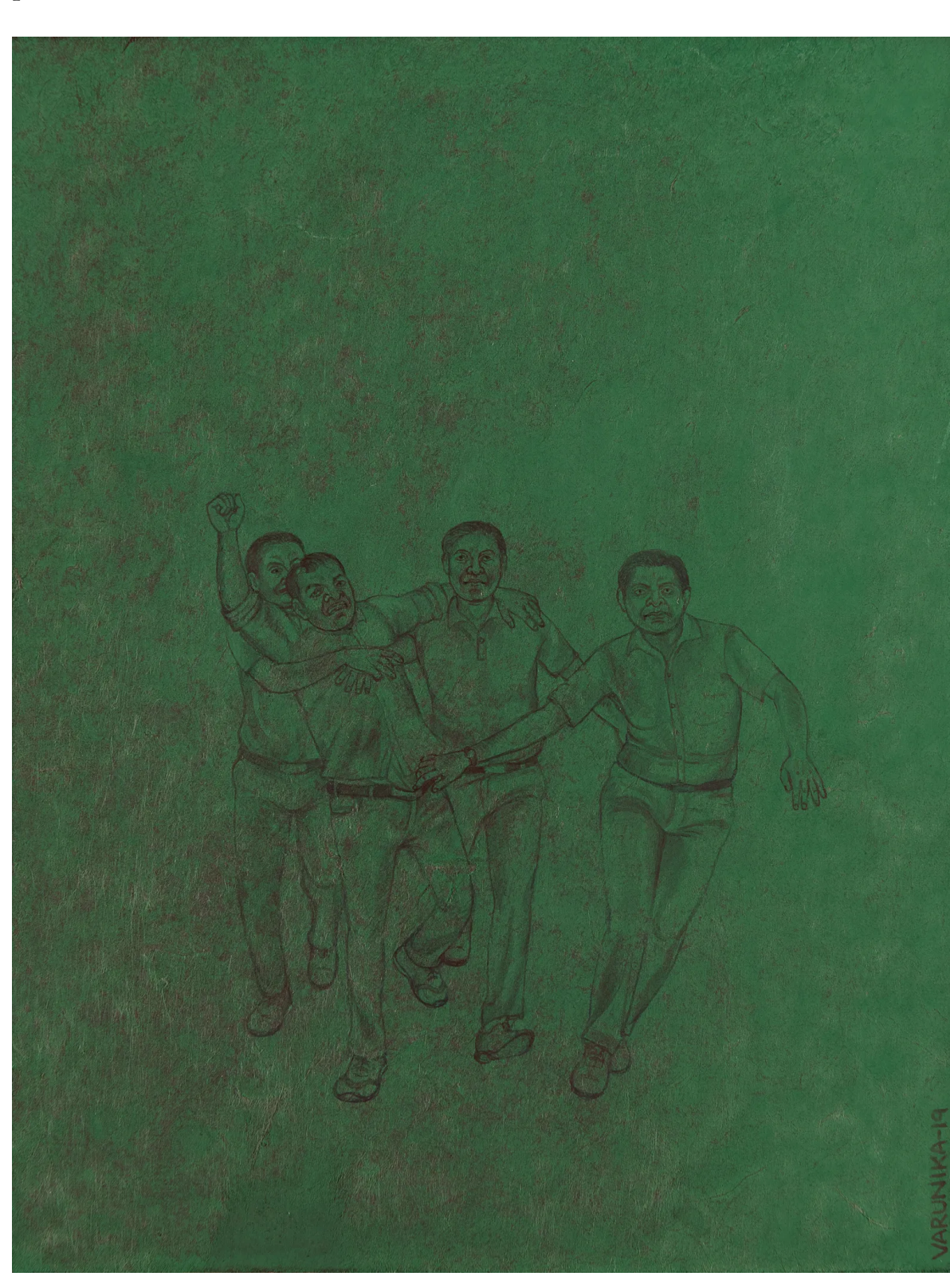
According to Varunika, this body of work takes its name from the synthetic iron oxide pigment, caput mortuum (Dead Head) that resembles dried blood. In alchemy, caput mortuum is classified as 'worthless remains', the residue left on the bottom of the heating flask once the nobler elements sublimate.



Varunika Saraf's solo show is currently on view at Chemould Prescott

Titled as a series of studies that run into recurring thoughts, the works are tranquil to the eye from a distance, but a closer look evinces a disturbed world filled with trials and tribulations and swept by the torment of violence and persecution. A total of 174 works done over a span of 4 years have been sifted into a series titled : *Miasma ( I,II, &III of 12 works each )*, *Caput Mortum ( 12 works )*, *Miniatures (12 works )*, *Nocturnes (12 works )*, *Manufactured Crisis(5 works)* *Those who dream (16 works )* *Jugni (12 works)* *Mood Indigo (8 works)* *We the people (46 works)* and a few more.

Neat architectural details created in watercolour on wasli and backed with cotton textile give us a series that have hues and mosaic minuteness. The humans juxtaposed on these veil-like jaalis belong both to the past and present.



"It appears to haemorrhage through the overlying stratum of intense colours, staining the surface of the painting in the same way as historical injustices seep through the cracks of time to mould our present, just as wounds inflicted by hate scar our society. In this process, Caput Mortuum also becomes a marker of a past rife with injustice and comes to signify the complexity of our current predicament," says Varunika.

## Life's Leanings and Learnings

The show is a summation of associations, memories and histories all coalesced into a cohesive commentary. The piece de resistance of the show is *Speak, your life is still your own*, 2018 an evocative choreography of characters from Indian history floating amidst the waves, created with watercolour and glass beads on paper, pasted on cotton textile. Interpretations and revelations both hinge on histories to create corollaries of the past and the present.

Varunika explains: " The events inscribed onto the surface of each painting document the extraordinary struggles that people are facing and bear witness to life without power and political agency. I draw upon medieval imagery of interpretations and revelations to develop a language that allows us to process not just portents and spectacles but also anxiety caused by political and social upheavals."

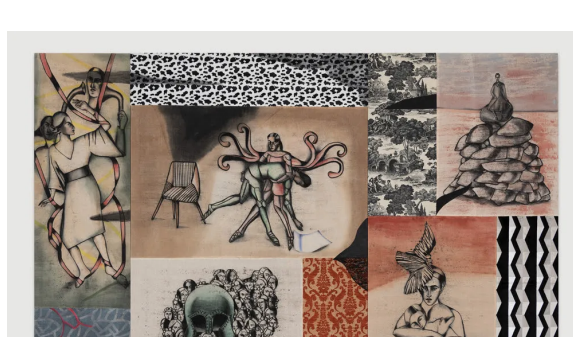


Varunika draws inspiration from Griselda Pollock's work that highlights the importance of remembering the past that "agitates the present" to warn us of the enduring threat of systemic dehumanisation. Complex spatial arrangements become the fulcrum of perception. The viewer is left with a disquieting presence that informs an other-worldly environment of desolate despair.

*Caput Mortuum* by Varunika Saraf is on view at Chemould Prescott from 25<sup>th</sup> Nov to 31<sup>st</sup> Dec 2021.

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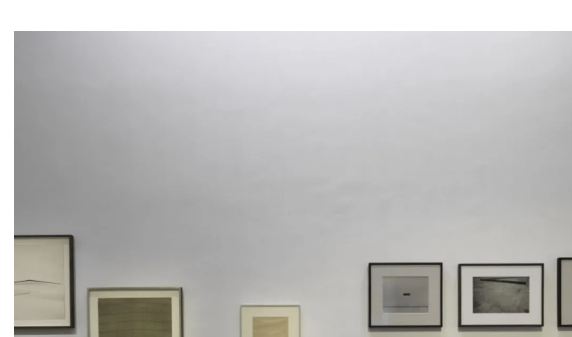
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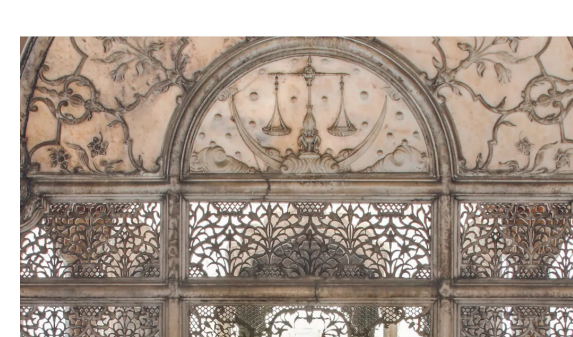
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