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Caput Mortuum: A photo exhibition raising questions about the relentless cycle of violence

Artist Varunika Saraf's hopes might seem utopian, but her new show is inspired by a bleak today, not a distant tomorrow

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Left to right: From the series 'Miasma' and 'We the People'



Shaikh Ayaz

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Varunika Saraf quotes German poet-playwright Bertolt Brecht: "Will there be singing in the dark times? Yes, there will be singing about the dark times." Speaking out against our grim present, the Hyderabad-based artist and feminist warns us of an Orwellian future. Saraf's ongoing exhibition Caput Mortuum at the Chemould Prescott Road gallery (on till Dec. 31) highlights both outer injustice and inner pain. Fashioned out of handmade paper called wasli, her suite of 175 recent paintings and drawings raise questions about the relentless cycle of violence.

The show derives its Latin title from the name of a synthetic Iron Oxide pigment, 'Caput Mortuum (Dead Head)', which bears a striking resemblance to dried blood. Not surprisingly, the colour red lurks in many of Saraf's paintings—a constant reminder that violence runs deep in society. "It's like our history is written in blood. It's true not just of India but the whole world," says Saraf, 40.

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One of Saraf's persistent themes is a scathing examination of what she calls the "cruel illusion called progress". In Caput Mortuum, she shows solidarity with India's protesting farmers. "As a nation, we are obsessed with economic progress, GDP, development, bullet trains and what not, but are inured to human suffering." Saraf's grandfather was a farmer in Arvi, Maharashtra.

Elsewhere in the show, there are also drawings championing the women protestors of Shaheen Bagh. In another zardozi-like series called 'Jugni', she uses the imagery of iconic Russian Madonnas to valorise ordinary Indian women. The series 'We the People' is a deep dive into the evolution of modern India—from 1947 to the present.

Within minutes of meeting her, one knows Saraf believes in the power of utopia and, through her show, she certainly helps us dream. "We have to rectify past mistakes before we can think of building a future. And thinking about the future can't be one person's job alone," says Saraf, a trained art historian herself. In a walkthrough with her, one can't miss the recurring motif of 'broken stars'. Is she hopeful of the future? "Honestly, on many days, I lose my optimism," she says.

"But seeing women protesting, or a court somewhere upholding human rights, or farm laws being retracted gives me hope."

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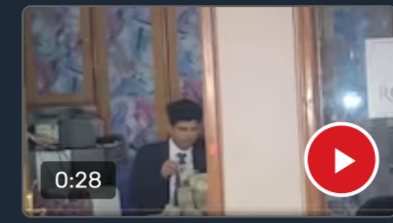
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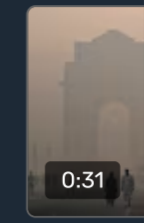
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