

Home > How To Lounge > Art & Culture > A fine balance between the delicate and the disturbing

A fine balance between the delicate and the disturbing

Varunika Saraf's latest solo features deeply political works, layered with pigment, imagery and meaning



Detail from 'Forsaken'. Image: courtesy Chemould Prescott Road/the artist

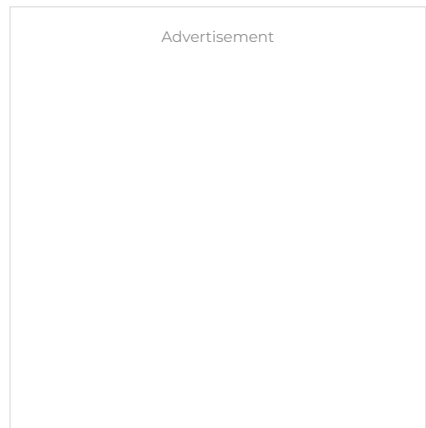
By **Avantika Bhuyan**

LAST PUBLISHED 06.12.2021 | 10:30 AM IST

Forsaken, a watercolour on Wasli paper (2020), beckons with its delicate colours and seemingly exquisite landscape of a dense forest. It's only when you look closely that a female figure, limbs entangled with the tree branches, becomes apparent.

In *It Rained This Winter*, the canvas seems to be breaking into a thousand pixels. But one can soon make out images of figures with rods, raining blows, and of a woman, head covered in a dupatta, walking away. There is something sad and morose about that tiny figure, who may have just witnessed the acts of violence depicted in another part of the canvas.

Finding something so violent or forlorn within a creation so beautiful is almost jarring. But it's

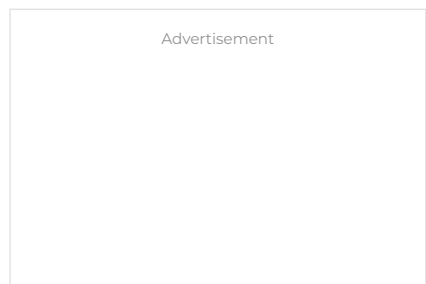


MOST POPULAR

LIGHT UP YOUR INBOX

Subscribe to get your weekly *Mint lounge* newsletter

JOIN OUR NEWSLETTER



in sync with Varunika Saraf's art language. In the past too, she has delved into the Mughal miniature tradition to create complex, multilayered narratives about the present. "There is a fine balance between something decorative and something that can shock and disturb you at the same time. I think, subconsciously, I use beauty to draw people in and allow them to discover layers of meaning in their own time," says the Hyderabad-based artist, in Mumbai for her solo, *Caput Mortuum*, at Chemould Prescott Road.

Also read: [A sensory experience of coffee and cotton](#)

With this show, Saraf seems to have found another kind of equilibrium—that between her visual language and her personality. Her work continues to be political but the style is soft and elegant. She tries to address questions such as: How do we stop the exponential rise of violence? Is it still possible to dream of an egalitarian society? Can we find love and hope amidst hate? Will we be able to heal the festering sores that riddle our world? "To speak about a present besieged by brutal acts of violence, this body of work takes its name from the synthetic Iron Oxide pigment Caput Mortuum (Dead Head) that resembles dried blood," she writes in the artist note. "In alchemy, Caput Mortuum is classified as 'worthless remains'—the residue left on the bottom of the heating flask once the nobler elements sublimate." In a way, the pigment becomes a metaphor for the decay and decline of a society that is witnessing these acts, often in silence.

A work from the 'We, The People' series of 46 works that tries to chart an alternative timeline for the nation. Image: courtesy Chemould Prescott Road/the artist

Also read: [Baaraan Ijllal's work stands witness to everyday erasures](#)

Saraf has always made watercolours from natural and synthetic pigments, creating them in her

own studio. Over the last few years, her paintings have been built with layers of colours. Even if the green is apparent in one of her works, it is evident that it has been created by a base of colours, layered over and over.

“Caput Mortuum stands for the complexities of a current situation, which have come about due to events and instances of the past. Communal violence of the past, and the silence around redressal of those wrongs, have led to the situation today,” says the artist.

The process is just as important as the work. Saraf deposits Caput Mortuum in thin washes on to the burnished Wasli paper. It seems to haemorrhage through the layer of 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,” she writes in the artist note. “The events inscribed on to the surface of each painting document the extraordinary struggles that people are facing and bear witness to life without power and political agency.... Through my work, I urge people to look at signs and assess whether they are dangerous or not.” The process adds to the message, and is potent with the accumulation of all that Saraf has felt in the last decades. “We don’t just need to examine the now, but the past as well to understand how we arrived at this situation. This ought to be a collective activity. Through my work, I urge people to look at signs, and assess whether they are dangerous or not,” she says.

Also read: [When a photograph is a site for design](#)

Saraf looks at the medieval imagery of interpretations and revelations that allow the viewer to process both the portents and the anxiety caused by the upheavals. Comets, meteors and differently-hued rain make an appearance. She draws inspiration from Griselda Pollock’s work, which highlights the importance of remembering the past that agitates the present, and *Augsburg Wunderzeichenbuch*, or the Book Of Miraculous Signs, which speaks of apocalyptic visions. “A lot of my imagery is inspired by this book from 16th century-Bavaria, which lists comets, strange colour of rain, hailstorm, sudden appearance of beastly animals as signs and what followed those portents. I borrow that idea to prompt people to look at signs of today and what that speaks of our times,” she says.

Caput Mortuum is on display at Chemould Prescott Road, Mumbai, and on the online viewing room, till 31 December.

FIRST PUBLISHED 06.12.2021 | 10:30 AM IST

For more such stories [Lifestyle News](#), [Fashion Photos](#) on Mint Lounge.

[Read Full Story](#)

NEXT STORY



Advertisement

NEWS

- Big Story
- Opinion
- Talking Point

FOOD

- Cook
- Drink
- Discover

FASHION

- Trends
- Shop
- Beauty

HOW TO LOUNGE

- Movies & TV
- Art & Culture
- Books

FOLLOW



SMART LIVING

- Environment
- Innovation

HEALTH

- Wellness
- Fitness

RELATIONSHIPS

- Raising Parents
- It's Complicated
- Pets