

A metaphor for violence

Varunika Saraf meditates on the existential irony of puny man amid Nature's infinity

Rita Datta | Published 08.01.22, 12:13 AM



The Seeker by Varunika Saraf
Chemould Prescott Road

The work with which the pdf file opens is curiously ambiguous: a lone figure in a vast, purple space set with glinting heavenly bodies. The image is suffused with an epiphanic pantheism. Yet, *The Sky Set Ablaze* is also steeped in a sense of desolation sensitively suggested in the painting that follows, *What Else Is Left for Tomorrow to Bring?* What begins as Varunika Saraf's meditation on the existential irony of puny man amid Nature's infinity takes on a grim aspect as her incisive eye locates him as bereft and helpless in an unequal society.

Saraf's recent gallery and online show, hosted by Chemould Prescott Road, Mumbai, asserts her concern in the title itself, *Caput Mortuum*, the alchemic term for the residue — or “worthless remains”— of distillation. The synthetic iron-oxide pigment that she grinds into watercolour and spreads on the Wasli surface in seeping washes, reminds her of “dried blood”. Her strategy thus inducts into her art the medium itself as a metaphor for the “structural violence” that the “cruel illusion called progress” inflicts.

Society isn't seen here as a network of support systems but a scatter of atomized little figures trapped in *tableaux* of strife, facing the casual brutality of the State. Redemption, though, lies in the irrepressible voice of women, some of whom recall the Shaheen Bagh *Dadis*. With embroidered haloes around their heads, women are iconized as inspiring Madonnas in the suite titled *Jugni*.

The artist's dramatic skies refer to period maps of the heavens (picture). Their exploding stars, unnaturally glowing colours and bubbles with cameos of violence and strange tails indicate unsettling *Portents* for the nation. No wonder she acknowledges a debt to the *Book of Miraculous Signs*. Perhaps she hopes for miraculous signs of grace and light even as her art negotiates the darkness around.

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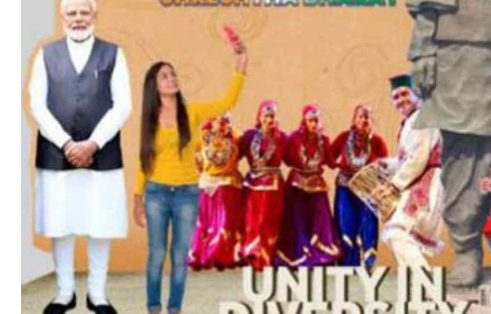
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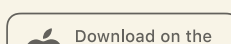
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