

LEISURE

ART

# A River Runs Through Us

Jayasri Burman's solo show in Delhi reimagines the Ganga and other female manifestations of divinity



have been made on a scale that is a first for the artist. She adds, "River of Faith became a subject that the artist made her own since we first planned an exhibition a decade ago and since then, she has researched, read texts that gave her ideas for her pictorial compositions. She saw Ganga as the manifestation of a goddess, but equally as that of a kindred spirit." Seeing the recent abuse of the Ganga—corpses of Covid victims float in the river—left a deep impact on Burman. "I had conflicting emotions; while polluting the river left me aghast, it reminded me of the faith she evokes," she says. And this mental conflict gave



birth to the *Jahnvi* series of sculptures.

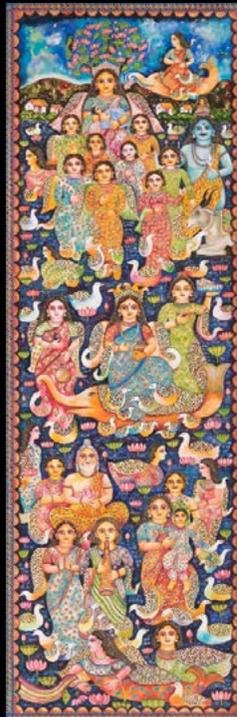
Critically acclaimed for her drawings and paintings, Burman's new sculptures now see her expand an already wide oeuvre. Even as a child, she was fascinated by the process of idol-making and the rhythmic anatomy of the human body. As a first-year student at Santiniketan's Visva Bharati University, however, she was never allowed to make sculptures, and yet, she stealthily learnt to make armatures. "When destiny gave me this opportunity to venture into sculpting, I lapped it up. I was drawn to the tactile medium of clay, almost awaking my senses which would transpire into the sculpted characters", she says.

Commenting on her three-decade practice, Burman says that mythology has been an inspiration, though she does not recreate the mythical characters as they are understood in the scriptures. She explains, "I am creating my own fantasies of gods and goddesses, transforming them through my imagination. They live an enchanted life, take flight like heavenly birds and glide in lily-strewn pools".

Sunaina Anand of Art Alive Gallery has closely worked with Burman over the past two decades. "Her practice has enriched our world with her visual stories of the mythical universe in a contemporary language. Jayasri discovers figures of myth in today's space, portraying important issues of environmental struggles with individual awareness and a collective wish for peace", says Anand. ■

(River of Faith can also be viewed on [Artexposure.in](http://Artexposure.in))

—Rahul Kumar



(clockwise from top, left) 'Ambika'; 'Anandi'; Jahnvi I, a bronze sculpture; and 'Ganga'—all created by Jayasri Burman

Artist **Jayasri Burman's** solo show, *River of Faith* (at Bikaner House, Delhi, from December 12-19), is inarguably significant. Centred around the idea of the mystic, and also that of the river Ganga, the works on display have resulted from a deep, ongoing engagement with these subjects. "I have been working on the theme of Ganga since 2004. I started studying its history [and have] enjoyed being by the river in Varanasi and Kumartuli in Kolkata. It has been an unexplained primordial connection," she says. Enamoured by the sheer strength of her force, the power of her scale, her nurturing fertility, Ganga, one might argue, highlights both the spirit of womanhood and the resilience of Burman herself.

Ina Puri, the curator of the show, says that Burman's somewhat monumental works

**SPEAKING FOR INDIA** (clockwise from left) From the series *Miasma*; *Jugni*; and *We the People*



## BLOOD, SWEAT AND TEARS

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

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 the grimness of our present realities, the Hyderabad-based artist and feminist also warns us of an Orwellian future. Saraf's ongoing exhibition *Caput Mortuum* at the Chemould Prescott Road gallery (on until Dec. 31) highlights both outer injustice and inner pain. Fashioned out of handmade paper called *washi*, 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)'. The pigment 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.

One of Saraf's persistent themes is a scathing examination of, what she the "cruel illusion called *ress*". In *Caput Mortuum*,

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. Even though the series has a sense of immediacy, there are deliberate gaps in its hanging, implying that the picture is very much incomplete. Within minutes of encountering her, one knows Saraf believes in the power of utopia, and through this 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. It is a collective activity," says Saraf, a trained art historian herself. In a walkthrough with Saraf, impossible to miss the recurring motif of 'broken

PRATEEK BABBAR IN HICCUPS & HOOKUPS (TOP) AND IN COBALT BLUE