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Debris of the old in the new

'New Canvases' by Sheetal Gattani, presented by Chemould Prescott Road, Mumbai, overturned the very idea of 'new' being virgin, untarnished territory



[Untitled, 2021 by Sheetal Gattani.](#)
[Chemould Prescott Road](#)

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New Canvases — that's the simple title, shorn of thematic references. But the new canvases of Sheetal Gattani, presented by Chemould Prescott Road, Mumbai, at its recent show — both in the gallery and online — overturned the very idea of 'new' being virgin, untarnished territory. The discoloured, damaged, degraded epidermis of her canvases, astir with intimations from underneath, implied the persistence of a past that subverts brash pretensions to newness. Because every 'now' comes with its embedded debris of 'then'. And it's the texture, speckled with clues of weathering, that imports a meditative gravity into her work.

The structuring of the canvases is artfully and thoughtfully done, as Pooja Savansukha's introductory note explains. The artist builds her work on the black acrylic ground of an unstretched canvas over which paint of different colours is slathered, not by a brush but by pieces of handmade paper, a painstaking ritual of layering that harnesses deviations, accidents, re-starts. Mounted on stretchers once the paint dries, the canvas weave colludes with the process to claw the surface. As

the underlying paint struggles through the top layer, at times soiled with black, what emerges is a striated, abraded topography.

For works of this kind, where images are replaced by tones and textures that assume autonomous sentience to predicate the ravages of ageing, subtle variations will, inevitably, be lost in online viewing. Yet, what comes across in the cyber space urges a closer, deeper examination of the surface that doesn't remain a shallow space anymore. Narratives of attrition seem to impinge on each other to co-exist in an uneasy, fragile, ever-changing equation that resists harmonious blending.

Gattani's abstractionism suggests the gathered focus common to colour field painting, but leaves room for uneven tones and the unplanned disfiguring of the surface that hint at immanent flux, cunningly leashed. When she says that "painting is a time-manifested process" anchored "to the reality of the present moment", the viewer senses that, although immersed in the process, she balances chance with control by her strategy.