

## ART

# The afterlife of polypropylene bags



## Pooja Savansukha

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### Aaditi Joshi's solo show transforms form and function in an extremely visually rewarding way, says Pooja Savansukha

Amidst the countless ongoing construction projects throughout the city, woven polypropylene bags that carry cement are an ordinary sight. Treated as banal objects, they are considered useless as soon as they fulfil their utilitarian functions. In Aaditi Joshi's first solo exhibition, *Aaditi Joshi: New Works* these bags are rendered unfamiliar – they take on a new life – as artworks.

For those familiar with Joshi's practice, her adoption of plastic as an artistic medium is no surprise. She is particularly known for her large, cloud-like installations made with PVC plastic bags that have been heated and fused together. In her ongoing show, those familiar with Joshi's work may notice a definite deno<sup>^</sup> in her aesthetic

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The artworks, hung on the walls exude a sense of two-dimensionality. Some resemble framed paintings, while others embody frames themselves. They exhibit Modernist

tendencies, dealing with abstraction, minimalism, and geometry. Yet, it is clear that they are made of reused polypropylene plastic fibres, fibreglass mesh, and cement. A large, site-specific installation displayed near the staircase, stands out. The installation, also made of plastic, hangs from the ceiling of the gallery's floor above, bridging the two levels. It's reminiscent of the show *Waste Land* also exhibited in 2018 at Tarq. Gallerist Hena Kapadia, expresses enthusiastically how the playful and accidental shadows on the walls created by the individual fibres of the works are among her favourite visual elements in the show. They draw attention to the minute details and true dimensionality of the works. Joshi's meticulous transformation of her primary material enables her body of work to lend itself towards considerations of sustainable practices, formal artistic concerns, and conceptual ideas.

## Upcycled art

Joshi witnessed the 2005 floods in Mumbai, where she noted how irresponsibly discarded plastic bags goaded the impact of the cataclysm. Joshi began working with plastic as a comment on the city's consumerist culture, excessive construction, and the impact of their waste on the environment. The artist's decision to reuse this contentious material that would otherwise find a place in a landfill, choke a drain, or pollute the sea, is more topical than ever.

Joshi goes a bit further, taking advantage of the material's malleability and sculptural properties to highlight its aesthetic qualities. In her essay entitled 'Who is Afraid of Plastic?' that accompanies the show, Birgid Uccia explains, "Joshi detects beauty in its cheap textures and colours, creating sensitivity towards what is otherwise overlooked and neglected." Through her practice, a material that symbolises trash, is deftly transformed into a valuable commodity. While adopting and promoting ideas of sustainability, Joshi's self-reflexive artworks, "tear down the barrier ^ between art and everyday life, economic

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## Painterly questions

Joshi trained in drawing and painting at the L.S. Raheja School in Mumbai. Although her artworks employ plastic, they resonate with painterly explorations. In her sculptural paintings, she experiments with the woven grid of cement bags, layering them with repetitive coats of cement and plastic fibres. Her process renders “the surface of the painting permeable to all kinds of intrusions from the world around her,” describes Uccia. These works subvert geometric integrity, defy straight lines, and eliminate the possibility of a flat picture plane.

Contrastingly, her works that represent frames eliminate the picture plane altogether, making viewers confront the blank wall. The frames are made of polypropylene bags, wrapped around soft-wood structures. In some, the plastic is wrapped neatly, adhering to the frame’s geometry. In others, the plastic challenges order, “the material reveals creases, tears, folds, tangled fringes and biomorphic knots,” says Uccia. For Joshi, additionally, “the various colours of the plastic bags used to make the works represent swatches of paint.” By rendering both, the frame and the picture plane in her works, Joshi blurs the boundaries between form and content. Her emphasis on notions of disorder, spontaneity, and non-adherence to convention, also reflect the chaos of the city itself.

## On permanence

Through her highly tangible and form-oriented explorations, Joshi also considers immaterial ideas. While the non-biodegradable nature of plastic is typically its most reprehensible quality. “Joshi reveals that her artworks outlast most durable materials,” Uccia purports. The notion of permanence from this perspective demands viewers to reconsider questions of time. While the plastic bags have outlived their functions, their transformed selves promise to simultaneously represent their past and renewed lives, for perpetuity. The uncanniness of their identity is exemplified by the somewhat discernible remnants of their past lives. For instance, Joshi points at particular abstract forms in her framed works, wrapped in plastic. She explains how these fragmented remainders once served as printed text on the plastic bags. By pushing the boundaries of rigid structures and signifiers, and rendering mundane objects, unfamiliar, Joshi is asking viewers to be more vigilant.

Aaditi Joshi: *New Works is ongoing at Tarq, Colaba until September 28.*

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