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In the East Bay

FREE

What lies beneath

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scrape through layers of his paintings
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22 Oakland artist Sanjay Vora helps hang one of his paintings at Vessel Gallery in Oakland.

Cover photo: Vora creates textured pieces by covering his base paintings with clear gel then scraping it away.

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Special to The Chronicle



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Above: Oakland artist Sanjay Vora demonstrates how he uses a screwdriver to carve grooves onto the plaster material covering his paintings. Below: Holes are gouged in the gel plaster that covers Vora's paintings. The artist will open a solo show titled "Memories of Dreams" in May that will feature new pieces.

OAKLAND

Uncovering artwork, one layer at a time

By Lauren Nelson

In the art studio behind his Oakland home, Sanjay Vora stands in middle of the room taking a long look at his most-recently completed painting. He has spent hours — full days — perfecting the light, the feel, the emotion.

He works secretively, and no one has seen the painting and they never will. At least, not in this form.

With a thick gel-like plaster material, Vora covers his new painting until the entire surface is completely white, rough, jagged and textured.

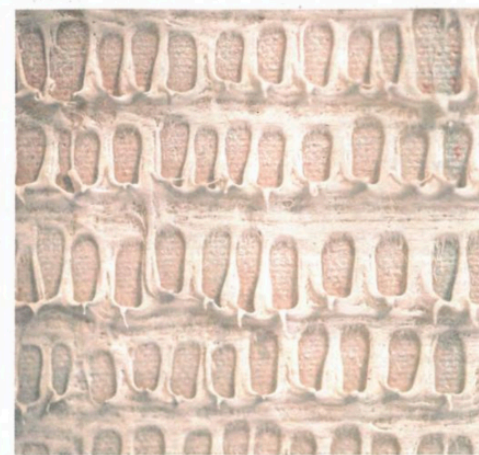
Then, he starts digging. He carves away the hardened plaster with a screw driver, scraping through the surface to uncover his original painting.

The plaster leaves a residue that gives the transformed image texture, as well as a dreamlike quality. This laborious effort of

digging through layers of his painting is where Vora finds a poetic connection.

"My work really does explain and represent who I am," Vora said.

The fine artist has embraced this unique art technique and is planning a new solo show of his work titled, "Memories of Dreams," which will be on display in May at the Gallery Bergelli in Larkspur. His work is also often on display at Vessel





In addition to paint brushes, Vora also uses screwdrivers to gouge designs into the gel he uses to cover his base paintings.

Gallery in Oakland.

In his new show, Vora's large-scale paintings will focus on the forgotten moments of his past through a process that requires him to relive memories, cover them up and then unbury them again.

"The work explores the idea that memories, over time and years of subconscious glorification, have turned into dreams, and that our memories subsequently are referring to dreams," he said.

The 34-year-old art teacher and father of three has always been intrigued by what used to be.

"I'm like this person who looks forward by looking backwards," he said. "There's something about what's gone. Once a moment is gone and you can't get it back, you know it's powerful."

The paintings reflect Vora's idyllic past and his childhood and upbringing in rural New Jersey. With each piece, there is what he calls repetitive retrieval or his search for something. Even at 18, he longed for the times when he was younger.

Many paintings are photo-realistic portrayals of family snapshots, like of Vora and his brother playing in a field. Or of his grandparents during childhood trips to visit London, something he did maybe 10 times growing up, but remembers as some of his most cherished memories.

One painting is of his wife, designer Sudie Wentling. It is a scene from around the time they moved to the Bay Area in 2013;

she is lying on a couch in a dress. In the white layering, he etched the words "It's okay to dwell on you" over and over again until the color and faint image of his wife shone through the surface.

"That was just super powerful and I was really amazed by it and taken aback," Wentling says. "It really does capture a moment in time."

Though the colors are subdued after the final etching, it is an effect that Vora says brings out a new richness to his original paintings.

"You get the sense of color as you stare at them longer," Vora said. "They're quite reduced in color, but I see them heightening the sense of color."

Vora's emotions or inspiration can be triggered easily by life happening around him — the way the light is set, seeing an old photograph or listening to the mix tape he's had since he was 18 that can transport him back to a split second of his teen years.

"That feeling, it's so unique. It's a combination of this joy and melancholy at the same time," he said.

Though he's a deeply sensitive artist, the reflection is not always that of loss or sadness.

He still finds beauty and happiness in every day and feels blessed for his family and children — a 4-year-old son and 1-year-old twin daughters.

Vora keeps busy as he balances family, work and painting. He spends his days teaching kindergarten through eighth grade students how to paint or mold



Above: Vora, left, watches Lonnie Lee, center, curator of Vessel Gallery in Oakland, and Ken Ehrhardt, manager of the gallery, hangs one of Vora's paintings. Below: Vora sits in his studio.

Sanjay Vora

"Memories of Dreams": Artist Sanjay Vora will have a solo show at Gallery Bergelli, 483 Magnolia Ave., Larkspur. (415) 945-9454. www.bergelli.com.

The show will run May 24-June 26, and the opening reception will be 4-6 p.m. May 31.

clay as an art teacher at St. Paul's Episcopal School in Oakland. He was also a visiting lecturer at UC Berkeley in painting in 2011 and 2012.

But he also fits in time to play with his band, St. Tropez, which is releasing an album later this year. His father, an engineer and musician, taught him to respect music and his Indian roots at an early age.

"(My parents) emigrated to this country and worked extremely hard so that my brother and I could go after our dreams," Vora said. "As passionate musicians themselves, I hope to be the parent they are for me."

But being away from family and his Indian culture at home also played a role in creating his



style. Growing up, his parents only listened to Indian classical music. He was surprised to learn that he yearned for those iconic sounds when they weren't a daily part of his life.

"I went to college and I realized I started missing what I was hearing in the house," he said. "My parents sent me all this music that I wanted to listen to."

While working toward his master's of fine arts at the Art Institute of California in San Francisco (after receiving a bachelor's degree in architecture

from University of Virginia), he used both music and his new-found style of painting to retrieve and celebrate his roots. He writes most of the songs for St. Tropez, and he says the lyrics are significantly linked to what he strives for with his paintings.

"That dreamlike vision is more what I feel and want to achieve," he said. "In the end, it's still beauty when you combine joy and melancholy and joy."

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