

Art

Contemporary Now 2026 turns Chennai into a city-wide gallery, tracing the present through living histories of art

As Contemporary Now returns, Chennai prepares to host artistes, galleries and conversations from across the country.



Dominus Aetis Flux XII by Thakral and Tagra



Anoushka Kunda

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What makes a work of art contemporary? Is it the moment it is created, the materials it employs or the questions it dares to ask? Contemporary art rarely offers definitive answers. Instead, it asks how the past continues to live in the present. That thought runs through *Practices in Continuum: Tracing the Present*, the curatorial theme of Contemporary Now 2026.

For 20 days this month, Chennai will become a city-wide gallery. Across galleries, artist studios, and cultural spaces, 66 artists and seven leading galleries from across the country will bring exhibitions, performances, walkthroughs and conversations to the city. Visitors can begin their day at Lalit Kala Akademi before making their way to an artist's studio in T Nagar or an exhibition that has travelled from Mumbai, Kolkata or Delhi, experiencing contemporary art well beyond a single venue. Ahead of the festival, we caught up with curator Priyanjoli Basu, participating Chennai artists and galleries from across the country to find out what visitors can expect over the next 20 days.



Curator Priyanjoli Basu

Curator's corner

"*Contemporary Now* is a platform, not just an exhibition," begins curator Priyanjali Basu. "It's a gathering of artists, collectors, curators, and curious minds coming together over several days to experience contemporary art in a way that feels open and alive, where the art is the centrepiece, but the conversations, the people and the energy around it are just as important," she explains.

What began as an experiment has steadily expanded in both scale and scope. "The first was about testing the idea: could we bring this kind of energy to Chennai? The second proved we could. Now, with Edition III, we're bigger and bolder with more artists, more venues, more programming, and a sharper curatorial vision," she says.

This year's edition revolves around the theme *Practices in Continuum: Tracing the Present*, reflecting how contemporary artists build on inherited histories, materials and memories rather than leaving them behind. "For us, the contemporary is not a break from the past; it is an active conversation with it," Priyanjali says. "Tracing the present is about looking at what's happening right now through the lens of artists who are stretching, bending and reimagining what their medium can do. It's continuum, not nostalgia," she avers.

The festival's greatest strength lies in making contemporary art feel approachable. "Accessibility isn't about dumbing things down, it's about removing barriers," she says. Walkthroughs, artist conversations, catalogues and public programmes are designed to welcome newcomers alongside experienced collectors. "Art should invite you in, not keep you out," she says.

More than anything, she hopes visitors leave with a lasting connection to the work. "You'll discover a new artist you haven't seen before, a conversation that shifts your perspective, a work that stays with you long after you've left," she smiles.



For the Sake of the Bird, 2025 by Jagati Ravi

Meet the artists participating from *namma* Chennai!

Slow stories

K Benitha Perciyal

Hailing from Thiruvannamalai, mixed media artist K Benitha Perciyal returns to her long-running *Xenophora* series at *Contemporary Now*, presenting an installation that draws on medicine, travel, and the history of Delhi through engraved books and found objects. "I started with five books, and it kind of extended and extended. Now it is growing towards a library," she says.

Her materials are as familiar as they are symbolic. "Frankincense, myrrh and all those things come from nature. Whether it is a birth or a death or any other ritual, they use that as a kind of sacred material," she explains. Working without rigid plans, she allows each material to determine its own pace and form. "Each material has its own quality," she says. "They take their own time. I try to use them as they are so they speak by themselves," she adds.





K Benitha Periyal

Ritual remembered

C Krishnaswamy

For Salem-born artist C Krishnaswamy, painting is only one part of the story. At *Contemporary Now*, he presents Kundalini Rising, a live performance that merges yoga, painting, and movement, treating the body itself as an artistic medium. Rather than directing viewers towards a fixed interpretation, he hopes they simply remain present with the work.

"I don't expect audiences to arrive at a single meaning," he says. "Every person is like a unique antenna, receiving and responding to the same imperceptible creative energy differently," he adds. Drawing from rituals, festivals and everyday life in Tamil Nadu, Krishnaswamy sees these traditions as living expressions of creativity that continue to evolve. "Just spend time with the work, observe, feel and allow your own experience to unfold," he says. "If the work creates a moment of awareness, curiosity or connection, then it has already begun a conversation," he tells us.



C Krishnaswamy

Everyday epiphanies

Jagath Ravi

A simple interaction between a teacher and student becomes the starting point of Jagath Ravi's *Punishment*, a painting that transforms an ordinary classroom moment into a meditation on empathy and understanding. Rather than portraying punishment as an act of authority, the work imagines it as a playful gesture, where 'the punishment' is handed to the adult instead.

For the Chennai-based artist, however, the painting reaches far beyond the two figures it depicts. "It is not just about the boys shown in the painting," he says. "It is also about how different ways of responding to a situation can change a person and their surroundings," he adds. Drawn to the extraordinary in everyday life, he believes paying closer attention can quietly reshape the way we see the world. For Jagath, painting is less about reproducing what he sees than discovering what stays with him. "Sometimes, a structure or form I recognise already carries the expression I am looking for," he says. "It doesn't have to be perfect or exact. What matters is that it has the power to quiet me," he shares.





Jagathi Ravi

Living legacy

Sharan Apparao

For Sharan Apparao, curator of *Masters in Madras*, the exhibition is rooted in memory as much as art history. The exhibition brings together works by artists who shaped modern Indian art, many of whom he knew personally over four decades of working in the field. Rather than tracing the evolution of the Madras Art Movement through dates and milestones, he hopes visitors encounter it through the relationships and stories that shaped it.

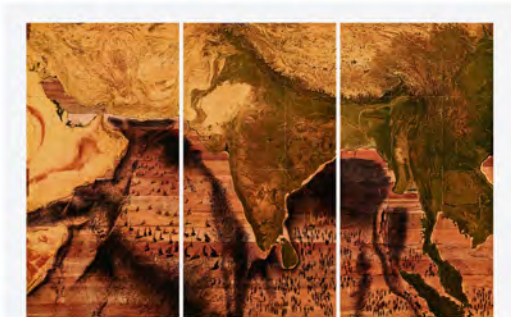
"When I started, I worked with all these masters. They were all friends," he recalls. "I hope this exhibition will wake them to look inward about the city and bring more eyeballs to the art it has to offer," he says, adding that festivals like these are invaluable in helping younger audiences connect with modern art.



All I Think of is Growing Old With You, 2024 by Nirayan Unnikrishnan

Gallery trail

Contemporary Now isn't just bringing artists to Chennai. It is also bringing some of India's leading contemporary galleries into the city, allowing visitors to encounter works and conversations that would ordinarily require a trip beyond *namma* Madras.



East Asia to West Asia by Saju Kunhan

TARQ | Mumbai

For Mumbai gallery TARQ, *Contemporary Now* is as much about building relationships as exhibiting art. "We're always excited to connect with new audiences, and this seemed like a lovely opportunity to introduce a wide range of artists we work with to audiences in Chennai," founder Hena Kapadia tells us. Its presentation brings together nine artists working across painting, printmaking, textiles and wood, united by ideas of development, the environment and identity.





Custodian, 2025 by Chumakya School

Experimenter | Kolkata

Returning after participating in the inaugural edition, Kolkata's Experimenter sees Chennai as a city ready for contemporary art. "We feel Chennai has long been ready for contemporary art," co-founder Prateek Raja tells us. "Presenting the seven leading galleries of the country in Chennai together feels like an important moment of shared friendships and the coming together of some of the best contemporary art that the country has to offer," says co-founder Priyanka Raja. Their presentation brings together 11 artists whose works move between the vastness of the universe and intimate inner worlds, inviting moments of pause and reflection.



Repellent VI, 2025 by Mahesh Baliga

Project 88 | Mumbai

Making its *Contemporary Now* debut, Mumbai's Project 88 sees the festival as an opportunity to engage with one of the country's most discerning art audiences. "This is our first year here. Chennai has some very good collectors and we felt *Contemporary Now* would be the right platform for us to meet them," Director Sree Banerjee Goswami shares. Its presentation spans the breadth of the gallery's programme, from Khageswar Rour's sculptural studies of flora to Mahesh Baliga's intimate paintings.





Remnants in the Bazaar, 2024 by Joya Mukerjee Logue

Vadehra Art Gallery | New Delhi

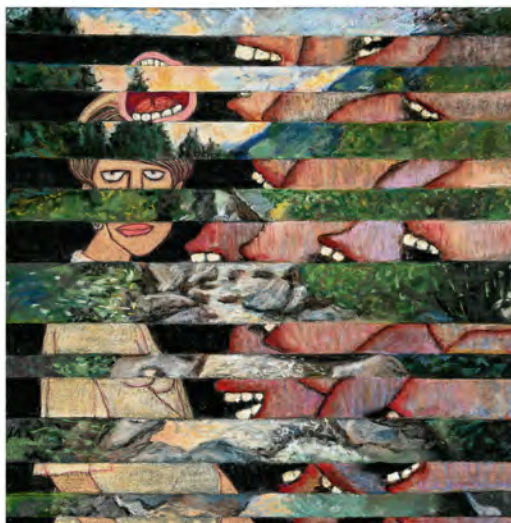
For Delhi's Vadehra Art Gallery, the festival is a chance to extend conversations beyond India's established art centres. "*Contemporary Now* presents an exciting opportunity to engage with the rich artistic and cultural history of Chennai while also witnessing the increased interest in contemporary art," says director Roshini Vadehra. The gallery brings together works ranging from Astha Butail's lightbox and Anita Dube's textile pieces to paintings by Joya Mukerjee Logue and drawings by Jasmine Nilani Joseph.



Lands, Waters & Skies Zimurg, 2018 by Nikhil Chopra

Chatterjee & Lal | Mumbai

For Mumbai gallery Chatterjee & Lal, collaboration lies at the centre of *Contemporary Now*. "The spirit of collaboration goes to the heart of our mission as a gallery, and the team behind *Contemporary Now* has, from the outset, approached the event in a spirit of community and togetherness," says co-founder Mortimer Chatterjee. The gallery brings works spanning four decades by artists including Nikhil Chopra, DLN Reddy and Arshi Irshad Ahmadzai, while exploring recurring ideas around fabric, textiles and the abstraction of nature. "Its importance is two-fold: first, to take Chennai to the rest of the country; and second, to bring the rest of the country to Chennai," he adds.





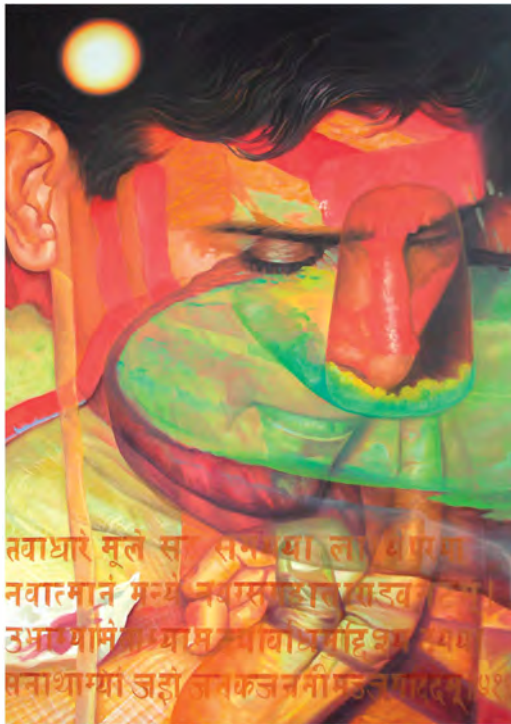
Untitled, 2025 by Dhruvi Acharya ANIL R

Walk the city

One of the best ways to experience *Contemporary Now* is to leave the gallery map behind and follow the people who know the works best. On August 9, the festival welcomes audiences to a series of open-to-all walkthroughs, inviting them to explore exhibitions through conversations with artists, curators and gallerists. Whether you're discovering contemporary art for the first time or returning with a trained eye, these sessions offer a chance to hear directly from the people behind the works.

Don't miss!

- 11.30 am | Walkthrough with George K for *I Have a Dream* at George K Studio.
- 4 pm | Walkthrough with K Benitha Perciyal at Ashvita's Flagship.
- 5 pm | Walkthrough with Ashvin E Rajagopalan at Lalit Kala Akademi.
- 5 pm | Walkthrough with Sharan Apparao for *Masters in Madras* at Apparao Galleries.
- 5 pm | Walkthrough with Sanjay Tulsian and Preeti Garg for *Madras Abstraction* at Gallery Veda.
- 3-7 pm | Open House at Ashvita's Archival and Conservation Centre.



Artwork by George K

By the numbers

- 20 days | August 6-25 | A city-wide celebration of contemporary art spanning exhibitions, performances, conversations, and public programmes.
- 66 artists | One of Chennai's largest gatherings of contemporary artists, representing diverse practices from across India.
- 7 leading galleries | Ashvita's (Chennai), Chemould Prescott Road (Mumbai), Chatterjee & Lal (Mumbai), Experimenter (Kolkata), Project 88 (Mumbai), TARQ (Mumbai) and Vadehra Art Gallery (New Delhi) are bringing some of India's foremost contemporary art programmes to the city.
- 10+ venues | From Lalit Kala Akademi and artist studios to Ashvita's spaces and partner galleries, transforming Chennai into one interconnected exhibition.
- 15+ public programmes | Artist walkthroughs, performances, panel discussions, gallery conversations and open houses.

Entry free. From August 8 to 25. Across venues.

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