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When Angel Otero makes his Indian debut at Mumbai's new Galerie Isa this month, giant canvases will hold what look like bunches of shiny wet cloth, making you think of drenched, unmade beds or this morning's washing in gleaming disarray. Look closer and you'll find that it isn't cloth at all. It's thick layers of intensely saturated oil paint that have been poured on to a glass sheet, dried, peeled off and draped over the canvas. The Puerto Rican artist's signature style has turned oil painting on its head, with him using common mediums to invent a form that's familiar, strange and fascinating all at once.

METHOD TO THE MADNESS

Did Otero accidentally spill a can of paint one day and discover a whole new art form? "It's not too far from the truth," he admits. At the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, Otero was doing what any student dissatisfied with his work would do—scraping off the expensive oils to reuse. "It started piling up and I wondered if I could put it on wet paint and make a collage." It worked, making Otero more ambitious. "I found a way to make bigger and bigger 'oil sheets', painting on glass, then peeling away the whole thing," he explains. "Stains from previous works would transfer to the new layers, making it exciting. It breaks down the image; portrait becomes abstract."

SLICK THINKING

In Otero's works, oils look nothing like brushstrokes, and a two-dimensional canvas turns almost sculptural. The giant folds and creases often confuse his audience. "Some people don't even go near it," Otero says. "They think it's something wet and wrinkled, which is wonderful. And they don't realise how incredibly complicated it is for me to make it look that way. It takes

five months and three people to complete a painting—a very fragile, delicate process."

In smaller works, Otero has also drizzled tar and silicone on paper to create familiar shapes, but his hallmark remains the oil sheets, and for now he isn't terribly afraid of being stuck with it forever. "I don't like the comfortable," he says. "So I think I'll always be experimenting. With oil sheets, I have no control over the process, [they're] just intriguing accidents and moments in the puzzle of art-making." ■

Angel Otero's show runs from March 29 to June 7 at Galerie Isa, Mumbai; Galerieisa.com



GREASE AND CREASE

Top: Angel Otero with an untitled work. Inset: Couch Habits

ART

Peeling back the layers

Puerto Rican artist **ANGEL OTERO** works with oils on canvas in a way that stretches the mind and the medium, says **RACHEL LOPEZ**