

VISUAL POETRY

RAM KUMAR

Arun Ghose



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Visual Poetry - Ram Kumar
by Arun Ghose

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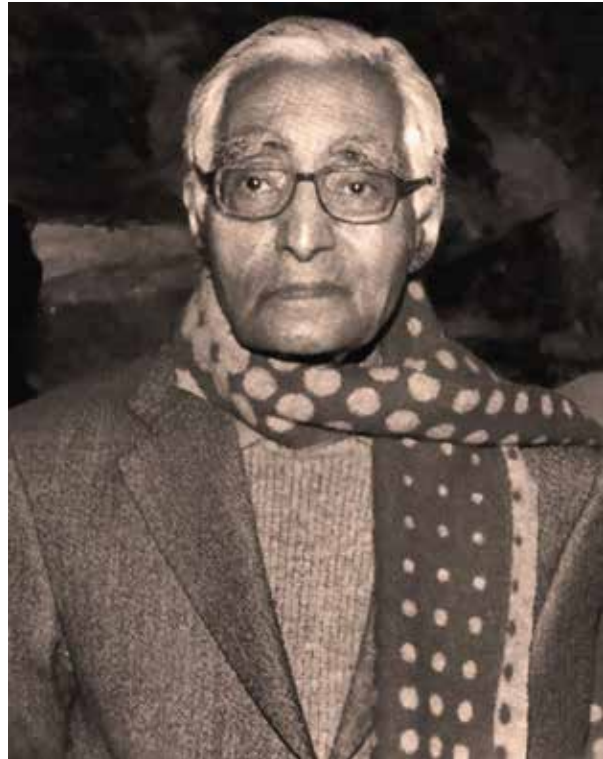
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Ram Kumar

————— b. 1924 —————

Ram Kumar's canvases are like long poems, easy to read but not easy enough to decipher the coded message with casual viewing.

He is easily inspired by the layers of accumulated memories, generated and carefully stored in his mental databank, about his long association with the holy city of Varanasi spent often in company with friend Husain. In the limited world he lives in, he feels free to use sub-conscious images, and fond memories, of the past etched deep into the sub-conscious. Seashells and marine remnants, water lilies in bloom and the rounded spread of its delicate leaves, and such other relics that smells of environmental tranquility appears in his canvases with unpredictable regularity.

Introduction

There was a time when Ram Kumar painted figurative compositions and there was a time when he switched over to increasingly non-figurative visual poetry. Such changeovers among the serious practitioners of Indian modern and contemporary art, from figurative to abstraction, are indeed not rare. What however is not so common is the reason that underlies such changeover in Ram Kumar. He surely was not aware of the fact that he will turn spiritual one day and will write his own spiritual thoughts in lines and colour in a way that will have a different kind of figuration, something that we do not get to see in our daily lives and, in order to give it a name, call it abstract. As one sees his art, created over the years, one becomes increasingly aware that his art lies firmly between the two extremes, though tends to lean slightly towards the latter.

He owes it to his friend, the tall and barefooted beacon of modern and contemporary art in India. Between them lied a difference of more than ten years in age and that however did not raise any barrier to their lifelong friendship. Both were poets at heart and both had visions

to chart out a new page in modernity of Indian art, though, in the early sixties, they did not have much of an idea how that is going to dawn in their brush and palette. Ram Kumar, a trained economist who gave up his promising career in order to be an artist, took up art at a slightly later period in life. His training started under Sailoz Mukherjee in Delhi and it gave him a firm footing in Western art. He then went to Paris on his own initiative and, fortunately enough, had the privilege of learning under Andre Lohte and Fernand Leger and, during his eventful days in Paris, came under the influence of the French Communist Party. In the field of art he, to start with, took up seriously the idea left behind by Cathe Kolwitz that was then sweeping the mind of the socialists all over the World, India included.

Once back home Ram Kumar Verma was lapped up by the 'Progressives' and it happened through his friendship with Raza and Souza who were founder members of this, now historically important, artists' group in Bombay, now called Mumbai. His friendship with Husain also took shape at the same time as they both were

struggling to gain attention, and a proper footing, in Indian art. It can now only be guessed why Husain proposed a trip to Benares together and perhaps it was the high level of spirituality the city was famous for. This holy city has witnessed the growth of Hinduism and Buddhism and also favoured development of Islamic architecture and other forms of minor arts like textiles. Its ancient character, coupled with the possibility of inexpensive accommodation and other civic necessities, may also have played in their mind to choose Benares for a sketching expedition. They had reached a mutual agreement of staying together but to branch out individually each morning to feel the pulse of the place and, if so desired, draw and paint too. Their evenings however were spent together discussing each other's work. Ram Kumar's jottings, it was soon to be found, were increasingly taking a definite shape. It seldom appeared with realistic depiction of what Ram Kumar viewed in the city but his 'jottings' faithfully recorded his visual impressions of what he viewed in the Ghats and lanes and in its roaming bulls and flowing rivers. His drawings resulted in forms felt within - an example of meditation with eyes open

and sensitising one's heart to receive signals emanating within. Soon such 'jottings' began to combine, in his sensitive core, a feel of the deep spirituality that flows in the unseen veins of the holy city. It is not known how Husain had reacted when these drawings were seen and discussed. He surely was privy to view them first before anyone else got to see them. Ram Kumar kept these 'jottings' close to his heart and began to work on his chance-discovery of how to visually channelize his own reaction to the spiritual undercurrent flowing in the ancient veins of this remarkable city. While those initial responses remained out of view the public was offered a chance to view his personalised take on the cityscape of the holy city. Its spiritual overtones, he felt within while visiting and viewing the city, was something that could hardly be expressed adequately in Realism and he moved in the direction of a semi-abstracted format.

He of course had his peers dealing with spirituality in modern art and he surely had seen them during his stay in Paris. The De Stijl movement, in particular, may have surfaced in

his mind as it, beside Kandinsky's contribution in this field along with the Futurism of Malevich, had already played significant role in this direction to usher in the era of abstracted spirituality in modern art. The De Stijl was a Dutch 'style' of pure abstraction developed by Piet Mondrian, Theo Van Doesburg and Bart van der Leek. The word 'abstract art', according to art-historical jargon, means to withdraw part of something from a visible object in order to consider it separately. In Abstract art that 'something' is one or more of the visual elements of a subject: its line, shape, tone, pattern, texture, or form. Mondrian began to reduce the shapes of organic substances, a tree for instance, to arrive at the purity of geometric simplicity which lies at the core of its form. He and Malevich eventually got rid of visible shapes altogether and began to experiment with the purity of geometric lines and shapes to generate the feel of spirituality. Abstract art, as a genre with world-wide following, had taken many tosses and turns over the last hundred years and, in post-War USA, it emerged in an image of being rebellious, anarchic, and highly idiosyncratic and, some feel, nihilistic art

movement called Abstract Expressionism. Ram Kumar's chance discovery however did not allow him to follow its spontaneous and (nearly-automatic) sub-conscious creative reaction. The anti-figurative aesthetic of Ram Kumar was based entirely upon his cerebral analysis of emotional intensity, something that has hardly any parallel in the history of art.

The present collection of Ram Kumar's small works on paper, painted at intervals over his long artistic career, may therefore be viewed against the said aesthetic considerations. A possible reward for such an exercise would be a rewinded review of the uniqueness of his deductive thought-process that helped him arrive at the level of abstraction in his art that are spiritual equivalent of scenes that underscores their origin. One may start this exercise by looking at a pair of small oils offering a close enough view of his inner world in his early years in art and shortly before visiting Benares. His philosophical attachment to the story of life of people of moderate to questionable means, his close encounter with the communist movement in France, and his reverence to the art of Kollwitz, all contributed equally in shaping up his art of the period. Each of the two canvases

in this show, chosen to illustrate this phase in his artistic rise, reveals such a story of a couple. In addition these two paintings also reveal his gradually progressive stage of deduction, from the visible lineament of human faces to its basic element of geometry. He chose to do so in order to tell the story of human tragedy he viewed all around him but not with the help of realistic depiction. He preferred a reducing level of identity. His intention, it appears, was surely to create a visual alternative of realistic picturisation by simplifying the physical 'forms' (of characters he chose to depict) into elements of de-emotionalised geometry. The receding barrenness of land lying behind the couple in one such painting

(Fig. 1.) yet retain its truthfulness of visual perspective that accentuates the couple's not-so-important social positioning (and of their average existence). There seems to be a



Fig. 1. Untitled | Acrylic on Paper | 9.8in x 10.6in | 1997

deliberate attempt by the artist, then a young poet with emotional response written all over him, to paint the landscape with hardly any attempt to emotionalise the life it sustains.

In the second work, done with not enough gaps in between, one could see the additional emphasis on delineating human physique with severe yet simple geometricity. His 'couple', in this painting, is painted half-bust with thicker lines made even more rigid by their angular precision and resultant simplification.



Fig. 2. Untitled | Acrylic on Paper | 9.8in x 10.6in | 2011

The degree of reduced 'Realism', of the architectural detailing at the back, however adds to the spiritual introspection in the face of the 'couple' and also add a hint of drama in real life. This pendulating shift of pictorial position, from figuration to non-figuration through the path of deductive articulation is evident in these two small canvases and signifies Ram Kumar's quest in

the by-lanes of the holy city of Benares.

This exhibition, fortunately enough, offers a large collection of similar small paintings which convey the steady progress he made following his chosen path right from the period of his sketching in the holy city with Husain. The cityscape of Benares, as viewed by the artist in one of this canvases (Fig. 2.), captures the view of the city from the southern end of its famous river-front. Ram Kumar savours the picturesque combination of its numerous 'ghats' and equally numerous steps rising out of the edge of the flowing river (with temple tops and minarets that dot its unique skyline) by reducing the urbanised mess of this ancient city into a limited yet thoughtful assemblage of triangles and squares. The huge expanse of the river Ganges almost pushes the holy city, drawn with 'minimalised' precision of chosen lines, into a close huddle on its left bank. The river itself is drawn by the artist by doing simply nothing except hinting at the presence of a few tiny river-boats placed at random to suggest a unified chaos. Complexity of architectural geometry against the backdrop of the blank paper (in which sky meets water only in the imagination of the viewer) and, by achieving a precisely minimal portrayal of a



Fig. 3. Untitled | 17.9in x 23.1in | Japanese Ink with Wax on Paper | 1980



Fig. 4. Untitled | Acrylic on Paper | 17.9in x 23.1in | 1990



Fig. 5. Untitled | Acrylic on Paper | 15in x 22.1in | 1992



Fig. 6. Untitled | Acrylic on Paper | 22in x 30in | 2012

congested city, the artist is thus able to paint a pictorial equivalent of peace and tranquillity as is revealed in the expansive nothingness of the ever-flowing river. It is indeed a classic example of simplification by deduction.

In another work, small yet powerfully painted with sepia and brown ink on paper (Fig. 5), he has taken an aerial observation of the river-front but with a close-up view to concentrate on the geometric convergence of boats assembled near the river-front. The near-poetic chaos one easily witnesses on its ghats, with boats of various sizes tied against each other awaiting customers, usually offers a frenzied activity by the boatmen shouting out loud seeking patronage. The seemingly unending rows of parallel steps in the ghats of Benares are usually dotted with large sun-shades, shaped like enlarged umbrellas, under which congregate scores of pundits and eager devotees. These, along with the customary 'holy' dip taken in the river by one and all usually make the 'holy ghats' of this city into its iconic singularity. Such an overwhelming assembly of animated humanity in close contact with inanimate objects like boats,



Fig. 7. Untitled | Acrylic on Paper | 22in x 30in | 2007

among other things, raises the intense search of spirituality of the devotees (converging on this chosen mile of river-bank day in and day out) into a poetic, non-objective, mass of unknown dimension. Ram Kumar, the poet, has reacted to this strange phenomenon, in which statics and dynamics of Indian spirituality is visible as well as audible with ease, and has painted the same by inventing a form that is abstract yet not entirely unrecognisable. The end result of his search, in this case, retains a strange duality of vision that hovers on the fence between what is known with that which is yet unknown.

His canvases gradually began to shift focus from such poetic abstraction of viewed reality and was replaced by the spiritual content found in the golden glow of the setting sun against a cobalt blue sky, the saffron glow of the river flowing below complimenting the combined strength of colours above as this is itself a subject worthy of deep introspection. His intended hint of a solitary tree, standing in a corner and witnessing the time flowing it by, is complimented with the triangle of brown in the centre that faintly echo the shape of a hut in rural India. In a way the spiritual roots of this

age-old Nation lies in its hinterland and stands its own even when set against the conflict of interest from among those who ruled over

them. His canvases, and smaller paintings on paper, paint the atmosphere and sentiments of the city with a meditative silence.



Fig. 8. Untitled | Acrylic on Paper | 22in x 30in | 2006

Reflections of other cities subsequently infiltrated his thought process. His palette also changed in tandem to adopt sweeping browns and meditative greys echoing the silence of the land in Ladakh and Shivalik Hills. In order to develop a pictorial metaphor of his intimate love for nature, as one gets to view in these chosen hills, his art began to increasingly embrace a path of visual non-objectivity in which lines, and shapes emerging out of such meditated assembly of lines, eventually determines the final outcome. Such transformation of nature into pictorial views, in which recognisable elements were replaced by a visual magic in order to create the essential sensation of spiritual poetry, is indeed unique in the World of Art.

Arun Ghose
Kolkata



Fig. 9. Untitled | Acrylic on Paper | 22in x 30in | 2011



Fig. 10. Untitled | Acrylic on Paper | 10.5in x 12.5in | 1999



Fig. 11. Untitled | Oil on Canvas | 24in x 36in | 2013



Fig. 12. Untitled | Oil on Canvas | 24in x 36in | 2013



Fig. 13. Untitled | Oil on Canvas | 36in x 36in | 2013



Fig. 14. Untitled | Acrylic on Paper | 10.5in x 12.5in | 1999



Fig. 15. Untitled | Acrylic on Paper | 9.8in x 10.6in | 1997



Fig. 16. Untitled | Acrylic on Paper | 10.6in x 9.8in | 1997



Fig. 17. Untitled | Acrylic on Paper | 10.6in x 9.8in | 1997



Fig. 18. Untitled | Acrylic on Paper | 9.8in x 10.6in | 1991



Fig. 19. Untitled | Acrylic on Paper | 10.6in x 9.8in | 1997



Fig. 20. Untitled | Acrylic on Paper | 9.8in x 10.6in | 1997



Fig. 21. Untitled | Acrylic on Paper | 9.8in x 10.6in | 1997



Fig. 22. Untitled | Acrylic on Paper | 9.8in x 10.6in | 1997



Fig. 23. Untitled | Acrylic on Paper | 10.5in x 14.3in | 1996



Fig. 24. Untitled | Acrylic on Paper | 10.5in x 14.3in | 1996



Fig. 25. Untitled | Acrylic on Paper | 10.5in x 14.3in | 1996



Fig. 26. Untitled | Acrylic on Paper | 10.5in x 14.3in | 1996



Fig. 27. Untitled | Acrylic on Paper | 10.5in x 14.3in | 1996



Fig. 28. Untitled | Acrylic on Paper | 10.5in x 14.3in | 1996



Fig. 29. Untitled | Acrylic on Paper | 10.5in x 14.3in | 1996



Fig. 30. Untitled | Acrylic on Paper | 10.5in x 14.3in | 1996



Fig. 31. Untitled | Acrylic on Paper | 10.5in x 14.3in | 1996



Fig. 32. Untitled | Acrylic on Paper | 10.5in x 14.3in | 1996



Fig. 33. Untitled | Acrylic on Paper | 10.5in x 14.3in | 1996



Fig. 34. Untitled | Acrylic on Paper | 10.5in x 14.3in | 1996



Fig. 35. Untitled | Acrylic on Paper | 10.5in x 14.3in | 1996



Fig. 36. Untitled | Acrylic on Paper | 10.5in x 14.3in | 1996



Fig. 37. Untitled | Acrylic on Paper | 10.5in x 14.3in | 1996



Fig. 38. Untitled | Acrylic on Paper | 10.5in x 14.3in | 1996



Fig. 39. Untitled | Acrylic on Paper | 12.2in x 9.4in | 1992

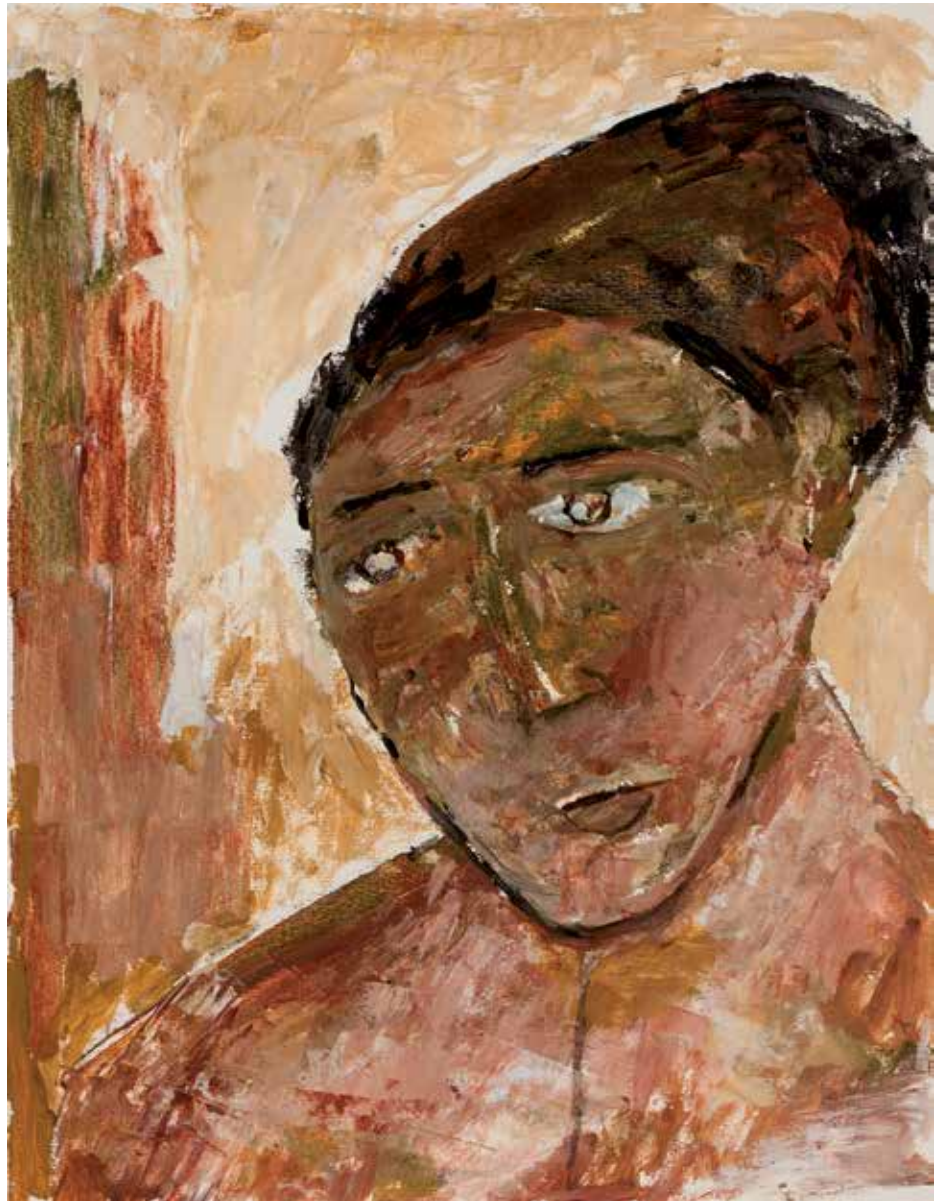


Fig. 40. Untitled | Acrylic on Paper | 12.2in x 9.4in | 1992



Fig. 41. Untitled | Acrylic on Paper | 12.2in x 9.4in | 1992



Fig. 42. Untitled | Acrylic on Paper | 23.1in x 17.9in | 1989



Fig. 43. Untitled | Acrylic on Paper | 17.9in x 23.1in | 1992



Fig. 44. Untitled | Acrylic on Paper | 18in x 23in | 1995



Fig. 45. Untitled | Acrylic on Paper | 22in x 30in | 2011



Fig. 46. Untitled | Pencil Colour on Paper | 18in x 23in | 1989

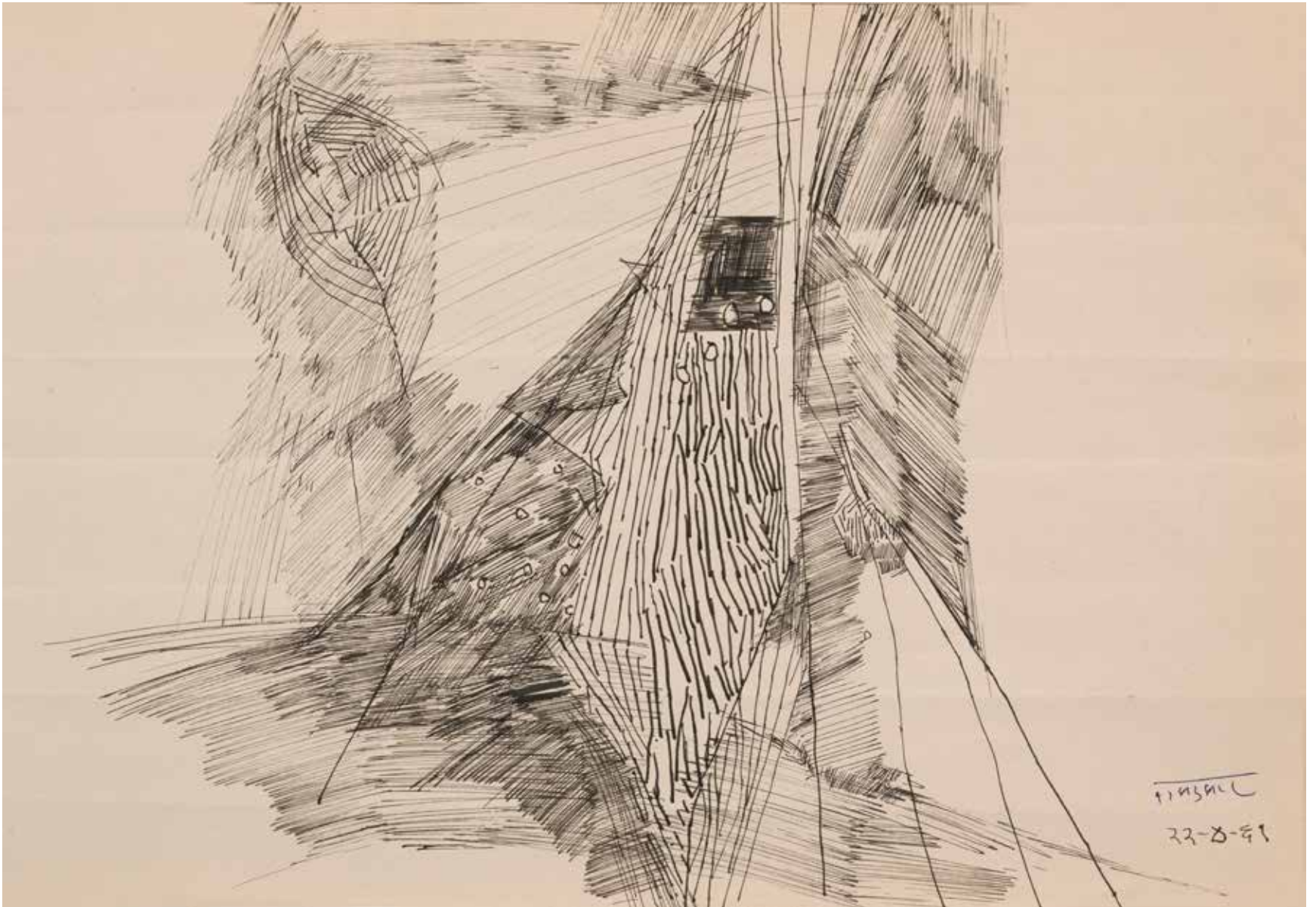


Fig. 47. Untitled | Pen and Ink on Paper | 12in x 8in | 1961



Fig. 48. Untitled | Pen and Ink on Paper | 12in x 8in | 1961



Fig. 49. Untitled | Oil on Canvas | 32in x 21.6in | 1960



Fig. 50. Untitled | Oil on Canvas | 36in x 60in | 2014



About

Arun Ghose

All branches of fine art extend their attraction to Arun Ghose yet his responses are far from equal to each of them. He is fascinated a lot more by the study of appreciation of arts, a fact that is supported by the volumes of critical essays he has written so far on artists and their art in India today. Even though he had completed his art training from recognised art institutions in India and abroad, he has stayed away from the creative arts and concentrated on assessment and appreciation, curating and conservation. He has served as the art-critic of a well-known literary magazine in Bengal and has introduced more than a hundred art exhibitions with his critical input besides authoring several books on life and art of veteran artists like Somenath Hore, Paritosh Sen and Sakti Burman. Recently, he also wrote a book on leading contemporary artist, Neeraj Goswami, which has been subject to much acclaim and praise. He, since last ten years, co-ordinates a post-graduate diploma course on 'Appreciation of Indian Art' at the Ramakrishna Mission Institute of Culture at

Kolkata and has delivered lectures in numerous national seminars on art, museology and conservation.

His professional career had an equally varied mix. He has served with due distinction in museums of repute for nearly thirty years before opting for being an independent art-expert since the beginning of the present millennia. He has, as ex-Curator of the Government of India's programme called 'Festival of India', organised important exhibitions of contemporary Indian Art abroad. Husian's last two major shows, entitled '88 Oils On His 88th Birthday' and 'The Lost Empire' had him closely working with the ageing artist both in India and London. His interest in conservation of paintings had resulted in his first book entitled 'Conservation And Restoration Of Cultural Heritage', published in Delhi in 1980.

He lives in Kolkata and works not being limited to this city alone.



About

Sanchit Art

Sanchit Art represents the best of contemporary Indian art and it specializes in showcasing quality artworks by artists of various age groups. It also aims to bridge the gap between artists working in India and abroad by establishing a platform to show contemporary European art in India while reciprocating the same with curated shows of contemporary Indian art abroad.


Sanchit Art now has two galleries in Delhi and Agra and both are spacious with full complement of necessary fittings necessary for display of contemporary art to its discerning and international clientele. It also has partnered InvesArt Gallery of Spain to show Picasso and Braque, among others, at the India Art Fair. One of our major shows at Singapore in April 2013, curated by Arun Ghose with works of nine seniors, was welcomed in the mainstream media of South East Asia in superlative terms. Sanchit Art is now in the process of firming up its initiative in Singapore with major art programs in the coming months.

Sanchit Art also has a dedicated team of researchers with a matching publication programme and believes in perfection, mutual trust and fairness as the cornerstones of all its interactions and dealings. It has already published a large 'coffee-table' book on art of Neeraj Goswami while its second book on a very important artist in India is under preparation.

Ganesh Pyne, Jayasri Burman, Jogen Chowdhury, K. Laxma Goud, Lalu Prasad Shaw, Neeraj Goswami, Paresh Maity, Ram Kumar, Sakti Burman, Sanjay Bhattacharya, Satish Gujral, Senaka Senanayake and Thota Vaikuntam are some of the artists represented by Sanchit Art.



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