



Peter Atkins, winner of the eighth India Triennale award, with a selection of his works in New Delhi on Friday.

It is a sombre thought that an artist can never escape the burden of his images. Carved in stone or laid in pigment, the record of his acts, they endure for posterity (or as much posterity as a troubled world will allow). To lesser artists, this situation may well be a minefield of embarrassments; but to a painter of the stature of Ram Kumar, it affords the serenity of a retrospective, a looking back over the sometimes leisurely, sometimes agitated progression of an *oeuvre*.

The retrospective of a major artist of our times, then, is always an event to be looked forward to. It is a strange and heightened moment when an artist considers the chain of decisions and coincidences that has defined his work; the hesitations, the false starts, the redeemed mileages of his quest. The Ram Kumar retrospective, organised by the Vadehra Gallery, New Delhi, provides a feast of paintings trawled from public as well as private collections; to admirers, many of whom are familiar with these works only through reproductions, this is a rare opportunity for first-hand viewing.

To trace Ram Kumar's evolution as a painter is to track the course of contemporary Indian painting. In the spiritual crises he has undergone, the choices of idiom he has made, we see reflected the tensions of an unfolding modernity, full of surprises and uncertainties. Beginning with a tragic modernism heavily coloured by Picasso and Leger, Ram Kumar spent the '50s perfecting a stylised, elegiac figuration. To this period belong the monumental Picassoesque figures packed into a darkened picture-womb, and the emaciated provincial townspeople struggling into the ill-fitting costume of urbanity whom he memorialised in paintings like *Sad Town*.

The exhibition moves from these early moorings in a post-colonial ethos of displacement, to the impassioned Banaras landscapes of the '60s: abandoning figuration, Ram Kumar explored this city of acute polarities, letting both grief and celebration trigger off a series of impasto contemplations on canvas. He addressed himself to the formal aberrations of mismatched planes, jamming the horizontal perspective against top views inspired by aerial photograph, and locking the riverbank architecture into a Cubist geometrical analysis. This immersion in the mixed motives of the holy city helped the artist to shade away from the landscape; retaining his bearings, he set sail towards the purely abstract departures which have since exercised his imagination.



A 1960 Ram Kumar: landscape through a Cubist lens

A painter's pilgrimage

20.2.94

The retrospective of Ram Kumar's paintings, currently showing at the Jehangir Art Gallery, Bombay, traces the senior painter's evolution over four decades. **Ranjit Hoskote** ruminates on the show



Ram Kumar

The retrospective attests to the crests as well as the troughs which have characterised this latter period: if the soaring, fantastic wedge motif, the fork of the watershed, and the streaming avalanches are catalogued, so too are

the muddier frames in which the beauty of the floating apparitions is absent. And yet, like a musical note sounded when it was least expected, out of the ochre-gold and olive of the undulating hills, the swift swathe of sparkling blue strikes out, more than compensating for the lapses along the way. At the end of the arduous climb, the pilgrim's vision is restored to fullness by an epiphany which,

childhood. In the workings of the elements, he senses the deeper intrigue of time; in the austere manner of the *shramana* seekers, he has turned from the cacophony of civil life to meditate on the ceremonials of decay and dissolution. The retrospective captures, with grace and sensitivity, this spirit of renunciation and passage from spring to autumn; Ram Kumar's annals are possessed of

To trace Ram Kumar's evolution as a painter is to track the course of contemporary Indian painting. In the spiritual crises he has undergone, the choices of idiom he has made, we see reflected the tensions of an unfolding modernity, full of surprises and uncertainties

unlike the seductive mirage, exalts by its presence.

Ram Kumar's pilgrimage has freed him from the pressure suit of society, given him the space to reflect upon the vast, moving forces of sky and sea and mountain which enthralled him in

the inevitability and yet the perennial surprise of the seasonal cycle. His sweeping colours, the jagged, stacking strokes of his palette knife, are always fresh; like the first apple, the first russet leaf of the year, they retain the germinal mystery of their coming.