

Landscape of harmony

The veteran artist's latest work shows that over the years he has begun to prefer stark settings sans the superbly painted still-life elements, says Uma Nair in Delhi.

RAM KUMAR'S ONGOING exhibition of landscapes at the Vadehra Art Gallery, embodies a personal and subjective vision, born out of rules of formal balance and naturalism.

The 68-year-old artist's originality in conceptualisation lies in the use of colour and light brushstrokes, giving his work an almost hallucinatory quality. There might be some who would look at these works and comment on their "unfinished" look, but today his style is valued for its individuality.

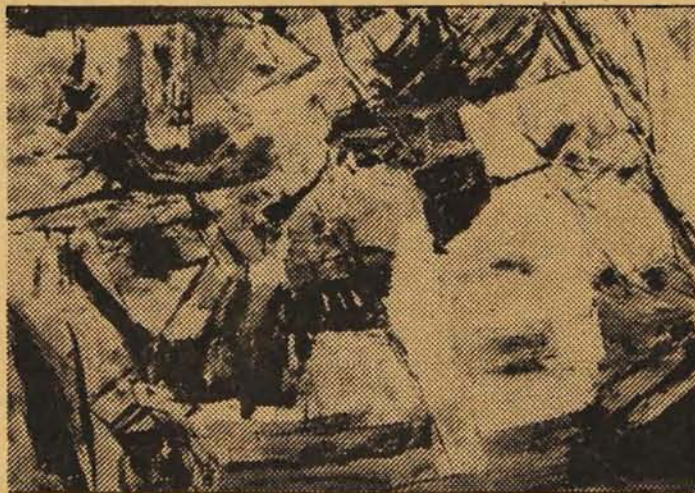
Kumar's search goes as far back as the '50s, to his sojourns in Europe. Andre Lhote and Ferdinand Lager lent delicate touches to the flavouring of this young man's intellect and when he came back to India aesthetic restraint took over from indulgence.

From the busy streets of Vara-

nasi, to the ice-laden Ladakh regions and now to this oeuvre, there is a relatedness that makes all his works part of a continuing dialogue.

As he lets his mind wander, his eyes light up at the memories of his Ladakh series: "For miles and miles, vast expanses of sandy earth without a tree or blade of grass appeared like a no-man's land. Grey mountain ranges out of which black rocks jutted out, looking like bas-reliefs; white mountains spread out were the shelters for man to survive and have faith in God.

"Even the blue sky and the crystal blue water of the Indus were dominated by rocky peaks and rug-



Kumar's work: superb use of colour, brushstrokes

ged mountains bathed in an eternal silence wasted landscape which refused to compromise with man. Later, while trying to interpret these impressions on canvas I could not visualise any colour ex-

cept grey, black and white." His images speak for themselves.

Kumar's art seems to unfold with the same calm and serious dignity as his life. There are no abrupt changes in his style, only a gradual perfecting of his skills. His streak of individuality is discernible in the way he handles his palette.

Even in the lighter whites and greys as with the contrasted ochres, his work is thick and richly textured, sometimes revealing an almost matted effect, like clotted cream. Over the years, his touch seems to have become lighter and broader, and there are unmistakable signs that he has begun to prefer stark settings without the superbly painted still-life elements that featured in his earlier city series.

"I have always ignored external trappings; my preoccupation has always been to communicate essential harmony. That is why I create works where space and atmosphere are rendered with astonishing vividness, but the individual forms, when looked at closely, dissolve onto blurred brushstrokes," volunteers the artist.

In the nourishment of artistic techniques, Kumar reveals a sense of truth not only of characterisation, but also of the mystery beneath nature. Can a sense of living reality be captured by what the mind knows to exist, without the eyes seeing it? In Kumar's brushwork one sees strokes that have less of force and more of judgement. And there is a sense of an unfinished symphony, which lends an immediacy and freshness which would have been lost in a more polished surface.

It is this visibility of Kumar's handiwork that brings us closer to both the artist himself and the mystery of the places he depicts. When brushwork is rapid, it can be taken to the extremes—it can become wispy and fragmented into strands where shadow and light merge into one. Like Tintoretto, Ram Kumar, too, goes in pursuit of the truth of the spirit. He seems prepared to go against the canons of form, and all notions of naturalism and of finish. There is then a revered but subtle championing of the spontaneity of the visible brushstroke. Here is a contemplative cast of mind where there is an intuitive understanding of subject matter whereby landscapes can be translated in the subtlety of visual interpretations into a kind of symbolism.