

SRR

## SMART ART



KISHORE SINGH

## Serial artist

The use of the term "series" in an artist's oeuvre is a manipulative one. Almost every artist has developed some series, though often it only communicates the suggestion of an umbrella under which a body of work can be viewed. Ram Kumar, we know, has been painting *Banaras* obsessively since the sixties, but can it be termed a series? Akbar Padamsee has his own *Metascape* series of inscapes or internalised landscapes. Tyeb Mehta painted a number of *Kali* and *Mahisasura* compositions, and even though they haven't been grouped as a series, the idea is there.

F N Souza did have a series of *Landscapes*, and *Heads*, perhaps even *Still-lives*, that would so qualify. As for S H Raza, ever since the eighties he has been working on his *Bindu*, *Kundalini* and *Germination* "series". Krishen Khanna has had to contend with his *Street*, and *Migrant* and *Bandwallah* series for as long as anyone can remember. A Ramachandran has devoted the better part of his career to painting the *Lotus Pond* series. The sculptor K S Radhakrishnan has split his oeuvre evenly between his *Maiya*



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Yet, each of these works remains an independent, standalone work of art. Collectors have probably commissioned these artists to make a "number" of similar works -

but a series? That term in the context of an unfolding narrative can truly only apply to M F Husain who painted the *Ramayana* series, for instance, on the behest of Ram Manohar Lohia, each painting moving that storyboard along. He then painted the *Mahabharata*, also as a series. It was this ability to link the plot that led to Guru Swaroop Srivastava commissioning him to paint, for the sum of ₹100 crore, as many paintings for the serial *Our Planet Called Earth*. More recently, it was as a series that he was commissioned to paint the history of the Arab civilisation for the royal family of Qatar, and the history of the Indian civilisation — or as he so piquantly put it, *From Mohenjodaro to Mahatma Gandhi* — for the Mittal family in London.

Such series do have a precedent in traditional art. Miniature painters were known to work mostly in series, whether on the epics, as Husain has done, or the *Rasleela*, the *Baramasa* (twelve seasons), the *Ragamala* (or musical notes, knitting them like a narrative). The idea of the painting as a unique work of art with no other link stems from the curriculum at art colleges that has been derived from Western art institutions.

Husain, it must be admitted, did paint "collections" that art writers have clubbed as a series for the sake of convenience. So, we have his *Horse*, his *Mother Teresa*, his *Untitled* works on musicians and dancers that have been labelled a series, even the mocking tone that he brought to a set of paintings on the British Raj that became his *Images of the Raj* series. In none of these paintings did he move the account forward. Yet, he was never removed from the idea of the narrative sequence, even when painting market-driven works such as *Gaja-Gamini* (the film and the paintings), or *Chandramukhi* (painted with Madhuri Dixit as muse, even though he was advancing the case of the cinematic character who, in turn, had been named after a mythical nymph), thus completing a conversation between the viewed works and the viewer.

Sadly, that opportunity of the narrative appears over. Why no other artist has chosen to work on the chronicle as a body of work — the "series" being an idea whose time is never done — will remain a mystery till someone reinvents that particular wheel.

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