'There's no charm in selling my work any more'

Artist Ram Kumar looks back at his life and remembers the various episodes that had a deep impact on his career

THE solitary figures on his canvas from the '50s, he says, are closest to who he is as a person. Like them, Ram Kumar, one of India's foremost abstract painters, yearns to be surrounded by his art rather than by a crowd. The 89-year-old, whose work *The Vagabond*, fetched $1.16 million at a Christie's auction in 2008, spends hours in his basement studio every day, where canvases lie stacked on shelves, and abstract landscapes, that have defined his oeuvre for years, are sheathed in plastic. At a solo show that will begin in Kolkata's Aakriti Art Gallery on August 1, his early works will be on display — sketches from the '60s with unseen gossamer-like line drawings made just before Kumar travelled to Varanasi for the first time. In this interview with **VANDANA KALRA**, the artist talks about his abiding enchantment with Varanasi, the camaraderie that existed between contemporary artists and painting for himself. Excerpts:

The line drawings in the Kolkata exhibition are from a phase of transition, just before you visited Varanasi in 1960. After that, your oeuvre completely changed. How was it to revisit those works?
These are works from my sketchbooks, that I never thought I'd exhibit. They were very private, capturing what I was feeling at that moment. They need not have led to any bigger work. It's like practising lines. I used to draw in ledgers, because those were cheaper than sketchbooks.

What made you move away from figurative to abstract paintings? Several artists of your generation went on to practise both, but you never returned to figurative work.
After making figurative works for over a decade, I felt I had done all that I could have. If I continued, I would just be repeating myself. There was an ambiguity about abstracts. I had something in mind, but chose not to title them, so everyone is free to have their own interpretation. Cities attracted me. Landscapes that were in the backdrop in the figurative works came to the forefront. All the places I visited impacted my work, whether it was Greece or Ladakh, Paris, Venice, Prague or Baghdad.

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AMIT MEHRA

COURTESY: VADEHRA ART GALLERY

ing in the mornings for lessons on Indian art. In 1948, I gave up a bank job to pursue art. It was the money in art that drew me to it. You could sell two works for Rs 300 and manage the month. My first solo was at Kumar Gallery in Delhi, I don't think many works found buyers but the thrill of exhibiting was unmatched.

How challenging was it to survive in Paris (1949-52)? Was it a completely different world, considering a lot was happening in art, unlike in India, where modern art was still finding its feet?
It was enlightening to be there. I went by a boat, with a one-way ticket sponsored by my father. I had no funds for a ticket back. Thankfully, I met a French lady who was extremely welcoming of Indian tenants. I was freelancing for an Indian newspaper from France and started writing when I was still in transit. Studying under (French sculptor and painter) Andre Lhote and (painter, sculptor, filmmaker) Fernand Leger, of course, had a long term impact. I visited several exhibitions and museums, saw all the art that I'd only read about. In one of the gatherings, I remember a (Henri) Matisse being sold for Rs 200. One can't even dream of that now. When SH Raza came there, I went to receive him at the station. We used to meet often, go for exhibitions and visit galleries. I even became a member of the French Communist Party, but that was shortlived.

Did you consider settling in Europe like FN Souza and Raza?
No, I always wanted to come back home.

But when you returned, your art seemed to express a lot of pain.
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backdrop in the figurative works came to the forefront. All the places I visited impacted my work, whether it was Greece or Ladakh, Paris, Venice, Prague or Baghdad.

But Varanasi was special. It stayed with you and continued to be a part of your work.

It was (artist) MF Husain who first took me to Varanasi in 1960. It was an impromptu trip — one day, he just asked me to pack my bags for 10 days and go with him. We stayed at Prem Chand's *haveli*. Both of us used to part ways in the morning, work on our own and discuss our experiences at night. It was an instant emotional attachment, very profound. I saw faith in that city, it belongs to the dead and the living. There was a mass of people, yet, for me, no human being could depict the anguish. It required symbolic motifs. As I began to paint, the landscapes came naturally and gradually, the outlines faded into abstracts. I went to Varanasi several times after that. Now age does not allow me, or else I would be there again.

Your brother Nirmal Verma was a renowned writer. You also began your career working for a newspaper. What made you take up art?

As a child, I was not in the least interested in art. I belonged to a large middle-class family and my father was a government employee in Shimla. There was no emphasis on creative pursuits, but somehow my brother and I got into writing. For us, it was also a way of earning some money. I began painting really late. While studying economics at St Stephen's College in Delhi, I chanced upon an art exhibition in 1945. I was very excited and enrolled for classes at Sarada Ukil School of Art in Delhi, where (one of India's early modernist painters) Sailoz Mukherjee used to teach. Initially, I just went for the evening classes, when Western art was taught. Later, I started going to exhibitions and visit galleries. I even became a member of the French Communist Party, but that was shortlived.

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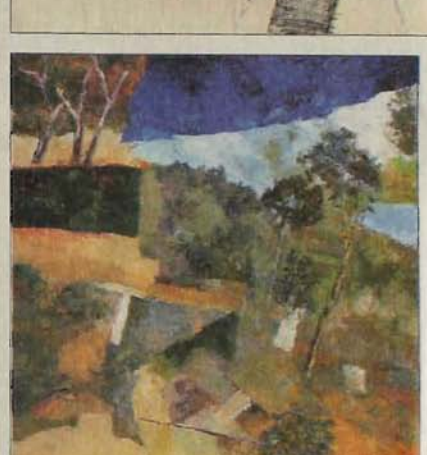

VOCABULARY OF ABSTRACTION (clockwise from top) The artist in his east Delhi residence; a line sketch that will be exhibited at the show in Kolkata; an untitled oil on canvas; another oil on canvas inspired by Varanasi

COURTESY: VADEHRA ART GALLERY

Did you consider settling in Europe like FN Souza and Raza?

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But when you returned, your art seemed to express a lot of pain.

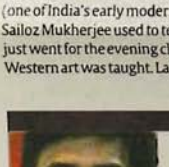
It was symbolic of the overall oppression in post-Partition India. There was a lot of alienation, uneasiness about discovering modern India. There were refugees who had fled Pakistan. My figures were dressed in suits, reflecting modernity, but they were still struggling with their emotions and thoughts.

There was a lot of companionship between artists at that time. Was it the struggle you all faced that brought you together?

We all had common and individual concerns. I was part of the (artist group) Delhi Shilpi Chakra, and all of us met regularly, but I think the artists' community was more close-knit in Mumbai. Even I visited Mumbai often. I was very thick with Bal Chhabra and Husain. I stayed with Kekoo Gandhy (co-founder of Gallery Chemould) a couple of times.

You rarely venture out for art events...

I still go for exhibitions, but not for openings. I avoid crowds. I usually go when my friends are showing. I meet Raza too, but not often — we are both old and our houses are far apart. Among the younger generation, I like the work of Subodh Gupta and Atul Dodiya, I've seen some of their work and read about them. Besides, I like spending time in my studio. I paint for myself. I've sold a lot and there's no charm in selling my work any more. People do ask for work; if they come, I show them what I have, but now I want to rest, not organise exhibitions.



speak easy

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Call of the Wild

The idea of India pervades the writings of Hugh Allen and Jim Corbett, despite their popularity as *shikar* writers

RUPA Rainlight has reissued *The Lonely Tiger* (1960), the solitary book of Hugh Allen, David Davidar's favourite *shikar* writer. He was convalescing in India from a serious head injury, a memento of World War II, when Independence changed the map. He elected to stay on. His sister and he bought an estate in Mandikhera (now Madikheda, in Shivpuri district, Madhya Pradesh), and sowed peanuts and sesame. It was the 1950s, when owning a gun brought on certain duties: shooting for the pot, and culling agricultural pests and predators to make lebensraum for the burgeoning peasantry, the new poor of colonial India.

Allen is an engaging writer with an easy personal style, conveying with equal facility the hair-trigger tension of tracking big cats and the beauty of the central Indian forests, once the favourite hunting grounds of the Mughals. Overrun by farmland now, they were already dwindling in his time. Allen covers the same ground as Jim Corbett, who is more popular, but perhaps his work feels more intense because he packs between two covers the material that Corbett used to fill out eight books, from *Man-Eaters of Kumaon* (OUP, 1944) to *The Temple Tiger* (OUP, 1954).

Similarities in their work are inevitable simply because of geographical proximity. Corbett ranged wider, from the hills of Uttarakhand, where he was born, to Mokama Ghat on the Ganga, where he worked in the railways and as a labour contractor for 12 years, but Madhya Pradesh has similar ecological zones too. And so, while Corbett relentlessly hunted a boar that the villagers had named the Son of Shaitan — and it had the luck of the devil — Allen wrote of lying up in a hide for an unstoppable boar whose body already contained two of his bullets.

In the hide, he heard the most dreaded sound of the darkened jungle, the slither of a snake. Only one thing could be worse — being locked up in a darkened room with a venomous reptile. In *Life at Mokameh Ghat* (*My India*, 1952), Corbett wrote of being in a darkened bathroom with a cobra. He had quenched his lantern by accident, splashing water on it in his hurry to get away, and had to wait for half an hour in pitch darkness, naked and absolutely still, before his workers discovered that he needed help.

Like Corbett, Allen was a conservationist born in a huntin', shootin' age. "The thrill of hunting vanished the second after I had pulled the trigger," he wrote. "After that, when I look down at the lifeless body, there comes a pang of remorse and the guilty thought that there, but for me, goes a magnificent animal." And both books are finally about identity. Corbett's writing displayed a deep bond with India's poor, almost nationalistic in tone. Allen, too, was attached to the fields and forests of the country he had adopted, choosing the life of the peanut farmer over the clerical boredom of London, which many demobilised soldiers found intolerable after the disruptive excitement of a World War. They are identified as *shikar* writers, but their real subject was the idea of India.