

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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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.

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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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