

KUMAR GALLERY



Sohan Qadri

The reclusive Punjabi artist who had a thing for tantra

A retrospective at Kumar Gallery, Delhi of the reclusive Punjabi artist, Sohan Qadri, who lived in a small apartment in Copenhagen until his death in 2011.



A work by reclusive artist Sohan Qadri. (Photo courtesy: Kumar Gallery)

Few abstractionists will evoke the mystery that tantric artists such as Sohan Qadri will do. The “reclusive” Punjabi artist who lived in a small apartment in Copenhagen until his death in 2011, was a practitioner was part of the neo-tantra movement, a movement that gained traction among a section of artists in the 1960s. After Ajit Mookerjee’s seminal book on Tantra Art in 1966 -- Mookerjee was the then director and curator at the Crafts Museum -- many artists such as G R Santosh, Biren De and J Swaminathan were influenced by tantric rituals and meditative practices.

However, unlike fellow masters such as Santosh, De and Om Prakash Sharma, Qadri was not just incorporating Tantric symbols and geometry in his works, but was also a full-time practitioner of those strict meditative practices. “He ran a full time centre for yoga and meditation in Copenhagen. And it is this spiritual experience that defined and shaped his work,” says Sunit Kumar, director at the Kumar Gallery, that is displaying 50 of Qadri’s works on the occasion of his 85th birth anniversary.

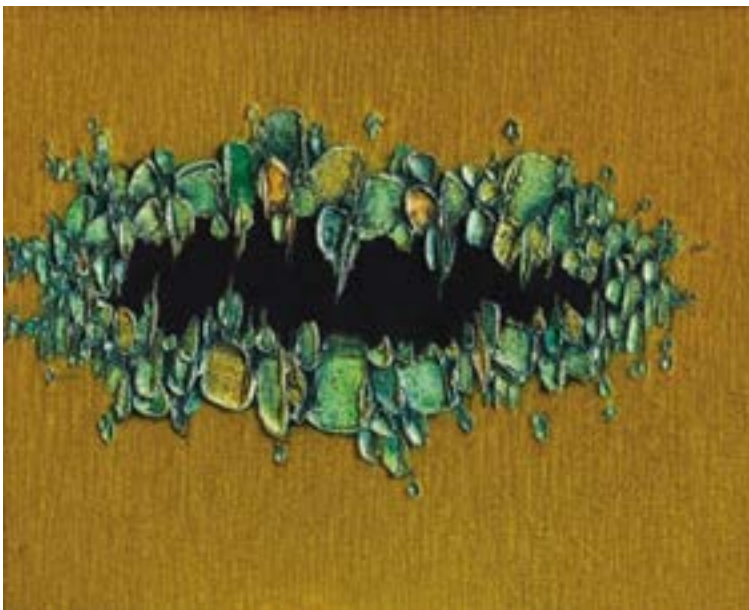


Artist Sohan Qadri (Photo courtesy: Kumar Gallery)

On display are the artist's vibrant, minimalist paintings with their unique texture, and replete with tantric symbols that define the male and female. The works include oil impastos (paint applied thickly) that Qadri did in the 1970s and the 1980s, as well as the ink dyes and incision on paper, a process that he developed in his later years.

If the underpinning philosophy and vivid colours make the work of this modernist captivating, his technique is no less fascinating. In a short video made by the New York-based Sundaram Tagore gallery, Qadri can be seen making incisions on pre-soaked paper, and then layering the canvas with different colours with a thick paint brush.

Each colour is a mixture made out of several dyes, Qadri explains in the video, even as he painstakingly shapes his incisions on paper after each application. These repeated incisions were part of the "meditative process" that he went through while developing his abstracts.



Untitled, Copenhagen, 1984, oil impasto on canvas (Photo courtesy: Kumar Gallery)

The proclivity towards meditation and spirituality, however, predates his art. At 14, the Phagwara-based Sohan Singh was introduced to tantra and yoga, and six years later, he travelled to the Himalayas to practise meditation.

Later, he went to art school in Shimla, was introduced to Sufism and changed his last name to that of his guru, Ahmed Ali Shah Qadri.

In 1963, the modernist painter who had until then displayed his works only in Punjab, came to Delhi to take part in an exhibition alongside leading abstract artists such as V S Gaitonde, Ram Kumar and Santosh at the Kumar gallery. “Since then he went on to live and work in so many cities, but the essence of his work always remained Indian,” says Kumar.

His work was celebrated across Europe and North America, and in the '90s, when Qadri started visiting India more, Kumar decided that the gallery would show his work more often. Despite his fame as an artist, Qadri was not a very “social” being, and remained a recluse until the very end. “Rarely does one find an artist who is also a spiritual being, and will stay true to his meditative philosophy,” says Kumar.

What: Celebration: Paintings by Sohan Qadri from 1970-2010

Where: Kumar Gallery, 56, Sunder Nagar, New Delhi

When: January 20-February 5, 2017, 11 am-7 pm

By Namita Kolhi