

## Formless chaos

Jaideep Mehrotra looks at urban spaces as you and I might view theatre, says Kishore Singh

Mumbai-based Jaideep Mehrotra is an infrequent visitor to New Delhi — he prefers New York — and his show here, after 18 years, brings to the city an artist at ease with himself and his context: one of “social structure”, he says, though you might be excused for thinking that it ought to be social infrastructure.

Mehrotra's world is an urban space, a place that even as it “grows inwards, loses its sense of openness”, pulses with “energy”. This coherence of emptiness and collectiveness that distinguishes personal from public space, is what distinguishes his current exhibition, *Growing Pains in Solitude*, in which he uses the window as a metaphor. In one, therefore, a form descends from a ceiling — a chandelier? a mass of cobwebs? — while a window tilted to one side overlooks the outside, the inspiration for which came when he stayed at a “palace” in Samode. “At one level it was sad that the maharajas no longer lived in these magnificent rooms where anonymous strangers now pay money and live; and at another level it was extremely positive that people had access to these places, so they were not neglected,” Mehrotra recounts.

It is only after a while you notice that the crowds and chaos of his urbanscapes are devoid of any human form, that there is no visible presence of any living being, that the buildings and streets and traffic



PHOTO BY PRIYANKA PARASHAR

**Mehrotra loves the energy of most urban spaces**

alone are suggestive of the voyeurism of our daily lives. Interestingly, three DVDs loop short films that bring in the human dimension and a sense of energy that is as compulsive as it is oppressive.

Alive to the process of experimentation less to shock but more as a natural progression of ideas, you can imagine Mehrotra looking out of his window at other windows, highrises, blocks, towers and billboards, assimilating within the chaos separate stories being enacted, not unlike theatre. The mess of the roads becomes, as you remove yourself, an overview, while the closer you get, the more it abstracts itself. “Some canvases are both,” agrees Mehrotra. For him, “the canvas is mute, a blank space where an artist tries to tell a lot of stories”, some of which work, some satisfy him and many of which he throws into the dustbin — “My rejection rate”, he says of completed canvases, “is 30 per cent.”

Nor does he shy away from using computers for his work. “I take photographs of a canvas I am working on to see how a particular colour might look, or how a form might develop”, and uses digital technology with happy — “for me as an artist” — results. Any impositions placed on artists annoy him. Otherwise easy-going, he now explodes: “Who creates these parameters?” he asks. “Who decides them? Galleries ask artists to be consistent because it’s easy for them to market a uniform style.” It’s not one he’s happy to accept. “The artistic concept” — such as his enduring affair with urbanscapes — “might be a common thread”, but he refuses to be ruled by colours, or mediums. As perhaps a player on his landscape of images, you can only nod, whether in approval or disapproval. That choice alone is yours. ■