

ABSTRACTIONS OF death are legion, especially in the visual arts, since our voyeuristic impatience tends to warm the coldest gaze. The daily images fed to us are simplified, dandyfied, in acknowledgement that the modern eye has not the endurance to linger. Max Kandhola, a second generation Indian immigrant in the UK and head of photography at Nottingham Trent University, has tried to turn the temperature back down on precisely this impulse. *Illustration of Life* and *Flatland*, A Landscape of Punjab, his exhibits showing at Photoink in New Delhi, make a strong pitch for a non-eureka ethic in Indian photography. These pictures, both the great and mediocre, require us to stare.

Illustration is the first part of a trilogy about Kandhola's family legacy; the second (*Flatland*) is about his Punjabi homeland and the final will involve family portraits and habitats. Begun in 1996, *Illustration* chronicles his father's succumbing to cancer. Its images are deliberately approximate – shaky views of his father's face, jump cuts of his eyes, neck, navel, and, most radically, notional totems like faint blood patches on tissue, hair fragments, bruises, urine movements in plastic bags, and the final ashes. Kandhola would collect the artefacts of his father's ruin in plastic bags to photograph later; he was unwittingly peering at his father through the viewfinder when he died. Kandhola photographed his dying mother too in 1984,



THE TAMING OF FADING LIGHT

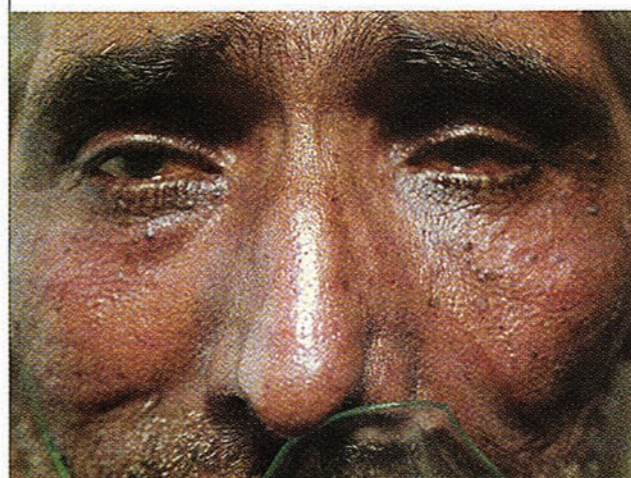
Max Kandhola's images of family death and homeland swing between the jejune and the lovely, says **GAURAV JAIN**

also shooting a death mask of her face. "The body has nothing to hide after death," he says with a small smile. "It won't bring people back to life, but it gave me a place to think... and yes, romanticise. I studied the history of such work in literature and art and tried to add to that body of work." That work included

Richard Avedon's shots of his father and Annie Liebowitz's portraits of her dying partner Susan Sontag. Kandhola likes to withhold emotion in order to evoke it, and excluded other people in these images of backlit rooms.

But Kandhola ends up producing his own prudishness – the grisliness of death's

debris is distanced with close-ups, creating a new type of abstraction rather than breaking through it. Critic Alka Pande emphasises his personal associations with the images, but the lay viewer cannot shake off the feeling of *Illustration* being forced and jejune, since its images work only as concepts.



A LANDSCAPE IS a proverbial scene of the good life. In *Flatland*, Kandhola traced his family's provenance on a map of Punjab and, starting in 2003, made several visits to shoot the unfamiliar countryside. He would give prints of old masters like Turner and Constable to scouts and ask them to seek similar scenes. "And they got it! They understood the views I was looking for," he laughs.

Using a strict grid and influenced by Ansel Adams' formalism, Kandhola began by studying Indian paintings,

Kandhola would give prints of old masters like Turner and Constable to scouts and ask them to seek similar scenes in the Punjab countryside

but braked when he realised it was never going to be his tradition. He returned to his idyllic British landscapes. His square-framed images are reminiscent of Constable's Fen Lane, Monet's shimmering haystack, Turner's cornfield. There's little, however, that's spectacular about what Kandhola is looking at – he rests his effects on careful

framing and delicate lighting of ordinary content.

The first thing that strikes you about these Punjabi sights is this lovely pellucid light, closer to Nordic fields or Oxford lawns – more Ingmar Bergman than Karan Johar. "When I first showed the prints, no one could tell they were from India," agrees Kandhola. He shot primarily in twilight, disliking the crisp-

Cold allusions Images from *Flatland* (facing page and left) and from *Illustration of Life* (below left and right)



ness of local afternoons and how it saturates everything. He says, "I knew the politics of photography in India – the street, beggars, the erotic, riotous colours. But these pictures are also India!" Some early racist experiences left an impression, but, he says, "I don't mind being collected as a black or Asian photographer. Or for my

work's themes like death." A diaspora Indian with some assimilation baggage returns only to anglicise the homeland? Kandhola defends himself gamely saying he had to employ the European tradition that's his own.

Flatland's more interesting aspect, however, is how it pushes against photography's ethos of instantaneous capture, which conceives a photographer as a Midas of moments – seizing the one decisive moment or culling an image from numerous

shots – rather than an assembler of a vision. Kandhola is more interested in producing a picture rather than just transferring a view onto photo paper. And as a teacher, he sees a related trend: "Some young Indian photographers are rather naïve in their approach. They have seductive pictures but unresolved portfolios. A project of 20 pieces has 15 ideas rather than taking one idea all the way through." It is this anxiety that Kandhola taps out in his work – to not squeeze the finger till an apt gland dilates before the good life. ●