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## Translating the Holocaust through Indian eyes

Why has a Jewish museum hired Ranbir Kaleka, a Punjabi with a different take on the Middle East, to create a permanent installation piece on the Holocaust?

When the Spertus Jewish Museum in Chicago decided to revitalize its Holocaust exhibition, the directors made a puzzling choice for the lead artist: a Punjabi multimedia artist known for his playful, overtly sexual work.

The choice becomes even stranger when the artist admits he was reluctant to accept the offer for “obvious reasons” (the Israeli state’s treatment of Palestinians). And, to top it all, this will be the first instance an Indian artist has been commissioned by a western museum to create a permanent piece.

But Felicitas Heimann-Jelinek, the chief curator of the Jewish Museum of the City of Vienna, who was called in to help with the transformation of the Spertus, and Spertus director Rhoda Rosen, were determined to challenge the approach Jewish museums take toward the Holocaust, and Ranbir Kaleka has never been one to shy away from a challenge.

Delhi-based Kaleka has been painting for more than 30 years and his vibrant work exudes a calm confidence. As a painter, he attempts to capture stories without end in paint. His multimedia work, meanwhile, combines painted images with film, creating a surreal landscape of living images. *The New York Times* called his work “a multimedia sleight of hand, in which reality and illusion dance a gentle dance”.

One of his most famous pieces, *Man with a Cockerel*, shows a man and his mirror image endlessly grappling with loss, discovery and love, through the capture and escape of a cockerel against an ethereal, painted plane.

Kaleka, 54, says his work creates a hyper-image, with “the presence of the painting, but with the aura of image made with light”. His installation for the Spertus will follow this tradition, tracking a painted girl, with braided hair, as she crosses from her canvas to a transparent screen in search of memories.

The girl, as well as all the characters and the ambience of the installation, will be distinctly Indian. The narrative voiceover will have an American accent, rather than a Germanic or Polish one. Therefore, the visual and aural aspects will not reference the Holocaust, broadening the scope of the piece beyond that moment in history. Of course, the anecdote that forms the plot of the installation comes from an Auschwitz survivor, recounting his work which involved separating wool in a factory in the concentration camp. Eventually human hair—including braided hair, lovingly decorated with coins and pieces of fabric—passes through the factory and the workers must separate that as well.

However, Kaleka says it will not be a weepy, dramatic account of the horrors. It will be a matter-of-fact telling that expands our interpretation of the past and insists that all human life is valuable.

Kaleka pauses often to ruminate over his words, carefully choosing his explanation of how he came up with his Chicago installation piece. He says most Jewish museums focus their Holocaust exhibitions on extreme visualizations of torture or attempt to recreate how Jews felt, through disorientation or claustrophobia. Neither, he says, can ever begin to reveal to the viewer the true experience of the victims. But Kaleka has a greater issue with most Holocaust displays: the Jewish-centric preoccupation with the event. “The Jewish people have suffered a great deal, but other people and other races have, too. Perhaps, not in one major event like this one, but there have been moments in history like this one. And it continues to happen today.” He said that he couldn’t undertake a work today that spoke solely of Jewish suffering. But, as he thought of it, he realized a shift could be made in the study of the Holocaust. And, as an outsider, he was ideally situated to contribute to the shift from a European-Jewish focus on the event to a universal look at human suffering. So when he visited the museum last fall they decided to address the European-Jewish fate, not as a singular, but as a universal fate. The piece will reside on the ninth floor, in a space that overlooks Lake Michigan. His girl will float on a space between the sky and the water.

Back in Delhi to work on the piece, a sense of optimism permeates Kaleka. His home of the past five years reflects this. The airy apartment, where he lives with his wife and son, is bathed in light from several windows. Soft oranges and pinks decorate the walls. A pillar has morphed into a whimsical grey totem pole marked in black symbols. An androgynous drawn figure surrounded in a purple flurry of butterflies watches over the scene. And a spoilt white cat tiptoes around. Here, the Holocaust seems like a distant nightmare.

But Kaleka’s no stranger to institutionalized violence. He has watched his own state suffer during Operation Bluestar, and when he speaks of the repression of Palestinian protests in Israel, an edge appears in his usually soft voice. His work is a risk for the museum. He says he admires its directors for taking that risk. The funders of the museum will not see the piece until it is finished—only a month before the planned reopening of the museum. Kaleka says they can veto the piece. “They can say, ‘How does this Indian know and why is he dealing with us?’”

The museum is set to open in September 2007. Kaleka’s work can be viewed online at [www.rkaleka.com](http://www.rkaleka.com). His works have previously sold for Rs7.5 lakh.