



Ranbir Kaleka. PHOTOGRAPH BY MANMEET SINGH.

Event, Metaphor, Memory

Ranbir Kaleka has had a busy two years. A solo show of his video installations ran at Bose Pacia New York from March 20th to April 26th 2008, and in 2007, the Jewish Museum in Chicago commissioned him to make a multi-media installation especially for their premises. **Latika Gupta** catches up with the veteran artist to discuss his work.

LATIKA GUPTA: DO YOU THINK YOUR PAINTINGS AND VIDEOS HAVE evolved over time?

Ranbir Kaleka: What has not changed over the years is what I want from my work. There is a process of meaning-making where I arrive at an 'event'. This 'event' is a psychological state, which employs images that have a universal familiarity and taps into our collective sense of memory. In painting, the 'event' may be created through a configuration of people and objects. The stance of the body, the trajectory of the eye, the texture of surfaces, the vigour (or otherwise) of the painter's hand all contribute towards creating what I call an 'event', the reading of which is not linear and not necessarily temporally or geographically specific but carries the physiological buzz of familiarity or an emotional twinge of recognition.

I like inventing metaphorical 'events', which are not culturally specific; I have also looked at art from other cultures and acquired a larger visual repertoire. My way of using colour has changed over the years. Emerging from a range of grays, I began pushing colours to the threshold of garishness. I felt that it was possible to produce a kind of sophisticated kitsch, which was complex and nuanced.

L.G.: Has the quality of your involvement with video art changed?

R.K.: I started to think of creating an image combining painting and video in the late '80s but it was in 1998/99 that I made my first video/painting piece.

My interest in video arose more from my interest in cinema than from video art. I wanted to see what would happen if I combined the physicality of the painted image with an image made out of light. I arrived at a sort of hyper-image, which had a quality different from both painting and the cinematic or video image. This became another tool with which to create 'events'.

L.G.: What do you think about the state of video art in India?

R.K.: I think younger artists are increasingly getting sensitized to video; they've grown up with the moving image and can understand its meaning-making potential. In addition, there are younger buyers as well and a new market for video art.

L.G.: How involved are you in the way your work is displayed? For instance, the version of your video *Man with Cockerel* at Anupam Poddar's house was so much more nuanced than the one at the large travelling group show, *Expanding Horizons*, recently curated by Sudhir Patwardhan. Do you believe the meaning of a work changes depending on how it is displayed?

R.K.: I am very involved with the display of my work. The nature of installation is such that it requires different solutions in different venues. Some works have the versatility to work at a monumental scale. *Man with Cockerel* has been projected in an enlarged format on a wall to be viewed from afar and also within a small alcove; it has been projected on a suspended board in a dark room where it looked like a floating mirror, and

[Interview]

on Plexiglass where the image seemed to be trapped like a genie in a bottle.

In these ways, entry into the work is affected subtly - the work may appear intimate and inward looking, or in other places, it may appear to be reflecting on the world in general. It can have a humorous twist as well, for example, when Anupam Poddar projected it so that the best view of the work was from his bathtub. As the work is not about any one thing and has multiple entry points, it only enriches the work if viewers pass varied nodes on the spokes of a turning wheel.

L.G.: Do you feel that your work is interpreted differently abroad?

R.K.: My work isn't culture-specific. I think its meaning depends on one's personal experience of life itself. Although people in the West have asked one question, which someone here may not have: whether the cockerel is culturally significant in India! What surprised me, though, was that whenever somebody found something 'spiritual' in the work, it was always an Indian viewer and not a Westerner looking for transcendental meanings in the work of an artist from the 'spiritual East'.

L.G.: Tell us about *Consider*, the audio-visual work you are showing at the Spertus Museum in Chicago. I am intrigued, since the museum is being projected as having double axes of focus - Jewish history, on the one hand, and working with people who engage with ideas of ethnic, religious or cultural identity, on the other.

R.K.: The installation *Consider* was commissioned as a Holocaust Memorial by the Spertus Museum, but before accepting the commission I made it clear that I would only be interested in creating this work if we could make it relevant for everybody, so that it might touch lives.

Consider has no Jewish or European people in it, it has no European sound. All the people are Indian but without being ethnically obvious. There is a reference to an event that occurred in Auschwitz, which was originally narrated by a man from a small place near Greece; but here I used a woman to narrate his testament. In the second half of the piece, it is read by an American. I attempted to shift the work away from specificity so that more essential aspects would emerge. Thus, watching it, we wouldn't only feel sorry for what happened to the Jewish people, we would also be concerned with how humans behave.

L.G.: What new projects do you have in the pipeline?

R.K.: I am working on a painting for the Khushi Foundation auction in which I am collaborating with A.R. Rahman and making a free-standing triptych with some sculptural elements to go with the paintings. I am also working on some sculptural pieces in which I am dealing with the idea of porous or leaking bodies.



Ranbir Kaleka. *Consider.* 2 channel projection with sound. 2007.
COMMISSIONED BY THE SPERTUS MUSEUM WITH SUPPORT FROM THE BERNARD AND ROCHELLE ZELL HOLOCAUST CENTER.



Ranbir Kaleka. *Consider (Detail).* 2 channel projection with sound. 2007.
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Ranbir Kaleka. *Fables From The House of Ibaan.* Single-channel video projection on painted canvas (size variable). 5 minutes 10 seconds loop with sound. 2007.