

Art in America

SEPTEMBER 2006

Ranbir Kaleka at Bose Pacia

Born in 1953 in Punjab, Ranbir Kaleka is based in Delhi. In the '90s he became known for intensely hued Neo-Expressionistic paintings with dense, libidinal narratives, recalling the work of Sandro Chia. Since the late '90s Kaleka has also created installations involving stripped-down realist paintings with video projections superimposed upon them. His tableaux no longer feel congested, even though video can carry more imagery and variety than paintings alone. The three installations at Bose Pacia were first shown in the iCon (India Contemporary) exhibition in Venice during the 2005 Biennale.

In the simplest of these, *Man Threading a Needle* (1999), a video image of a middle-aged man moving slightly as he squints to thread a needle is projected over an oil painting on an easel of the same subject. The synchronization of painted and video images could be seen as something like the coordination of hand and eye that the man requires to perform his task. The colored light in the video reinforces the loosely painted hues, creating an unusual tonal richness.

In the looped, single-channel video projection *Man with a Cockerel* (2002), Kaleka dispenses with painting in favor of a vertical-format blank board. In the upper half of the image, a man is shown from the waist up holding a rooster. In the bottom half, the figure is vertically "mir-

rored" and appears upside down. Sometimes, as the bird struggles, the "reflection" diverges, or both halves chimerically dissolve. The quality of the background, which looks as though it has been hand-brushed, along with the liquid distortions of the imagery, gives the piece a painterly effect.

The most complex work here was *Crossings* (2005), a four-channel, 15-minute video loop projected onto four 6-by-8-foot paintings hung in a row. The paintings depict figures against blank white backgrounds, including a family setting out on a journey, a bird seller, a suited man and two Sikhs engaged in dyeing a turban. Sometimes the video projections activate the blank areas of the paintings, so that, for example, a cross-legged man sitting on the ground in one painting is suddenly in Delhi, with traffic flowing past. At other times the video sets the painted figures in motion, layering over them slight changes in pose.

One action, nearly abstract in close-up, and divided among the panels, shows the scene of cloth being dyed in a village pond, then wrung and dried in the wind by figures unseen but for their shadows. An elderly Sikh then winds the cloth into a turban on a younger man's head. Animations of whirlwinds gradually cover all four panels, obscuring the various characters. In the end, the figures reappear

next to a modern expressway.

Hybrid formats can be fragile and demanding. Kaleka combines video with painting in a way that revivifies both mediums, infusing his keen formal skills with a contemporary awareness of movement and time.

—P.C. Smith

Ranbir Kaleka: *Crossings*, 2005, 4-channel video projection on 4 paintings, 15 minutes; at Bose Pacia.

