

Ranbir Kaleka, Bose Pacia

After a decade of working primarily in video art (albeit often projected onto canvases), Indian artist Ranbir Kaleka turned the bulk of his attention back to his home medium of painting for this exhibition, titled "Reading Man." The show, conceived as follow up to "Fables from the House of Ibaan: Stage 1," Kaleka's 2008 exhibition of video installations (also held at Bose Pacia), included several installations incorporating his pictures, and thus posed a set of questions about the relevance of painting today and the implications of experimentally working between media.

Kaleka, who was trained in painting in Chandigarh, India, and at the Royal College of Art in London, has lived in New Delhi since the mid-1990's. When he began to transition into video art toward the end of that decade, oil on canvas was virtually the universal medium of contemporary Indian art. Kaleka managed to create an interest in video in his home country by developing a painterly language for his multimedia projects, re-creating the refined feel of his earlier works in delicately transparent, slow-moving video like *Man with Cockerel*, 2001-2002, and rehearsing the act of painting in *Man Threading a Needle*, 1998-1999, which was itself projected onto a picture of the title figure.



*The Itinerant Librarian's Dilemma of Choice and Refusal* 2008-2009 height: 36" x width: 24", acrylic and oil on canvas, two 37" x 18" wood wing-doors with acrylic mirrors

The focal work in the recent exhibition was the eponymous *Reading Man* (all works 2009), a triptych of large-scale vertical canvases that depict a male hunter navigating a barren landscape and looking toward a distant and colorful paradise. His progression into a lush space teeming with almost psychedelic flora follows the artist's particular interest in the representation of narrative and in understanding the viewer's interest in the representation of narrative and in understanding how we "see" stories. In this work, however, the subtlety is undermined by the installation in which the triptych is presented. The panels are set above horizontal overlapping greyish canvases and behind a life-size wire sculpture of a man reading a book — presumably one relating the narrative depicted — replicated in three different poses. Besides compromising the viewer's ability to see the painting, these wire sculptures seem incompatible with the canvases' elegant execution. Several other objects in the installation likewise interrupt the sense of a narrative—a working clock and half of a silvered jacket hang at left, and a silver bowl and knife are on the table at right. The juxtaposition of these objects and the imagery in the paintings suggest an engagement with the language of Surrealism (though one might criticize as too easy the illusion to Dali through the clock).

*The Itinerant Librarian's Dilemma of Choice and Refusal* depicts an old and haggard man holding a pair of scissors as he weighs the decision to cut his beard. The work refers to a question faced by many men who have found themselves profiled as terrorists for their appearance; by placing the canvas between two mirrors, Kaleka implicates the viewer in the politics of the librarian's decision. Incorporating this work into a series that depicts several versions of timeless paradise suggests a subtext of Islamic extremism (particularly the promised rewards to suicide bombers) within these works' otherwise autonomous narratives.

Though Kaleka is evidently seeking a balance between painting and installation, it is the one painting without an accompanying installation, *Ochre Dust in a Delusional Paradise*, that stands out for its quiet and luminous beauty. It shows an androgynous blue figure, with butterflies covering one of his legs, in a fantastic fictional landscape. Reality lurks behind him as he stands on the edge of an arcadia, a stallion to his left and, in a touch of absurdism, an antique penis-enlarger at his feet—leaving little doubt as to what paradise means here.

In comparison to many of Kaleka's earlier works, those in "Reading Man" sometimes feel underdeveloped. Yet the exhibition can be seen as evidence of a senior artist's willingness to push beyond the comfortable multimedia spaces which he himself helped to create, and to reveal the vulnerabilities of working between media. While it may not always have been possible to find the main plot in "Reading Man," the show raised questions about where painting stands in India, and where it could go next.

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