

VIDEO ALLOWS YOU THE POSSIBILITY OF PRODUCING NEW KINDS OF IMAGES

Ranbir Kaleka talks to Meera Menezes about some of his video installations.

Can you tell us about the readings of some of your works?



installation still

MAN THREADING A NEEDLE 1998/1999
 single channel video projected on 59 x 91 cm, (23.3 x 35.8 inch)
 oil painting. 6 minute loop with sound

Well my works can be read at so many levels. In *"Man Threading Needle"* you have a man who is unable to thread a needle. There have been readings that we are talking of a man as a sexual being with his inability to thread a needle but it could be read at other levels as well. If you look at the man he belongs to the working class which would immediately shift the meaning. Then threading the needle would be to sew something which he doesn't have on his back.

That was the first one, then there was *"The Powder Room"*.

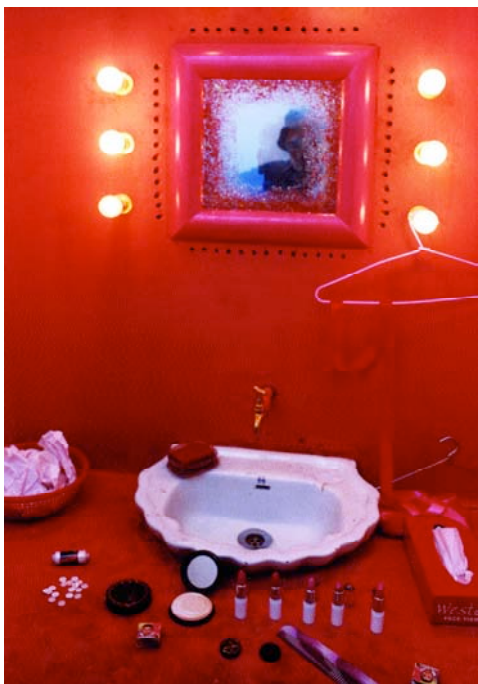
Qs: that is the one from the "Boxwallahs" project, I remember entering it in Gurgaon.

Ranbir: Yes but did you see it in Bombay because it developed further there. I made it into a narrative that unfolds. Well as you know it is a working washroom and when you enter the washroom situated on the motorway at a petrol station it has a few things to assist a traveler with threads and needles and buttons and that sort of thing. It also had a dhaba and people went to eat there and entered the washroom as it had soap and running water. In this installation when men went in, they washed their hands and combed their hair and at a certain point there is the sound of someone clearing their throat and when you look up in the mirror you see that your face has disappeared and replaced by other faces in the mirror. There are few technical things that we did. The distance at which your own reflection is formed in the mirror is the very same distance at which the other faces that appear. So your eyes at no point refocus, they remain at the same focus.

Then it was shown in a gallery situation where I built a little narrative which is played again and again where I show a kind of dysfunctional family and how it comes back together in the memory of a girl through an old photograph. First you saw your face and then the video came on. It was again about faces and memory. In the video itself there is an image and then there is another captured image of a photograph and there is something else I did over there. There are some real performers just on the opening night. As you went in you suddenly saw a man or woman dressing or undressing or inspecting one own's body or applying lipstick very close to the mirror and then they would look at you or engaged you and put you in a position of going from a voyeur to somebody who was being looked at.

Qs: How was your work received?

Some people screamed with laughter and others felt perturbed at being looked at from the other side. It was fun. But at the petrol



BOXWALLAHS, The DeEgo-Cube, Indo-Austrian Art Projects in Public Space, Gurgaon, India 2000

POWDER ROOM 1999/2000 (installation still)
 Single channel video/sculpture installation
 3 minute with sound



MAN WITH COCKEREL 2001-02
2 channel video, 19 minute loop

station I was told that some villagers thought it was possessed. There was a builder close by and from time to time he would get some of the workers in his jeep and push them into the room. They were apparently frightened by this possessed mirror.

Qs: After that came "Man with cockere l" – what were the shifts that were taking place in your work?

After having worked on this longish narrative work I wanted to work on something very short. And this work is just a three second clip and three seconds are stretched out into 27 seconds during editing and it is looped. So the work is not 27 seconds long, the work only makes sense if you have watched it for 5-6 minutes because it is the repetition that gives it meaning and not just one little event. It is to be installed in a dark room which is entirely black and the projection is on a board which is in the middle of the room. The projection is from both sides and it is vertical in format. So it looks like a floating mirror and you walk around it. In the video a man is carrying a cockerel and walks to the middle of the frame with his reflection and all his movements are synchronized precisely with those of his reflection. He reaches a state of comfort or rest being in possession of his cockerel and he disappears. He suddenly reemerges with the cockerel struggling to escape and the cockerel does escape. The man follows the cockerel but the reflection stays behind and slowly drags itself. The man comes again with his cockerel and his reflection intact and it repeats again and again.

Qs: Can you tell us about the conceptual underpinning of the work?

I think what comes to me even when I'm painting or making a video is the event. I see the event as being potent and certainly not linear. The event is something that cannot be explained in a linear manner but has a radial potential. The mind is creating a potential for a body of work.

Qs: What was the next video you did?

The next work was "Man in water". It was installed in a large full length pool on the side of the Apeejay Media Centre. The whole pool was enclosed in a room with a roof and sides and in the foreground immersed in the pool is a mountain or hill. It sits in the water and is reflected in it. On it we see a man carrying a sack on his shoulder and wearing a hood. It is the same kind of hood made up of burlap like those by labourers but makes him look like a monk as well. Behind him the entire wall has a projection of traffic in the city, near a roundabout with a policeman. And it starts at early morning and goes on till the evening. It starts from very early when you can still see the headlights. The man goes through various emotional states. There are times when the man, the traffic and the sound become one unit, they all come together to mean something. At other times they are divergent, the sounds do not connect with the man or the traffic. The sounds we have is of the traffic and the place where it was installed also had sounds of the road, so one could not tell if it was the video sound or real. There are sounds of a cricket commentary or of traveling in the North Pole or there is a hakim talking about the medication for constipation. At one point a flying book on fire enters the body of the man who bends over and disappears and in his place we see a little cave and the flying book flies over the traffic and disappears. But what is happening in the traffic is that from time to time it all gets submerged in water and reemerges again with the



installation still
Liminal Zones, Apeejay Media Gallery, Delhi
Nov 16 - 17 2003
MAN IN WATER 2003
2 channel video, 13 minutes loop with sound

sound of children playing and laughing. The man roars like a lion and turns into gold, so does the mound and so does the water and we hear the sound of a sufi singing and the day begins anew with traffic emerging. It was very complex with real water and videoed water.

Qs: It sounds like a very complex narrative with a sense of humour as well – the hakim for instance. What was going through your mind when you were making the work?

I am afraid to fix meanings. I am very comfortable with uncertainty and have found a place of comfort in it. It is not as if I am not trying to find clarity. I am always trying to do that but I don't want to fix meaning to anything. This is the state of mind I work in. If something is discordant it just feels right. If the incomprehension is comfortably complete but at that point it begins to generate meaning as it were and is no longer incomprehension, it's a way towards comprehending.

Qs: The moving and the static – projections on painting. What attracted you to it?

I think it creates a hyper image. Everything is so much more intense in colour, in the subtlety of colours that you can achieve. Then when there is sound with the static image it begins to live in time because sound is heard in time. All this makes it a very potent medium for me.

Having worked with this medium and having experienced its complexities does the painted surface afford you that much pleasure anymore?

Yes of a different kind – as much pleasure as a story simply told.

Qs: You have lived in the west and now live in India. What do you think of the video art movement in India and abroad?

I think one continues to find good pieces of work here. But both here and in the west there are fewer videos when compared to painting so consequently there are fewer good ones. One is hard put to find really good video installations. Once you have a camera, it seems easy and special effects are easy when you are editing. So it might seem quite special but it may not be that special – I include myself in this. Then video begins to look like early experiments in cinema – a 100 years ago when cinema was first invented, people did the same very thing with the camera which we are doing with video. So one doesn't really realize how dated some of these things are.

I like works that physically does something to you like a certain work by Bill Viola. Every time you go into that space you see and read a different thing. That's what makes an interesting piece of work. This is what I like about great pieces of art like great painting which I may want to go back to again and again and live it again and come away with something each time. With a lot of work you see it once and there is nothing to go back to again. It might reveal all it's got in one go which is fine but I do like work which like life itself retains something for you to go back to again.