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**Being Human: Ranbir Kaleka’s Latest Works Create
Meaning through Painting, Video Projection, Successes
and Failures**

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Introduction

A dark Chelsea gallery. Three artworks by Indian artist Ranbir Kaleka.¹

Circular and dichotomous meanings that loop again and again for a duration of 1 ½ months. In many ways, it does not take a familiarity with contemporary Indian art² and culture to understand that there is something more than video projection and paint repeating itself on the walls of Bose Pacia gallery.³ What Kaleka's works do require is patience, thought, and a bit of work. In the middle of New York, and far from Kaleka's New Delhi, what are the works of Kaleka telling us, and how are they telling us something, not necessarily about being Indian,⁴ but about being human?

Kaleka's three works, his 2002 video installation Man with Cockerel,⁵ his 2005 four channel video projection on painting Crossings,⁶ and the result of his first

¹ Ranbir Kaleka, born in Patiala, Punjab in 1953, has been well known as a painter on the Indian art scene for several decades. Since 1999, Kaleka has been combining painting and video projections, and now lives and works in New Delhi. See: Ranbir Singh Kaleka, biography of, "Coups de Coeur" exhibition catalog, Halles de l'ille Geneve, July 1– August 22, 1987, p. 108. See also: Kaleka, Ranbir. Interview with Johan Pijnappel, "Ranbir Kaleka, "iCon: India Contemporary" exhibition catalog, June 12- July 31, 2005, pp. 29-37.

² The first sale of contemporary Indian art in New York was at Sotheby's in 1995. Since then, the popularity of contemporary Indian art has been increasing since then; rising demand has been met with rising prices at the auction houses Christie's and Sotheby's in New York. See: Indrajit Basu, "Indian Art Going Global," United Press International, Sept. 29, 2004. See also: Haden-Guest, "India Injects the East into the West. The Contemporary Artists Now at Auction Are Part of Their Country's Cultural Story," The Financial Times, London, Sept. 24, 2005.

³ Bose Pacia Gallery, New York, 2005.

⁴ In an email correspondence with Ranbir Kaleka the week of October 10, 2005, Mr. Kaleka says that his work *Crossings* conveys something of the "flux and stillness" of India. He writes that India is said to "live simultaneously in all centuries and Indians cross from one to the other effortlessly," so that the "there is stillness of every century and movement between them." Ranbir, himself a Sikh, explains that in his work "Crossings" there is also an element of a "passing-on" of an outward religious sign, a turban, a symbol of the Sikh identity. After describing some of the symbolism relating to Indian culture present in his art works, Mr. Kaleka concedes that he is wary of attributing any "linear meanings" to his art, hoping that the works will communicate their meaning "radially." He wants to avoid "over-localizing" his work or situating it in "the exotic." When he left India to study art in England, he says that he experienced no culture shock. Instead, he says that he continues to find "strangeness" in his native India even today. See also: Sikhism <<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sikh>>

⁵ Ranbir Kaleka, Man with Cockerel, video installation, Bose Pacia gallery, New York, 2005.

⁶ Ranbir Kaleka, Crossings, 4 channel video projection on paintings, Bose Pacia Gallery, New York, 2005.

attempt working with video, the 1999 video projection on painting Man Threading a Needle,⁷ in many ways differ from one another in form and in content, but in their own ways literally shed light on the often dichotomous conflict and resolution that is life as a human being. Each work presents human figures whose actions and interactions within the video or painting and video include struggles, attempts, successes and failures, but through different devices, and in different forms. Not every video, or painting and video, ends on a positive note, or even on a resolution. Collectively, however, the three works project a sense of completion, and encourage complete thoughts on what it means to be human.

Man with Cockerel, in order of appearance the first of Ranbir Kaleka's works at Bose Pacia gallery, is an all-video work that portrays the metaphoric birth, struggle, triumph and death of a man in just a 19 second loop. The video projection of a man holding a cockerel who escapes from him, only to be brought back, achieves its meaning through sheer repetition of the sequence of events. The metaphor for a cyclical life demonstrates that the beginning is the end, the end the beginning, and that everything in between is simply a combination of conflict and success which repeats itself indefinitely.

Crossings, the next work in the adjoining room of the gallery, is in many ways more complex. The subjects and ever-changing combinations of elements in Crossings depict in a loop of 15 minutes an inter-connected portrait of human life filled with struggles, attempts, successes and failures. Although Crossings shares with Man with Cockerel an emphasis on birds, flight, and a cycle of life, its mixture of everyday happenings in India and of surreal appearances of white horses, as well as sounds, lends it a more narrative, cinematic quality. The painting underneath the

⁷ Ranbir Kaleka, Man Threading a Needle, video projection on painting, Bose Pacia Gallery, New York, 2005.

video projection lends the work, a series of 4 paintings/screens featuring a variety of people, places, and objects, a tactile, grounded quality. Thematically, as well, there is some stability underlying the chaos. The repetition of story lines, characters and themes hint at an ever-changing yet stable perspective of human life.

Man Threading Needle, Kaleka's first video work, is different from both *Man with Cockerel* and Crossings in that it seems unfinished, in form and in content. Its combination of paint and video never quite achieve the precision of Kaleka's previous works. Its subject, a man who never does succeed in threading a tiny needle, only displays equally tiny but intense signs of frustration and anger. Yet, the work shines like a stained-glass window in the dark, solitary room in the back of the gallery. If in the roughly made, 6 minute loop the man does not succeed in threading the needle, in a metaphor for human struggle, the video projection on painting Man Threading a Needle demonstrates that not every attempt will end in success, but that there will always be struggle.

Man with Cockerel – A Life of Struggle and Success

Ranbir Kaleka's Man with Cockerel is, at first glance, a simple work. Its video loop runs for only 19 silent seconds, and depicts little more than a man who struggles with a cockerel, only to repeat the process in the next 19 second loop. It is, however, exactly in the form of this cyclical process, and in the simple depiction of a man and an external struggle, that the work creates the metaphor of a human being who is born, experiences successes and failures, and dies, only to be reborn again. The loop is so short and fast-paced, and the actions and feelings of the man so subtle, that a concentrated effort is required to allow the metaphor to unfold. Yet, with ever more viewings, an entire life begins to form before one's eyes.

The screen begins with a black and white video still of the background, a white wall covered in cracks, framed on the right side by a leafy vine. The image is mirrored, as if cut in half and folded horizontally. In the middle of the screen, the torso of a man holding a cockerel on his left side emerges, literally dissolving onto the background. The man appears stern, yet proud, as he holds tightly onto the bird.⁸ The bird's head is majestically framed by his comb. In a fast sequence of events, the top half of the mirror image begins to move. The cockerel struggles to free himself as the man tries to hold on to him.⁹ Both move to the left side and disappear, leaving only the bottom half of the mirror image to linger.¹⁰ This bottom half begins to move slowly in the same direction, depicting a repetition of the struggle upside down, and in slow motion. Yet, the repetition is not an exact mirror image: it is a distorted image, one whose movement begins inorganically. The lingering image is pulled out of the

⁸ See appendix, figure 1.

⁹ See appendix, figure 2.

¹⁰ See appendix, figure 3.

frame not by its own action, but by a force against which it struggles. It holds itself back, as if in demonstration of the action it must follow. The screen is empty for a brief moment before the man, and his exact mirror image, return from the left once again holding the cockerel.¹¹ Both halves of the image freeze in the same position of the beginning of the loop as a fading curtain falls over them.¹² The man and the cockerel disappear.

It is at this moment that the metaphor of a cyclical life full of struggle and success begins to emerge. At the beginning of the loop, the man appears stern and proud, yet this exact same expression at the end is perceived differently. The viewer knows that the man has struggled to regain control of the bird, and has succeeded, but also knows of the struggles in between. Within the quick succession of events, a man gets hold of a prize, presenting it to the world with obvious pride. His faces transforms, expressing embarrassment and sudden frustration as the bird attempts to free itself from the man's grip. He momentarily becomes a man in flux, with nothing to show for his work, a man in danger of experiencing great loss. If the screen represents a human life, then the bird is all that the human has ever wanted. It is his life's work, without which he is only a man. The cockerel escapes the man's hands so quickly that one barely has time to realize the loss, except for one reminder: the lingering of the mirror image. The lingering man's hesitation is palpable, and his anger and disappointment a demonstration against the sudden emptiness. Without so much as a sound, both halves of the man and the cockerel are gone. Yet, redemption occurs just as quickly: the man returns, clutching the cockerel once again, once again presenting the bird with pride. It is critical to note that upon his return, as he again holds the cockerel, the top and bottom halves of the mirror image are synchronized,

¹¹ See appendix, figure 4.

¹² See appendix, figure 5.

indicating a regain of balance and momentum. A curtain falls over his life as he returns to the place he began. After watching the struggle between man and cockerel, a metaphor for a human life, the next 19 second loop is a fresh reminder that nothing much changes in each successive lifetime.

Even if the form and content of Ranbir Kaleka's Man with Cockerel are deceptively short and simple, it is in the details and in the repetition of the 19 second loop that great meaning arises. During the brief course of the man's struggle with a cockerel, he shows subtle yet telling moments of pride, doubt, and frustration, which are mirrored and emphasized by a double image. Viewed as a cyclical process which repeats itself endlessly, the man's actions and feelings are intensified into a metaphor for a human life filled with struggle and success.

Crossings – Complexity and Stability

Crossings is a gigantic work. Its video projection on to four 6'25" x 8'3" paintings loops every 15 minutes, and the innumerable images projected on to these paintings cover a wide variety of subjects and situations, faces and places, alternately bordering reality and fantasy. Although it seems to bear little similarity to Man with Cockerel, Kaleka's Crossings also touches on the flux and stability, the failures and successes, of what it means to be human.

Formally, the painting and video projection Crossings is a mixture of images and interactions that change and transform very quickly, encouraging either a focus on the details of one painting or an overview of the four as a panorama of constant change. Yet, even with the constant flux, Crossings is grounded by its painted human figures, and has a literal quality that is narrative and cinematic. While characters collide and interact, thematic images are repeated. A storyline is hinted at of a cast of characters who test the borders of their individual freedom, yet continue to share certain traditions with others. It seems that underneath all of the change and chaos of life lie elements that are constant.

The black, white and grey under paintings of the Crossings canvases at first hang lifeless,¹³ one next to the other. The room is dim, and the faces are expressionless before the video projections are turned on, illuminating them and giving them life. For the purpose of this paper, the canvases will be named A, B, C, D from left to right. Canvas A features a family of four, a mother, father, and two sons sitting in a semi-circle. On Canvas B, a man sits cross-legged between two bird cages, with vials and paintbrushes spread out in front of him. Canvas C once again features

¹³ See appendix, figure 6.

the family of four, this time standing side by side and facing to the right. A man, sitting on a stool, next to him a sledgehammer and behind him an empty bowl, is painted on to canvas D. As the video projection begins, the first images to be projected on to the canvas do not exactly match the painted figures, but are tied to them in a thematic way. On canvas A, a bird flies around, and canvases B, C, and D feature a middle-aged man wearing a turban, a young man, and a boy. Although the following projections of images begin to change rapidly, featuring many different characters, animals, and places, the three video characters return in the middle and at the end. The 15 minute video projection, together with solitary sounds, is used to create different scenes over each painting. Sometimes a busy intersection covers canvas B, a white horse appears magically next to the man in canvas D,¹⁴ and family members from canvases A and C appear in different scenes, interacting, laughing, and disappearing again.¹⁵ The painted figures truly come alive at times when the video projection matches them exactly. The images and actions projected on to the four canvases are constantly changing, but are grounded by grey paint, which gives them depth and stability.

Yet stability also comes from thematic symbols and individual stories, the subtle familial centerpieces in a seemingly chaotic world. Emphasis is placed on the individual stories of the boy, the young man, and the middle-aged man who begin and end the video projection.¹⁶ Whether they are three different people, generations of a family, or one and the same, is left to the viewer to decide. The three figures appear deeply tied to recurring symbols of birds, and of the colorful turban cloth, symbols which emphasize individual growth, but tradition and family as well. The images of

¹⁴ See appendix, figure 7.

¹⁵ See appendix, figure 8.

¹⁶ See appendix, figure 9.

the birds and of the turban cloths create a consistency next to which the constant flux is less disorienting.

In the beginning, the flight of the bird across the screen is accompanied by the sound of wind. The bird signifies lightness and movement, and immediately becomes a symbol of freedom, a fluid part of the characters' stories. It appears at various times, but has a particularly strong effect toward the end of the loop, when the young boy looks up at a sky full of birds, at his own freedom. The turban cloth, in effect the symbol of family and tradition, is used as a counterweight to the lightness and fluidity of the bird. In one shot a cloth is shown being dyed bright shades of blue, in another, two men hold opposite ends of a bright red cloth. An elderly woman knits a piece to add to the middle-aged man's turban. A wife helps her husband with his turban, while a father helps his son. At one point, when the father offers his other son a turban cloth, the son refuses. Not long after this departure from tradition, tornadoes erupt across all four screens, and a new road is taken. Birds fly, covering all four screens. Yet, the symbolic turban returns. Nostalgic images of the young boy, the young man, and the middle-aged man reappear alongside images of the colorful red cloth. It appears that freedom and change has occurred, but stability and family traditions remain.

While the images on the four screens of Kaleka's work Crossings are constantly changing, there is an underlying sense of permanence. Through Kaleka's particular combination of form and content, flux and stability are not mutually exclusive conditions. On a formal level, the paintings underneath the video projections are stable and unchanging, even while the video images flicker. Yet on a more emotional level, the symbolic traditions in Crossings, and the families who participate in them, add a level of stability to a constantly changing world. Even when individuals feel the desire to fly away, they still remain grounded by their roots.

Man Threading a Needle - Living with Struggle

Ranbir Kaleka's first work using video projections, Man Threading a Needle, lies in the corner room of Bose Pacia gallery, a darkened space in which the illuminated painting shines like a stained-glass window. This work too, has something to say about what it means to be human, but perhaps nothing so gratifying as the reliable cycle of struggle and success in Man with Cockerel, or the constant of stability amid change in Crossings. The 6 minute painting and video projection Man Threading a Needle exposes, in the darkest room of the gallery, what it means to experience and live with faults and disappointments.

Form and content represent the frustration of the repeated attempt, and of success that remains elusive. The work is, in itself, the imperfect, early version of the melding of painting and video executed successfully by Kaleka in Crossings, five years later. The first layer of Man Threading a Needle is a black, white and grey under painting of a man, holding his hands up and together in an attempt to thread a needle. The paint surrounding the man is not black, white, and grey as in Crossings, but colorful. The affect is an overall glow, similar to that of light coming through a colored window.¹⁷ Although the work shines invitingly, upon closer examination one finds that details do not match. The video projection of the same man over the painting at times casts too much light in the wrong places, and moves uneasily. The paint underneath the hands and face, the parts of the body which move with the video projection, are drawn in with little detail, making it difficult to discern precise outlines and borders. In contrast with Crossings, in which painting and video work together seamlessly, Man Threading a Needle exposes weaknesses in skill.

¹⁷ See appendix, figure 10.

How perfectly the weaknesses in execution illustrate the theme of the work itself. Although the movements in the video projection are very subtle, they embody the intensity of the man's frustration. The man is alone in his struggle to complete the seemingly simple task of threading a needle. The bright colors surrounding him make him appear all the more distressed as his hands press together and he stares intently at the needle and thread. Ever so slightly, the tips of hands come closer to each other, yet never touch.¹⁸ Sirens go off in the background, and he swallows nervously, attempting to pick up his pace. There is a sense of urgency to complete the delicate task, which only increases the man's nervousness and frustration. He blinks and blinks, trying to clear his vision. At times, there is no movement at all. Because the man never succeeds in threading the needle, the loop never clearly comes to an end. He is left hanging, working on finishing a task that will never be finished.

Does Kaleka's Man Threading a Needle represent an attitude inconsistent with the later perfected and polished works, Man with Cockerel and Crossings? Not necessarily. While the work Man Threading a Needle still feels unfinished in form, and the man depicted in it never accomplishes his task, there is also no sign of surrendering to defeat. The man attempting in vain to thread a needle is, after all, continuing the struggle. If success and perfect fulfillment were achieved immediately, why would one continue to make an effort?

¹⁸ See appendix, figure 11.

Conclusion

Ranbir Kaleka's works Man with Cockerel, Crossings, and Man Threading a Needle subtly depict a few simple yet great truths about being human. The video and painting installations require patience and thought, revealing the struggles, successes and failures of what it means to be human. Man with Cockerel is the 19 second loop of a life worth living, allowing a man to appear, to overcome an obstacle, and to finally find satisfaction in the same place he began. Subtle expressions and variations in speed of the man and his mirror image depict deep emotions experienced over the course of a lifetime, repeated indefinitely. Crossings, a 15 minute ride through new situations, places, and intimate family traditions, fleshes out a theme of stability underlying constant flux. Paintings give video projections an underlying weight, and themes of freedom are balanced by family tradition and generational interconnection. Finally, the never-finished nature of Kaleka's work, Man Threading a Needle, is a reminder that there is, and always will be, struggle underlying human life. In the determined attempt to succeed, struggle is stable too.

Appendix

Man with Cockerel



Figure 1: The man presents the cockerel with pride.



Figures 2 and 3: The cockerel begins to struggle and the man's top half moves quickly out of frame. The bottom half of the mirror image lingers.



Figures 4 and 5: The man returns holding the cockerel. The curtain falls.

Crossings



Figures 6 and 7: A Crossings under painting without video projection, and a fantastical horse which appears at various times throughout the loop.



Figures 8 and 9: The family of four alternately sits in the midst of a crowded street, a park, a field. The young boy who returns in the beginning and end of the loop is a reminder of tradition and change.

Man Threading a Needle



Figure 10: The work glows like a stained-glass window in a dark room.

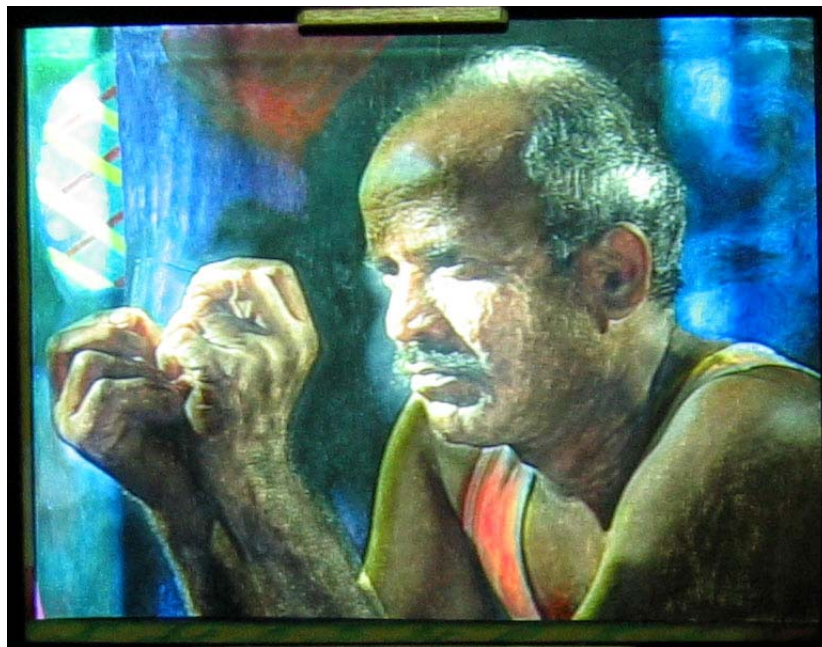


Figure 11: The man attempts to thread a needle but never succeeds.

All photographs courtesy of Bose Pacia Gallery, New York, 2005.

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