

Artist at Work
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Family-II 1993
91.5 x 122 cm
36 x 48 inches
oil on canvas



TWO WOMEN WITH A LIZARD
oil on canvas, 1986-2002, 60.2 x 90.5 cm

Artist Ranbir Kaleka lets ideas linger, preparing and planning each stroke.

Video Installation Artist Ranbir Kaleka, a painter who is making waves with his video installations, is a deliberate artist. He knows what he wants and he takes his time to get there — for instance, he took 16 years to finish one of his paintings, *Two Women with a Lizard*.

“The process varies with each painting,” says Kaleka, “but what does not vary is when a painting comes to me, I don’t put it immediately on canvas. It lingers in my head for a few day or even months.” Even after that, the artist only occasionally begins directly on canvas, preferring to do several preparatory drawings. If certain visuals in the painting need reference material, then Kaleka goes all out for it. “If there is a lizard then I would like to know a lot about lizards and look at all kinds of lizards — whatever form I can lay my hands on, movie stills, photographs, real lizards if I can find any, sketches — and only then do I paint the lizard, which may not be of any species, but is a lizard of the painting and not of nature.”

Similarly, with people in the painting — if there is a particular face he wants, then he photographs it or makes sketches. One of his paintings, *The Family* has a strong silent female presence and sure enough, it turns out to have been modelled on none other than Deepa Sahi. “She came over a couple of times and I made sketches. But then this is no portrait of hers,” he laughs. “I wanted something from her face and I got it. I thought her face had a quiet strength.”

But what starts off an idea for Kaleka? “It is usually a configuration of people and objects,” reveals the soft-spoken artist. “This configuration generates a potential event, and the event has a tension to it. Here, it can move in various directions. So, the meaning of the painting becomes non-linear.”

The painting appears to him as a feeling, in a fog. As the fog clears, he turns his attention to situations, looking intensely at them and the images and light.

Detailing is a very big part of his work and for Kaleka, it is interesting when a painting works when you walk right up to it and see the details of the layers and surfaces, as well as when you enjoy it from afar. As detailed as most of his paintings are, some of them tend to have a mythological feel, leading the painter to put in icons, of contemporary times like tea cups in *The Family*, or say, a radio. Also, he tends to make his subjects temporally and geographically non-specific. “I want to talk about people in general, as to how we are,” he explains.

The painter’s latest love, however, is video installations. “It comes from my love for both movies and paintings,” he says. “The processes are very similar, in terms of the way ideas come — and I know almost immediately what will help the idea come to fruition, canvas or video. Again, I do a lot of drawings and preparatory work.” He works with professionals for the video recording and editing that he requires for his near-illusionist works, and is currently working with a sound recordist for an upcoming installation. “I would like to work with so many different sensations in my works of art — smell, taste, time — and explore further areas of human experience through my work,” he concludes, the constant smile on his face flashing brighter than ever at the prospect.