



NOT FROM HERE

*Installation shot 2009, Astonishment of Being, Birla Academy of Art and Culture, Kolkata
Four channel HD video projection on painted canvases, 6 min loop with sound
Size variable, projection size at Birla Academy: 243.8 x 1371.6 cm (96 x 540 inches)*

If you went to the roof of the house, at just under a kilometre away, beyond the flat open grassland with smattering of brown shrubs and scattered kikar trees, you could see a quaint train station. Small, it was more like a guard's room, beautifully proportioned. The train emerged from behind the distant houses and chugged in a half circle, stretching a kilometre to the tiny train station. On sunlit days the bare track was a burning arc of white heat, a kilometre wide.

The train brought in migrant labourers to the larger station in Patiala. Season for harvest. Local farmers crowded the platforms to pick up farm-hands, jostled to have a first pick of the more robust.

As children we often went to fish in ponds and a canal that ran close to the little station. Trains stopped only briefly at this station, sometimes for less than a minute. The little station had no platform. Occasionally, we saw a bundle thrown hurriedly from the train followed by a scrambling family getting off, women hastily passed a trunk or a child to their man below on the ground. When the train left they always formed a huddle. In its wake the train left a family looking forlorn, appearing strangely defenceless, abandoned in a landscape of barrenness accentuated by lonely kikars.

*"The day we arrived, it was pouring rain," recalls 32-year-old Guddi, a migrant labourer who came to New Delhi with her husband and two children last year. "The train only stopped at the station for a moment, and by the time we realized that we had to get down, we hardly had time to jump off and grab the children. We had brought everything with us—flour, dal, pots and pans—but we left it all in the train. We got down with nothing but the clothes on our backs."

Today there are around 100 million circular migrants in India. In Delhi migrants form 40 per cent of the population. Many are reduced to seeking charity though there are some who hold degrees.

These were some of the images and thoughts occupying me when I worked on "Not from Here".

At the Birla academy in Kolkata, "Not from Here" was projected on a 14 metre wide canvas screen. A family group is painted in one section of the canvas screen in acrylics. Three thin columns with struts are also painted in acrylics. These columns intersperse the screen.

Since 1998, I have projected videos on paintings. The palpable 'thingness' of the painted images fused with the 'aura' of images made of light makes for a kind of hyper presence. The image speaks with a different eloquence. Luggage on the ground is painted in this manner to achieve a hyper image, on the other hand the painted family group has only a tenuous relation to the videoed image.

There is no clear narrative in the video, only a sense of the 'imminent'.

The loop begins with a blue cast of early morning before sun-rise. Day emerges and a life-size train thunders past

The new arrivals stand self-conscious and stiff, as if lining up to be photographed. Their belongings lie on the ground.

From their looks they appear to be from a slightly indeterminate background. Their exact relationship to each other is a little ambiguous too. Momentary body shifts and nervous gestures increase as trains roar past behind them. One by one they begin to walk out of their painted selves, leaving their bodies as mere traces on the canvas. The luggage on the ground is painted in detail. These belongings acquire a hyper-real presence but the family group is painted in a sort of line-wash. In the family group, after a video-image walks out of its painted-image, what is left behind is an insubstantial imprint. Visitors to the city: almost invisible, without a record of their presence, just a spectral presence in the city's memory,

As the family group gets dissipated, only two are left, one each on the extreme ends of the group, a woman and a small child, a girl. The two do not go off any where, they do not walk out of their painted images. Other members of the group never return. Eventually the woman and the child just fade out in the place where they stood.

Stories of labourers' lost children are plenty. In all over 34000 children have gone missing in Delhi in the last 20 years.

What ever the fate of this group in the video installation, the traffic of immigrants has continued and will continue.

Nearing end of the loop: a whistle announces new arrivals, and to the strains of a song, a ghostly procession of past and future trains come in and out bearing new travellers. The grey of the video transforms into a melting, rolling rainbow of colours as the trains arrive attended by jubilant sounds of the travellers and the hosts.

Migrants have faced violence while there are others who have found their dream of a better life fulfilled. An ongoing engagement with the subject of immigrants and visitors to the city will evolve into further events in the video.

Ranbir Kaleka 2009

*('Moving for a Living', Far Eastern Economic Review, December 2003 by Jason Overdorf)