

No solace in the imagined

Ranbir Kaleka's vivid and unsettling takes on the human condition

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After working with the moving image in inventive ways—such as marrying it with a still image— which evoke a sense of wonderment in the viewer, Ranbir Kaleka has returned to paintings for his latest show, Reading Man. In three of the four works that form the show, the paintings are supported by elements of sculpture and installation art.



Kaleka with a section of 'Reading Man'

The use of different elements is most in evidence in the large and complex work also titled Reading Man—it consists of three panels of colourful oil paintings with psychedelic scenes that “flow” on to the floor, turning into a cloudy carpet of black and white swirls; three wire sculptures of a man reading a book in standing, sitting and reclining positions; a working clock and solid sculptures of aluminium moulded in the shape of a bowl, a knife and a jacket (that's been sliced in half).

The fantastical scenery on the panels in front of the reading man could be the contents of his book or, more likely, reflect his subconscious—they include a naked man with an idealized body clutching a javelin, a lush multi-hued mishmash of vegetation and a flowing stream that is part orange, part rust and part other colours. Do the dull and austere aluminium props flanking this triptych represent the physical world, throwing the disorienting phantasmagoria—the make believe—into bolder relief? Perhaps.

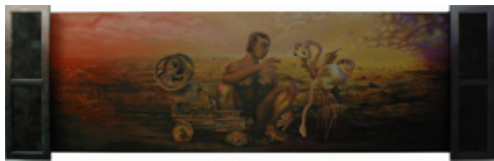
The fantastic is never far from Kaleka's mind, even in a straightforward painting with a very straightforward title, Itinerant Librarian's Dilemma of Choice and Refusal—a portrait of an old man with boils on his face, clutching his white beard with one hand and a pair of scissors with the other. Kaleka was advised to shave off his beard when travelling after 9/11, and he sees the painting in that context. The old man's expression is one of pain and perplexity, and there is the distant cityscape in one corner from which emanate luminous—and ominous— streaks, which are initially hard to register amid the bright and garish colours.



Itinerant Librarian's Dilemma of Choice and Refusal

Kaleka points out details in the work which are not realistic—the oversized hands, the black and oversized flat scissors, the railway tracks on one side that bend unnaturally, and, of course, the colours. “I push the colours to a point just before they become unbearable,” he says. “They are like calendar art.” He labels it “almost kitsch”, and this effect is heightened by the mirrors affixed on either side of the painting, like window panes, which reflect the old man, and the viewer’s profile as he comes closer.

Storyteller 2: White Shadows has a naked man on his haunches talking to flamingos next to a broken piece of machinery (apparently, of 19th century vintage). In the background is a post-apocalyptic arid landscape in which distant figures are shown walking in file or in groups and files and, Kaleka points out, casting tiny white shadows on the ground. Adding to the bleakness are the two window frames on either side with black opaque panes, forming yet another bleak but vivid-hued triptych of sorts.



Storyteller 2: White Shadows

The classically composed naked androgynous figure in a come-hither posture in Ochre Dust in a Delusional Paradise, is much easier on the eye than the bearded old man, but seems equally perplexed. The counterpoint to the Edenic setting populated by butterflies from which it has emerged is provided by present-day touches such as buildings, distant battle tanks, a dish antenna, and a man in a business suit. Kaleka points out significant details that would otherwise emerge only after extended viewing—among them, a glass tube with a rubber pipe attached to it (“It’s a penis pump”).

A sex toy in a Renaissance setting, fantasy and whimsy, sober and dark reality; all melded in bright hues, they offer a sense of escape and rich material for reflection—but little sense of relief.

Reading Man will show at Nature Morte, A-1 Niti Bagh, New Delhi from 11 to 18 April, 2009.