

तह-सतह : A VERY DEEP SURFACE

Mani Kaul & Ranbir Singh Kaleka: Between Film and Video

Curated by Ashish Rajadhyaksha





‘When nothing moves, time does’



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Special thanks

DIRECTOR GENERAL, JKK Pooja Sood

Jawahar Kala Kendra is delighted to open the doors of its newly refurbished galleries and museum space with an exhibition of the moving image, *तह-सतह: A Very Deep Surface*, Mani Kaul and Ranbir Singh Kaleka: *Between Film and Video*.

Curated by eminent film historian and scholar Ashish Rajadhyaksha, this exhibition is a conversation between India's leading avant-garde filmmaker Mani Kaul's classic celluloid films from the 1970s and 80s and his digital experiments in the 2000s, reworked here in multichannel formats, alongside several video-on-canvas works by internationally renowned artist Ranbir Singh Kaleka. Consisting of over 10 single and multichannel video installations, a sound installation which includes poetry and music alongside video projections on canvas, this exhibition is an attempt to ask new questions about the moving image in 21st Century India.

A series of collateral events will unfold during the 6 week period of the exhibition. A first full retrospective of Kaul's films, including his rare final digital works, will be on view at JKK. There will be a series of talks by the artist Ranbir Singh Kaleka and curator Ashish Rajadhyaksha as also by other eminent curators, writers and scholars. Daily walkthroughs for visitors by JKK's curatorial staff will also be available.

This exhibition would not have been possible without the support of the National Film Development Corporation, Doordarshan and the Films Division, for which we are extremely grateful.

तह-सतह: A Very Deep Surface is the first of several museum-quality exhibitions that will be showcased in the sprawling 20,000 square feet museum and gallery spaces at JKK. The forthcoming programmes of the galleries and museum space will consist of carefully curated exhibitions across a rich mix of genres, ranging from new media, popular culture, photography, architecture and design, as well as painting and the plastic arts, thereby making JKK a site also for learning and critical discourse.

We look forward to welcoming you to Jawahar Kala Kendra. Your participation and support will enable it to become a centre of excellence for contemporary art practice, not just in Rajasthan but across India.



Siddheshwari (1989)

THE DESERT OF A THOUSAND LINES

When nothing moves, time does – Mani Kaul ('Beneath the Surface: Cinematography and Time', 2008)

This exhibition sets up a conversation between two men who are perhaps the most elusive makers of the moving image in modern India. That conversation is also one between celluloid film and video art: media revealed as being at once fundamentally different and intriguingly similar.

Mani Kaul (1944-2011) was born in Jodhpur but spent his childhood and early youth in Jaipur. His first film,

the experimental *Uski Roti* (1969), defined an inaugural moment in the New Indian Cinema. Over the next two decades, Kaul went on to make an array of films in a diversity of genres that engaged with literary, performative and musical sources. He adapted contemporary Hindi writers such as Mohan Rakesh and Vinod Kumar Shukla to film, had an enduring interest in Dostoevsky, the source of two expansive films, *Nazar* (1989) and the elaborate television mini-series *Ahamaq* (1991). All this underpinned at all times with a major engagement in Dhrupad music. An important source was his native Rajasthan: the desert of a thousand lines, appearing for the first time in the celebrated *Duvidha* (1973), in *Mati Manas* (1984) as well as in several shorter films.

To many cineastes, however, the key work – and the unique cornerstone of Kaul's cinema – lies in a form that he invented with astonishing prescience and well before its time in the 1980s, which he later updated to digital platforms. This is a form that we may loosely call the film-essay. While the well-known genre retains its essentially non-fictional dialogic quality, in Kaul's hands, however, it appears unafraid to make sharp forays into the domains of fiction itself. In 1980 Kaul adapted the poetry, fiction and essays of Hindi author Gajanan Madhav Muktiboth to make *Satah Se Utatha Admi* (1980), a film whose genre defies categorisation. Part epic (in the vein of Muktibodh's celebrated epic poem *Andhere Mein*), part storytelling, part exploration

into aesthetic theory and part documentary, *Satah* was followed by a cycle of experimental films, *Dhrupad* (1982), *Mati Manas* (1984) and eventually the most famous of these, the expansive *Siddheshwari* (1989). All of these used music, and more particularly the Dhrupad form – adapting the training he received in Dhrupad from Ustad Zia Mohiyuddin Dagar – to make deft incursions into something that might be best described as a documentary rendition of mythic narratives.

A further transformation would take place at the end of *Siddheshwari*. When the actress Meeta Vasisth playing the singer Siddheshwari confronts the original on a video monitor, what we get is also an announcement of the arrival of video, as technology and as art. Among the less known aspects of Kaul's last cinema was his non-fiction work in digital video, showcased in this exhibition by the first-time presentation of two films he made in Holland: *Ik Ben Geen Ander* (*I am No Other*, 2002) and *A Monkey's Raincoat* (2005).

THE MAN WITH A COCKEREL

Ranbir Singh Kaleka is a decade younger, but has curious similarities to Kaul's in his own career, in addition to a shared aesthetic that was supplemented with years of friendship. He was born in 1953 in Patiala, studied at the College of Fine Art, Panjab University, Chandigarh, and came into national



Man With Cockerel (2002)

reckoning in his late 20s as a painter who combined expressionist content with a strongly reflective, slowed-down, sense of time. In 1987 Kaleka went to the Royal College of Art to do his Masters in painting, but remained a largely reclusive painter having his first solo show only in 1995.

A seismic transformation would take place in 1998. That year, Kaleka made a work that projected a video image onto a painting. The work was *Man Threading a Needle* (1999): perhaps India's single best known work of video art since then, it was also something of a clarion call for the

coming of age of video art in India. Kaleka's next work was *Powder Room* (2000), an installation set inside a functional wash room with a mirror. And his third, *Man With Cockerel* (2002).

Unlike Kaleka's signature style, *Man with Cockerel* is just twenty nine seconds long and has no painted image. It stands alone, gleaming on a rectangular board projected on both sides, as we see again and again a fluttering rooster that a man tiptoes in and tries to pick up. The rooster escapes and the man goes out. However, like *Man Threading a Needle*, however, this too explores the most basic of all properties of the moving image: the oldest silent films, such as the Lumiere shot of the boy and the hosepipe. Like in those films, we get a new exploration here into not just *how*, but *why* moving images move.

A century on from Lumiere, however, as video art is announced, what we also get is veritably the cockerel jumping straight from the cinema of the twentieth into the video art of the twenty first century.

Three years after that work, Kaleka made what was again a major foray into domains hitherto the sole property of the cinema, in a work that was every way the mirror-opposite of film. This was the magisterial *Crossings* (2005). It is an epic, with four screens spread over four oil paintings upon which four video images play out. The oils themselves comprise isolated individuals, singly, together or in line. These might be refugees

or simply bystanders, contemporary figures who come from 'somewhere else', surrounded by spaces they don't know, able to survive only through projecting upon what is around them their memories of the past. Images swirl round them like birds. These are images of windswept mountains, childhood and windmills. A man sits at the end impassively, watching all this.

In full display here is the key grammar of Kaleka's work, an oil painting that becomes a moving image, blank spaces that become suffused with projectiles drawn from memory. It is

intended, says Kaleka, to be a 'painting living within time and time living within the painting'; a 'play between stylisation and verisimilitude'.

THE CONVERSATION

Mani Kaul thus spoke for both Kaleka and for himself when he pointed to a fundamental 'paradox', in a paper he wrote shortly before he died:

It is only when the object and the camera are immobile (without motion) that we make an entire contact with



Uski Roti (1969)



Dhruvad (1982)

duration. An immobile apple on an immobile table, filmed by an immobile camera offers an ideal situation for an experience of a passing of duration.

To Kaul, most moving images 'do not encourage a direct awareness of the passage of time'. For most mainstream

productions, such awareness can be a disaster, he says. For films - and we may now say, for all moving image art too - such stillness is 'indispensable'. Showcasing time in its pure durational essence, it opens up the audience to the times in which the works exist, and which they explore.

WORKS



HOUSE OF OPAQUE WATER

Ranbir Singh Kaleka/Pradeep Saha
(2013), Three-channel high-definition video on polished floor, stereo sound, 10' 33"

This elegiac environmental work, mostly in black-and-white, tells of the occupants of low-lying islands of the Sundarbans delta even as they get eroded by rising water. This is the closest Kaleka comes in all his video art to documentary film. It was made in collaboration with well known environmentalist Pradeep Saha,

who has had a long history of engagement with this region. Shown over three channels set above a floor that reflects the image as though in water, it reconstructs a saga that combines, at once, extreme pain, a stoic millennial fortitude, alongside very contemporary phenomena of climate change.

House of Opaque Water (Detail), 2013 ►



DAATA

Conception/Editing: Piyush K. Kashyap, Sound: Madhu Apsara (2017), Five channel projection with single-track mono sound, 9'

Original work commissioned by the Jawahar Kala Kendra, made in collaboration with the National Film Development Corporation, by young filmmaker/editor Kashyap, supported by veteran soundman and key Kaul collaborator Apsara. This installation reworks Mani Kaul's famous first film, *Uski Roti* (1969). The original film is an iconic work in Indian film history, as well as a classic in the tradition of 'slow cinema'. The film was ostensibly about a woman in a Punjab village who sits through the day waiting for her husband, a bus driver,

so she could give him his meal. The installation, in contrast, opens up and activates Balo's free-associative projections. They include her sister Jinda's desires and fears, her husband Sucha Singh's masculinity, her memories of her marriage projected upon the suicide of her neighbour. The city beckons, both as a space in which Sucha lives and as a dreaded/desired possibility, even as her fantasies merge into a montage of spaces that she variously occupies. The bus stop itself becomes a space of expansive, windswept drama, of tumult and passion.

Daata (Detail), 2017 ►



'ITI' - THE END

Conception/Editing: Piyush K. Kashyap, Sound: Madhu Apsara (2017), Three channel multimedia projection with stereo sound, 14'

Original work commissioned by the Jawahar Kala Kendra, made in collaboration with the Films Division. The title, perhaps translatable as 'thus it was', refers to Kaul's use of it to end *Uski Roti*. Three screens will combine sequences from the essay-films *Satah Se Utatha Admi*, *Dhrupad*, *Mati Manas*, *Arrival*, *Siddheshwari*, together with autobiographical videos

made in Holland: *Ik Ben Geen Ander/I Am No Other* (2002) and *A Monkey's Raincoat* (2005). The themes move from the idea of an artistic persona (Muktibodh/Siddheshwari/Kaul himself/the young artists from the Rijksakademie), to diverse definitions of artistic expression, and finally the journeys that make such expression possible.



CROSSINGS

Ranbir Singh Kaleka (2005), 4 channel video projection on painting, stereo sound, 15'

Kaleka's four-channel work spread over oil paintings upon which video images play out. A 'coming of age' saga of a Sikh youth brought into maturity, introduced into adulthood with the ritual of tying his turban, which is first dyed by being dipped into a pond that then turns into a vat of colour. Kaleka's central

strategy inverses the cinema completely. The painted figures become intensely mobile as they travel through different projections. They migrate, move over mountains, become refugees, perform various actions on foreign lands. A man on the right sits silent, even as tornadoes rage.



SWEET UNEASE

Ranbir Singh Kaleka
(2011), Single channel HD video projection on painted
canvas mounted on fractured wall, 11'11"



Two men (played by the same actor) on two sides of the screen eat, enter a central *akhara*, and wrestle. Each man leaves his painted self to perform this cyclic act of consumption and violence. The playful energies of the same man, doubled, are expended over a gouged-out wall between the two sumptuous

food-lined interiors. Kaleka recalls a childhood memory of how two wrestlers would be fed by a village leading up to a much-anticipated bout. These were traditionally *mallas*: historically the first line of defence against invaders, who had to be looked after by the entire village in Punjab.

MAN WITH COCKEREL (VI)

Ranbir Singh Kaleka
(2002), Two-channel projection, 29"



We have the original version of this famous work of Kaleka. It is one that explores the most basic of all properties of the moving image. It uses a classic example of the earliest of silent cinemas of the cinema: here, a man tiptoes, tries to pick up a rooster, it flutters in his hands,

and both it and he escape. Geeta Kapur writes that the 'language of representation enters the liminal zone and the encounter, sanguine, serene, evanescent, resembles a *haiku* where the hypothesis offered about a lived life needs no backing of proof'.

HE WAS A GOOD MAN

Ranbir Singh Kaleka
(2008), Video projection on painting atop easel, stereo sound, 5'3"



Kaleka's reworking of his first major video work, *Man Threading a Needle*. The original painting-that-moved, showing a male figure devoting the greatest attention to that most concentrated of acts - that of pushing a small thread into a miniature hole - had moved minimally. This remake is almost

the opposite of the minimalism of the old: in evidence here is the full repertoire of Kaleka's struggles with the present, the documentary form, suffused with nostalgic images. The painting/video ends with a door opening and people walking in, to see the painting itself, as if in a gallery.

FOREST

Ranbir Singh Kaleka
(2009), Video projection in painting, stereo sound, 16'



This is a single-projector work upon a large painting. The work is set to music by film composer Elliot Goldenthal (best known for his score to the motion picture *Frida*, 2002).

It works like a mythic fable of man, flagellating himself on burnt ground, as the work transmogrifies from a forest into a books library, and from burnt earth to water.

HAWA ME GAANTH

Vikram Joglekar, with programming on Max-MSP by Clifton D'Souza (2017), Eight-channel sound installation, running time variable

Renounce the notion that beings and objects appear from somewhere (even from a beginning) into world-space and are destined to disappear from it. Space extends and returns to itself. It's return marks the intensive phase – Mani Kaul

Original work commissioned by the Jawahar Kala Kendra. Made by one of Kaul's key

collaborators in his later films, Vikram Joglekar (who composed both the sound and music for *Nazar* and *Ahamaq*), this is a multichannel rendition of soundtracks, of music and dialogue, from several of Mani Kaul's films, moving from whispers to the full magnificence of the Dhrupad. The title comes from a phrase that Ustad Zia Moiuddin Dagar commonly used to describe a twist in a Dhrupad *taan*.

Hawa Me Gaanth (Detail), 2017 ►



THE IDIOT GARDEN

(2017), Earth work, comprising Amba's Bench and the Broken Vase



Inspired by Kaul's massive film *Idiot* (also known as *Ahamaq*), this Garden, the centerpiece of the exhibition, reproduces the private garden of Amba (Aglaya) with its green bench that is her favourite tryst. It is at this bench that Amba first interrogates Myshkin, setting herself up in rivalry with the

seductions of Nastassiya; here that Myshkin tells Killer how to load a revolver, and where he has his savage confrontations with Raghujan. There is also the Chinese vase that Myshkin smashes when he gets an epileptic fit during his marriage to Amba/Aglaya.

THE IDIOT ROOM

(2017), 4 channel video on monitors each playing one episode from Mani Kaul's 1991 film *Ahamaq/Idiot*, with chairs, sofas and diwans, '58'



Four channels play, over an hour, the complete four-part version of *Idiot* (1991). Best known as one of Shah Rukh Khan's first films, the film also featured British Asian star Ayub Khan-Din as Prince Myskin, a man whose epilepsy is mistaken for idiocy. With this tour de force of control over a bewilderingly complex

narrative and a massive cast of characters (more than 50 key roles) constantly shifting about in both geographic and cinematic spaces, Mani Kaul continues exploring Dostoevsky's fiction, faithfully following the novel's original plot transposed into a scathing depiction of a feudal elite, largely bypassed by history.

MANI KAUL
(1944-2011)



Born in 1944, in Jodhpur, Rajasthan, Kaul grew up in Jaipur until he left to join the Film & Television Institute of India, Pune. In Pune, he was taught by film director Ritwik Ghatak. Widely considered the founder of an avant garde cinema in India with *Uski Roti* (His Bread), 1969, Kaul made a series of experimental films in different genres, including fiction films adapting literary texts, and several 'film-essays'. He was a part of the YUKT Film Collective in the early 1980s. He was trained in the Dhrupad form of Indian classical music, as student of Ustad Zia Mohiyuddin Dagar, and was also a poet and painter.

ASHISH RAJADHYAKSHA (THE CURATOR)



Ashish Rajadhyaksha (b. 1957) is an independent writer and researcher. He is the author of *Ritwik Ghatak: A Return to the Epic* (1984) and *Indian Cinema in the Time of Celluloid: From Bollywood to the Emergency* (2009), co-editor with Paul Willemen of the *Encyclopaedia of Indian Cinema* (1994/1999). He co-curated (with Geeta Kapur) *Bombay/Mumbai* (1992-2001) for *Century City: Art & Culture in the Global Metropolis* (Tate Modern, 2002), *Memories of Cinema* (IVth Guangzhou Triennial, 2011) and *You Don't Belong* (Film/Documentary/Video, a travelling film festival in China, 2011).

RANBIR SINGH KALEKA (b. 1953)



Born in Patiala, Punjab, Kaleka did his diploma in painting at the College of Fine Art, Panjab University and his Masters in painting at the Royal College of Art, London in 1987. A well known painter, Kaleka moved to video art in the late 1990s with his famous work, *Man Threading a Needle* (1998-99), which inaugurated the style that he is best known for, that of projecting video upon easel paintings. Kaleka's style lays bare many of the founding elements what used to be celluloid film: the single frame shot encompassing a span of attention, spaces within and beyond, still characters amid a hyperactive landscape, and hence an interrogation of the very idea of movement. The key elements of Kaleka's painterly grammar are the oil on canvas: the still work that moves. In moving, it opens up spaces-within-spaces that are straight from the cinema; cinematic sequences mediated by the aura of documentary testimony.

◀ Photo credit: Rashmi Kaleka

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MAP

SCHEDULE OF EVENTS

JANUARY

- 20** FRIDAY - - Inauguration
- 21** SATURDAY - 5:30 PM - Exhibition walkthrough by Ashish Rajadhyaksha and Ranbir Singh Kaleka
6:30 PM - Artist Talk, Ranbir Singh Kaleka
- 22** SUNDAY - 5:30 PM - Exhibition walkthrough by Ashish Rajadhyaksha
6:30 PM - "Behind तह-सतह: A Very Deep Surface: the Kaul/ Kaleka Connection": Illustrated Talk by Ashish Rajadhyaksha

FEBRUARY

- 28** SATURDAY - 5:30 PM - Exhibition walkthrough by Ashish Rajadhyaksha
- 03** FRIDAY - 5:30 PM - Exhibition walkthrough: Ashish Rajadhyaksha with Udayan Vajpeyi
6:30 PM - Talk by Udayan Vajpeyi, 'Life With Mani', an evening of poetry, music and ideas
- 11** SATURDAY - 5:00 PM - 'Vijaydan Detha, Mani Kaul, Duvidha', by Uday Prakash
- Followed by a discussion on Mani Kaul and Rajasthan, by Mr. Uday Prakash and Dr. C.P. Dewal, moderated by Malchand Tiwari

MARCH

- 03** FRIDAY - 6:30 PM - 'Shadow Encounters: Video Practices in India', Talk by Gayatri Sinha
- 04** SATURDAY - 6:30 PM - Mita Vashisht: 'That thing called the actor...': Taken from her under-production film *First Take Ok* on Mani Kaul's theory of performance, the actor/ director and key figure in Kaul's *Siddheshwari* and *Idiot*, in conversation with Ashish Rajadhyaksha

Exhibition walkthroughs daily at 5:30 PM

Exhibition closed on Mondays and Public Holidays

MANI KAUL RETROSPECTIVE

JANUARY

- 23** MONDAY - 6:30 PM - *Uski Roti* (1969): film screening of the original film in digitally restored form
- 24** TUESDAY - 6:30 PM - Shorts: The student films: *Yatrik* (1967)
- Feature: *Ashad Ka Ek Din* (Mani Kaul, 1971)
- 25** WEDNESDAY - 6:30 PM - Shorts: *The Nomad Puppeteers* (1974), *Historical Sketch of Indian Women* (1975), *Chitrakathi* (1976)
- Feature: *Ghashiram Kotwal* (Yukt Film Collective, 1976)
- 27** FRIDAY - 6:30 PM - Shorts: *Arrival* (1979)
- Feature: *Satah Se Uthata Admi* (1980)

FEBRUARY

- 29** SUNDAY - 6:30 PM - Feature: *Ahamaq* (1991)
- 31** TUESDAY - 6:30 PM - Shorts: *Before My Eyes* (1988)
- Feature: *Mati Manas* (1984)
- 01** WEDNESDAY - 6:30 PM - Feature: *Siddheshwari* (1989)
- 02** THURSDAY - 6:30 PM - Short: *The Cloud Door* (1994)
- Feature: *Nazar* (1989)
- 07** TUESDAY - 6:30 PM - Feature: *Bojh* (2000)
- 08** WEDNESDAY - 6:30 PM - Feature: *Naukar Ki Kameez* (1999)
- 09** THURSDAY - 6:30 PM - Essay films: *Ik ben Geen Ander/I Am No Other* (2002), *A Monkey's Raincoat* (2005)
- 10** FRIDAY - 6:30 PM - Screening: *Duvidha* (Mani Kaul, 1973)

NOTES:



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Special thanks

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