

'I do love donkeys very much'

[Kishore Singh](#) | New Delhi

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To know what a maverick artist looks like, look no further than Ranbir Kaleka. He wears a hat even when indoors, from which on occasion I have seen fish hooks dangling — or perhaps they were earrings. Unlike the networking artist, his eyes don't dart impatiently across the room, scanning to see whether there are buyers interested in seeking him out. You have all his attention when he speaks to you, and his speech is deliberate, slow and accented.

But the man will frustrate you by not speaking about his art. At least, not in the way other artists do. It's already difficult grappling with his fantastical canvases, but when he won't explain them, you find yourself studying them even more deliberately. There's a lot that happens on them, and unless you know him and locate his memory, it's impossible to find the key to what he's attempting — though on the surface level you cannot help but respond to the everyday ordinariness of his art.

Even before he moved to his recent practice of combining oil and acrylic canvases with video projection and sound, there was an element of theatricality to his paintings. No surprise then that Kaleka had dabbled with theatre in an earlier stint in Delhi, and with filmmaking and film viewing in Punjab, where he was born and where he studied art before going to study and work in London.

Now back in Delhi, the artist has moved on from canvases where he would recreate a cinematic aspect through painted layers and frames, spaces where he might place remembered people in surreal situations to arrive at newer meanings. In so doing, he was creating fables and allegories, posing people to tell stories that alluded to myth but were commonplace. Take his symbolic meeting of birds and beasts on the ruins of a newly minted Delhi that he created as part of a body of work commissioned in the capital for the Commonwealth Games that is insightful for the venality that preceded the event.

Working now with video projection, he creates a dual reality of time. Within the magic realism of the images is a more profound truth that you might have to scramble a bit to understand — such as food being a metaphor for life, but the diners themselves morphing into wrestlers as a further metaphor for questions about that life.

The ordinary teakettle — a recurring motif in his work — the corner flower shop, the pushcart vendor, for Kaleka all these carry as much meaning as angels and beasts ("I do love donkeys very much," he says with unusual candour), and it is these that he places in his artificially digitised environments, working with technology that defies conventional art but which causes less dismay among even purists.

Because he is a slow artist — "It takes me a long time to think of what I must do next, and how," he explains — and because you will never see a collection of dozens of his works in any single space, Kaleka has remained somewhat unnoticed by mainstream Indian media. But he's been busy in the last years, his appearances in Guangzhou, Moscow, Singapore, Taipei, Hong Kong, New York, Tokyo, Chicago, Sydney, Berne, Busan, Basel, Lisbon and Berlin resembling the mappings of a journey of recognition that might well mark him as one of the most important artists of 21st-century India. If you get the chance to see his work — or him — grab it, because unlike his subjects, there's nothing ordinary or everyday about Kaleka.