

Subtle incisiveness of Ranbir Kaleka's works puts everyday events into perspective

<https://www.stirworld.com/see-features-subtle-incisiveness-of-ranbir-kaleka-s-works-puts-everyday-events-into-perspective>

The artistic tool of metaphors and experiment with mediums with which the multi-media artist Ranbir Kaleka carved his artistic journey has turned human realities inside out

by [Dilpreet Bhullar](#)

Watching a story unfold in front of the eyes when narrated with the finesse of a raconteur is akin to the pleasure of reading poetry. The story that has its beats of enchantment, pregnant pauses to think, and subtle appeals to act upon never fails to strike a chord with the viewers. Such is the experience when gleaned from the oeuvre of mixed-media artist Ranbir Kaleka. His works, mostly an amalgamation of video and [painting](#), are nothing short of the art of telling an engrossing story that you would like to have it for keeps. Watching his [video installations](#) running in parallel with the resonating sounds last year at the exhibition *Fear of a New Dawn*, at Vadehra Art Gallery in New Delhi, reaffirmed the artist's position as a sensitive receptor to his social surroundings. The art of [moving image](#) bound to the brackets of its definition, that involves an interplay of video and sound, is driven by the rules of technology. For Kaleka the efficacy of technology is not limited to its methodological patterns but combined with the social thematic, as his works show, lend myriad meanings. Kaleka's artistic journey is an assertion of his choices to represent the unflinching truth of our lives that many tend to ignore or may garb it under the fluff of candyfloss. As for the viewers, the thread that binds to the work from stage one of taking a step forward to decipher its meaning until the end does not at once tends to leave the perceptive minds.



'Not Anonymous_ Waking To The Obscure Fear Of A New Dawn' 2017-18 (extract); Single channel projection on burnt wood; 9 min 18 sec loop

Video Credit: Camera: Pradip Saha and Raj Mohanty; Editing: Raj Mohanty; Sound: Pradip Saha (variations on the score by MihályVig); Special thanks to protagonists: Shambhu, Naresh and Girish

Watch full video [here](#).

The ones dwelling on the peripheral existence of our society, since they are perceived to be making a little contribution towards the larger good of life, are often dubbed as the nameless population in the mass media. The title of Kaleka's work *Not Anonymous_Waking To The Fear Of A New Dawn* that prompted me to see his [exhibition](#) rightfully catapults the not-so-anonymous human tribe to the centre of history. Giving an identity, not white-washing the labourers under the umbrella terms, the video of 9:18 minutes, single channel projection on multiple planes, forge a relationship between the unnoticed motley of labourers and donkeys. Both work relentlessly towards the shaping of the cities that we embrace wholeheartedly whilst relegating the makers to the margins. The suggestive meaning of arrows that ooze the blood out of the donkey retraces the barbaric acts of hunting down the oppressed. With the nock of the arrow, the silhouette of the man gradually fades away as we see the head of the donkey bleed to the death, and sooner a tree grows to dissipate the dead man. The cruelty projected in the video does lead to a grim reality of mortality, however, the streak of metamorphosis is never far to reassure the resilience of the ones at the receiving end.



'Contested Desires-2'; 2009; 55x73 inches; Digital collage, Archival Inks and oil paint on canvas
Image Credit: Ranbir Kaleka

Kaleka's affiliation with the [video art](#) stems from his interest in cinema and theatre that till the current day continues to inform his art practice. Speaking with STIR, Kaleka reminisces his childhood days, "I recall the first cinema images as well as theatrical performances. I was 3 or 4 years old and from our village house balcony, I saw an animation film projected on the side of a van parked in a clearing. It showed enormous mosquitos, in-flight, and stinging. I was amazed by the transformation of the van into mosquitos and then back into a van. My uncle used to create shadow plays for me and my brother on the walls of our *haveli*. He used a lantern to cast huge shadows of his body, which he often padded up for the show. The first experience of the transformative power of cinema and the shadow play has left a lasting impression".

When one is introduced to these larger-than-life animations at an impressionable age, it does not come as a surprise that the artist had a perpetual penchant for the art of storytelling. Kaleka explains this, "When everyone in the family was an inventive storyteller, creating their own forms and methods to tell a story, two village raconteurs were occasionally called to the house to retell an incident. What the raconteurs created can be described as a circle of magic, they pulled you into it, kept you enthralled, making you oblivious of the external world".



'House Of Opaque Water'; 2012; 3 channel projection with sound on 3 panels (extract); 171.6cm x 914.4cm (variable); 10 min 33 sec loop

Video Credit: Camera: Pradip Saha and Gautam Pandey; Research: Pradip Saha; Sound: Pradip Saha; Editor: Pradip Saha; Assistant editor: Rajan Kumar Singh; Special thanks to the protagonist: Sheikh Lal Mohan, Tushar Jiwarajka and the Islanders of Sagardweep

Watch full video [here](#).

The three-channel video *House of Opaque Water* could not have held more importance than today when Sundarbans is near to extermination in the face of Amphan cyclone. The delta in Bengal bears the immediate repercussion of the storm rising from the Bay of Bengal. Given the intensity of the cyclone this year, the salt from the sea has turned the farmlands of Sundarbans toxic for the next few years. The Sheikh Lal Mohan of *House of Opaque Water* narrates the plight of his fellows in the Sundarbans. Calling the vast expanse of water his home, Mohan voices the predicament of his community with which they put up every year. Interestingly, before Lal greets us, the home of the artist with everyday objects and a dead beehive at the start of the video adds a layer to what manifests the idea of home. The video with the metaphor water illustrates the calamities that take away the home and belonging, but its fluidity raises the quotient of temporality attached to everything around us.

The experimental and metaphoric quality of Kaleka's work has been instrumental in generating a sense of wonder among his viewers who are keen to experience novelty that Kaleka strives to offer. He opens the door to his journey as an artist-creator of his works, as he says, "The first seed for a work usually is found at unexpected moments in various sources: a real happening, literature, art history, a memory recall etc. I would say the seed leads to the efflorescence of a visual 'event'. In its contour, it is diffused in the beginning. As the contours take a more definite shape, the visual 'event' begins to 'whisper' its meaning. Now, for me to continue to work on it, it's necessary that it should continue to tantalise me with its multifaceted fecundity. The complete, fuller meaning of the work that engages me stays just beyond my grasp. If I completely understand what the work 'is', then it is a work, which is one-dimensional and not plumbing the hidden depths of experience. I then do not take the work any further. Otherwise, I pursue its elusiveness and begin to move on from sketches to gathering reference materials if necessary. I continue to work on a piece, even if it takes months to years until it 'feels' right in my entire body."



Kaleka's digital collage, with archival inks and oil on canvas, *Man with Quilt* resonates with the vicious circle of poverty that [India's](#) internal migrants have been the victims of, for many decades now. Soon after the social unrest of February in [Delhi](#), the pandemic crisis still at large has left the poorest of the poor in desolation. The work recreates the scene of mayhem that reduces the life of a destitute to bare essential, in this case, the quilt. Against the burnt shops, stray dogs and streets populated with footwear and stones, the man leaves the home with a single quilt. The forced [migration](#) is not an episode in the life of the poor but is consequential enough to turn the entire life topsy-turvy. What remains consistent in the works of Kaleka is the presence of human figures that successfully draws the connection of togetherness against the burden of lonesome life. Kaleka further elaborates on this, "It is the human condition that interests me. I create 'events', which may appear abstruse or metaphorical, using people to enact them. I look for a particular face or body type, which would be able to express complexity as well as an easy connection and an oblique familiarity with the viewer."

'Man With Quilt'; 2020; 120 X 55 inches; Digital collage, Archival Inks and oil paint on canvas
Image Credit: Ranbir Kaleka



Untitled

Video Credit: Performers: Mandeep Raikhy, Harriet Quinn Manju Sharma, Parth, Ahmar Raza and Bashara, the white horse; Camera: Gautam Pandey and Abbas Muzaffar; Audio engineer: David Fulton; editor/ compositor: Steffen Frech and Gautam Pandey; Special thanks to Riverbank studios and Akhara wrestlers

Working on a new video sculpture, Kaleka brings in the aesthetic sensibility of an astute creative mind to reconfirm the idea that humans are entangled in variegated alcoves that remain distant yet interconnected with each other. The alcoves housed in the structure of a decayed body rendered in the ash-grey colour evoke the 'memento-mori'. The physical struggle between the couple under the first alcove is followed by the mental combat that a person undergoes to suggest that our existence is a constant battle. It is the ash-grey sculpture and background sound of a droplet synonymous with the ticking of the clock that reminds us of the eventuality of death. It is a work in progress, as Kaleka declares, "the other alcoves will have a representation of time in one alcove and that of 'eternal nature' in another."

For someone who is equally at ease with a variety of mediums, one is inevitably curious to know how Kaleka selects his medium for his particular work of art. Kaleka declares, "When I speak of an idea for an artwork presenting itself as a visual event, nearly always it arrives with its medium. The challenges of all the mediums are similar, as they all require honesty in their execution. Most of my practice involves me singly in the making of a work. The exception is when you are making a video where you require many cameras and a large number of people for the shoot, there the challenge is to allow each of my assistants to be true to themselves and see how you can weave their natural instincts into your vision".

The works of Kaleka are an enticing invitation to watching, observing and witnessing, and implicitly pressing upon the viewers to not leave these experiences as a single-time source of fulfilment but set the roots to take cognisance of the surrounding in an effort to be empathetic towards our fellow companions sans the order of hierarchy. Yet, the multifacetedness of Kaleka's artistic journey refrains from raising urgency to convey the message or to let the rush of emotions dictate the experience of watching a subtle and incisive work. It is the familiar still unknown setting of the works that hold the attention of the viewers. It is this sense of steady engagement with the piece of art that has made Kaleka's works carry a distinct identity amid the noise and haste of making art.

Comments

[Dilpreet Bhullar](#) Dilpreet is a writer-researcher based in New Delhi. She is the Alliance for Historical Dialogue and Accountability Fellow, Columbia University, New York. She has been co-editor of the books *Third Eye: Photography and Ways of Seeing* and *Voices and Images*. Her essays on visual sociology and identity politics are frequently published in leading books, journals and magazines. She is the associate editor of a theme-based journal dedicated to visual arts, published by India Habitat Centre.