

Take one

RanbirKaleka adjusts the frames for his first solo in Mumbai, reports **ZeenatNagree**.



In the late 1990s, when contemporary Indian art was being redefined through experiments with video and new media, RanbirKaleka's first video-painting made its debut in Delhi. Since then, the 57-year-old Delhi artist has shown his distinct artworks in museums and art galleries across the world including New York, Venice, Berlin, Lisbon and Sydney but rarely in his home country.

This fortnight, Kaleka's video-paintings get a public outing in his first solo show in Mumbai titled *Sweet Unease*, which features new pieces as well as works made during the last decade. What distinguishes Kaleka is that while his work is important in the development of Indian video art, it continues to hold on to the painting tradition. Viewers in Mumbai will get to see Kaleka's approach, which involves the projection of video on an identical painted surface. Kaleka began employing this technique in 1998 to see what happened "when an image made of light is combined with a painted surface and a third kind of image is created," he said.

But Kaleka's video-paintings don't rely on this enchanting technical feat alone – even though the painted and video images align, they often slip and separate to reveal their individual existences. "The meaning of the work is not governed by the surprise element," he said. "I'm like a sorcerer showing everybody how I do the tricks." The effect is heightened in the show's title work, a two-screen installation, in which Kaleka makes his protagonists walk out of the frame onto the blackened surface of the wall between the two screens. A male model, who appears in both paintings and the accompanying 11-minute video loop, is shown ceaselessly feasting and taking intermittent breaks to engage in wrestling. Even as the wrestling comes alive on the wall, the painted images seem lifeless when the video protagonist departs. Kaleka uses the acts of eating and wrestling as metaphors for human life. "As organisms, we eat to stay alive and we also struggle to stay alive – whether with our own selves or with the others," he said. "Life has its uncertainties. But we have to find a space of ease within them." *Sweet Unease* also evokes Kaleka's childhood in Punjab where traditional wrestling is a common sport. With no obvious beginning or end, the video depicts an unending cycle that doesn't give viewers the satisfaction of watching complete events.

Kaleka's works have never offered simple conclusions. Using open-ended narratives, the artist addresses what he

describes as “grand themes” that explore eternal subjects like “life, death, loss, and aspirations”. In this show, Cul-de-sac in Taxila provides a narrative puzzle that dwells on desire and struggle. The work features a man dressed in a black suit sitting still and holding a hammer. When he suddenly raises the hammer to strike the air, a white horse appears before him. The title springs from Kaleka’s fascination with the city of Taxila, an important stop on ancient trade routes as well as a centre of learning, which was destroyed in the fifth century. Kaleka’s work suggests that the man has aspirations to explore Taxila but can’t find the road to it. The horse appears and disappears, and the man’s interminable wait is only disturbed by the persistent sound of a drop of water falling into a pan behind him.

As in Cul-de-sac in Taxila, which was part of the 2005 four-screen installation titled Crossings that explored the theme of migration, Kaleka can deftly draw from older works while transforming their character. “My concern is not just producing something new each time, but also to see how I can explore one single image to make something that isn’t just a variation,” he said. In He was a Good Man (2008), the artist uses the protagonist of his first video-painting in 1998-99, Man Threading Needle, to tell the story of a migrant who longs to go home. Apart from the figure of a man threading a needle, which suggests the need to earn a livelihood, the work features images of trains passing by and the occurrence of violent events. The protagonist is based on a migrant who worked as a carpenter in Kaleka’s house, but the artwork is not so much his particular story as a homage to migrants across the world. “They disappear but we see them because our doors, windows and cupboards have been built by them,” Kaleka said. The theme is explored further in the 2009 Not From Here, which shows a migrant family standing near a railway track. “I want to say that [migration] cannot stop either,” Kaleka said, perhaps pointing to his own move to London in the mid-’80s (and from where he returned in 1999). “People will keep coming and going and I’m trying to give it a celebratory sense as well.