

RANBIR KALEKA'S MOVING STILL LIFE

By Shana Maria Verghis

Saffronart and Volte Gallery Present the Solo Exhibition of Ranbir Kaleka: Fables

Showing at The Oberoi, the artist's *Fables* are a delightful composite of video and painting with metaphorical stories.



Ranbir Kaleka seemed pretty certain, in retrospect, that his course as an artist, was predestined. “I grew up in a village in Punjab. We were two boys. And I have a clear memory of the things that I did until the age of five. One was drawing a tractor on the walls of the house with charcoal.” Considering that “macho” cultures look down on men in artistic professions, viewing them as a sissy, Kaleka, holding a show at The Oberoi till January 5, feels his case, “was unusual” for the time and place. Because when they spotted talent, his family decided early on, the boy would pursue art as a career, so he shared, “I lacked a killer instinct because they indulged my whims and I had nothing to rebel against.”

He was allowed many leisurely hours to perfect his medium. And soon afterwards, he would even fix the time in which he would complete each piece. There is an amusing story concerning how the artist evolved as a notoriously slow worker. He tends to take a long time over his productions. The latest of which are being hosted by Saffron and Volte Gallery, as part of a show called

Fables.

“I was around eight or nine at the time,” he recalled, adding he was, “very busy drawing. My family had wanted me to join them for dinner. I was adamant I would not. Until I was done.

“Then an adult asked, in general, how long would it take an artist to complete something. And an uncle of mine responded by saying, ‘It took Michaelangelo 15 years to complete Sistine Chapel’.”

That was when Kaleka said he, “made my decision.”

Instead of prodigiously creating art, Ranbir Kaleka chose to spend most of his time on, “thinking.”

He was lucky that his family indulged his processing periods. Or he might have starved in a garret! Kaleka recalled that after studying in Delhi, where he later taught art, he had joined up for a course in post-graduation at the Royal College of Art in London. Seems that he did little when he was there. His seniors got rather perplexed. Because the space for him was empty!

But Ranbir could say later, that he put that his “goofing off” to good use. Because he turned his mind to perfecting his pitch. Now he can explain this, using the physical example of two glasses with red wine, perched on a table beside us. Pushing one a bit away from the other, he remarked, “You just get a keener eye about something being a bit off.” Maybe not synchronising, but trying to get a different take on perspectives.

When he has the spotlight on him, the artist has to explain himself. Though as Kaleka, added, “When one is making a work of art, one is not overanalysing how it is done. Or even why it’s being done.”

However, there is always some magical way in which various influences from art history, from poetry, books et al, seep into your metier. In *Fables*, one of the main influences is the movies.

There is an earlier piece Kaleka did with Khushi. And it features paintings and video. In the piece, socialite Naveen Ansal and his family, guest star as still life that comes alive, in a room with a lamp and candles on a table. A painting of Ansal in the foreground,

is a constant in the frame. In the background, is a corridor (in the Ansal home), and a door opens to changing scenarios. The moving image stories inside the painting, make it delightful, for minutes, like kids' pop-up books.

There is another video-photo montage with a row of about eighteen candles, and a water-effect.

Our favourite features exotic flowers in the foreground in still life with a video of a flower shop scene (in Jor Bagh). It cuts slowly to the interior of a luxuriant living room. "A decadent one," said the artist. You don't really have to look for deep meaning. The journey of flowers from the poverty stricken shop to richer space is straightforward. Kaleka did some earlier work on the, "journey" of a kettle, and wants more still-lives, building a story around objects, like a shoe. As said before, his metaphorical stories, take time making. The Naveen Ansal piece, "emerged from many conversations." And like stories in a book, his video-paint-photo-montage stories also have chapters. His preoccupation, is with space and time. And finding a place, that is, "not painting, not video."

Ranbir Kaleka has also created several photo montages and some paintings with birds and beasts. One of them, he explained, "Has at least 300 layers." It is a surreal panorama of animals. It also has various symbols of development and heritage (the Qutab, for size), in the far distance. Kaleka normally exhibits overseas and rarely in India.

He commented, "Only some artists, particularly those of the older generation know with my work."

Adding that the kind of new media art he specialises in, is, "popular now among boys and girls." Some of it he described, "as dreadful." But there is also a lot of commendable work. He veered towards this specifically because tools were comfortable for him. Now he wishes to work with, "scientists, maybe biologists and sculptors. I wondered what a moving sculpture would be like." Recently, he worked on creating a static tornado, with the support from the gallery owner of Volte. "If I could create the moving effect of a tornado around this room. Wow. The other one was about eight feet high, but standing still. I was thinking about how a tornado

emerges from nothing visible, ascends, then collapses in a heap.
And how something so fragile can change the destiny of cities.