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RanbirKaleka's Beautiful World



VOGUE RSVP

DIFFERENT STROKES

An aluminium kettle, that icon of the roadside chaiwallah, simmers away on a hob as the projected background transforms every few seconds. From the domestic interiors of a kitchen to the window of a tea stall to a storage cupboard to an improvised stove surrounded by garbage and brambles, the kettle remains a constant. In *The Kettle*, as in his other works on display at his solo exhibition *Sweet Unease*, RanbirKaleka overlays painting and video projections on a single surface creating an image of an inimitable quality. "Painting has a physical quality, a thing-ness which one can touch and feel. Video, on the other hand, is made simply from light, and has another kind of aura. I wondered what would happen if I combined the two," says Kaleka. "When you do that you arrive at a third, layered image with a different quality, which makes it possible to enter different spaces of meaning and touch human experience at another level.

"Known in the past decade for his work that amalgamates the dynamic projection and stagnant image, RanbirKaleka was born in Patiala in 1953 and studied at Punjab University, Chandigarh and the Royal College of Art, London. "My interest in video is rooted in my passion for cinema," he says. "Even when I was back in India in the late 70s, I started a film society in my home town Patiala, where we watched offbeat films and international cinema loaned out by the embassies.

" Having worked in a wide range of media over his 30 years of artistic engagement, Kaleka's oeuvre extends over watercolors, oils on canvas, mixed media on wood, digital photographs and finally video. He has held teaching positions in Patiala and in New Delhi and has received the National Award from the Lalit Kala Akademi in addition to the Sanskriti Award. Though his reputation in India is unfortunately largely restricted to world of the art aficionado, his work has been exhibited in New York, London, Venice, Berlin and Vienna among other cities. Kaleka now resides in New Delhi.

In his first ever solo show in Mumbai, Kaleka brings together a wide gamut of his work from the last ten years in a curated selection of seven video works. The varied subjects of the works share an existentialist perspective, linked together by their commentary on non-linear temporality. "I don't believe that there is any geographical or temporal specificity to my work, and I don't think they abide to a specific cultural metaphor. If there is mythology, it is invented," says Kaleka of his choice of theme. "I think this liberates it from making a commentary on any one aspect of life and connects it to what used to be called the grand themes of life; the tragic, the beautiful, the triumphant. "Visually remarkable, the layers of meaning in his work are disruptive of a singular interpretation. Manipulating light by using different pigments to absorb or reflect radiance allows the artist to achieve an incredible tonal range.

The exhibition includes his most acclaimed works; Man With Cockerel and He Was A Good Man, both of which inhabit dreamscapes verging on poetry; the man continuously loses and chases his prize rooster, while in the other a man sits patiently, eternally attempting to thread a needle by a window occasionally blinking his eyes. Every now and then the fantasy is demolished, and the painting on the canvas underneath is revealed as a material artefact. The Kettle and Sweet Unease, his most recent explorations in layering video on canvas, exemplify his playful lyricism.

Multiple selves are fused into one work in Sweet Unease, where two identical male figures occupy two separate canvases, walk away from their painted selves and wrestle in the in-between space. Kaleka enchants us with his multi-media wizardry, creating a dichotomy between the gradual movement of sequential time and its indeterminate repetitive nature. While his work has been alternately viewed under the rubric of new cinema, painting and installation art, Kaleka finds such categories redundant in thinking about contemporary art,

"Students of art are meant to be taught art history and what the different genres are - and then you have to be taught that you don't have to follow any of that. You just decide what you want, use whatever means you can to arrive at it, and let the art critics and art historians decide what to call it.

(RanbirKaleka's solo show 'Sweet Unease' is on at Volte Gallery, Mumbai, until February 15)

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