



Ranbir Kaleka. *He Was a Good Man*. Single-channel video projection with sound on a 45" x 60" painting (acrylic on canvas). 2007-08.

## Spitting Image; Splitting Image

**Niharika Dinkar** checks out how Ranbir Kaleka continues his project of facilitating an encounter between painting and video.

IN 1839, WHEN THE FRENCH ACADEMIC painter Paul Delaroche declared dramatically that painting was dead, he was pointing to the powerful rise of photography and the threat posed by technologies that could mechanically reproduce images – technologies that were to dominate 20th century visual culture.

The continued presence of painting has, however, belied Delaroche's claims, and instead, inspired explorations of the complex and rich relationship between diverse media. Ranbir Kaleka's works, for instance, investigate the exchange between painting and screen technologies.

Since 1999, Kaleka has been working on video projections on paintings on canvas, sometimes duplicating the images entirely, sometimes making additions to the images through a directed light source or by adding sound effects. It is a strategy that undoes the singularity of the painted image by shadowing it with its digital avatar. Such duplication questions

video's indexical realism – the 'blurred' borders of an image interrogate its integrity. During this transaction, new relationships emerge between the two media that are both illuminating and unsettling.

Kaleka's projections encourage a thoughtful meditation on the juxtaposition of the still image with the moving image. It is this tension that guides *He Was a Good Man* (2007-08). The ensemble consists of a 30 seconds' video loop projected on a monochromatic painting of a middle-aged man that Kaleka has reworked from previous versions of *Man Threading a Needle* (1999). In this version, Kaleka has added interesting touches such as a frame around the edges and an opening door at the end, each serving to highlight the possibilities implicit in the image. Furthermore, he installs the image within a darkened theatre, where wandering visitors interrupt the light projection casting their shadows on the screen.

The painting itself portrays a singular

moment (of a man threading a needle) – tantalizingly close to the moment of completion. The action remains unconsummated even in the video image, the thread never quite reaching the needle. The images exist at an uncomfortable distance from each other even as the promise of video as a genre depicting an action unfolding in time is belied. The video teases the viewer with a background that changes – carrying a typical view from a train to a view of working women – while the stationary body of the man twitches animatedly in the foreground. The painted image appears to provide the point of departure and return for the ghost-like video images that swim around.

A second piece, *Man with a Cockerel*, from 2004, had been on view recently in a different avatar (as a wall installation) at the Newark Museum during the *India: Public Places, Private Spaces* show (2007-08). In the present installation, Kaleka chooses to project the video on a large hanging plexiglass sheet, thus providing the possibility of viewing it from both

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Ranbir Kaleka. *Man with a Cockerel – 2*. Single-channel video projection on suspended plexi-glass. 60" x 45". 2004.



Ranbir Kaleka. *Fables From the House of Ibaan – Stage 1*. Single-channel video projection with sound on a 45" x 60" painting (acrylic on canvas). 2007-08.

sides. It shows a man submerged in water, holding a cockerel that flutters and disappears along with the man, strangely 'leaving' his reflected self in the water for a moment or two. Unsettling our notions of a reflected image, Kaleka's work encourages speculations on the process of duplication inherent in reproduction-oriented media like digital video. The images have a dreamlike translucent quality, emphasized by the frosted plexiglass - the effect is decidedly painterly.

A brand new work, *Fables From the House of Ibaan – Stage 1* (2007-08), comprises a meditation on the interior spaces of a home along with a contemplative portrait of its owner. The world seems to drift around the man - his child and wife potter around him while his gaze remains directed at the viewer. An open door at the back introduces the outside world into the home, its familiar sights and sounds wafting into the closed spaces. The viewer wanders through the deepest recesses of an interiorized self here - an interior peopled with everyday activities. The aesthetic is rather different in this piece - the light projections seem to have a kitschier glaze, an acknowledgement perhaps of the more contemporary nature of the work.

At the artist's talk accompanying the exhibition at Bose Pacia (from March 20th to May 3rd), Kaleka spoke of his work in a rather Proustian vein - as remembrance of things past - and referred to his early years spent in a haveli in Patiala. The slow motion of his videos helped the viewer revisit a different era, as stubborn images occupied a place in memory where time stood still even as animated everyday activity buzzed all around.