

The Living Canvas: A Journey into Ranbir Kaleka's 'Fables from the House of Ibaan'

Dr. Sonu Pareek

Art Researcher & Critic, 2/227, M. P. Nagar, Bikaner-334004 (Raj.)

Abstract—Ranbir Kaleka is an innovative contemporary Indian multi-media artist internationally renowned for his unique video paintings. His artwork 'Fables from the House of Ibaan' (2007) blends painted canvas with single-channel video projection, creating a hybrid medium where static images gain lifelike movement. This engages viewers through its narrative, symbolism, and technical innovation. This study explores Kaleka's artistic vision and technique, and analyzes the meaning and message woven in his work. It argues that 'Fables from the House of Ibaan' is not just an artwork, but an experience that inspires viewers to think, feel, and imagine.

Index Terms—Ranbir Kaleka, Video Painting, Fables from the House of Ibaan, Digital Art Innovation, Living Canvas, Contemporary Indian Art, Fables and Myths.

I. INTRODUCTION

Ranbir Kaleka is an innovative and internationally renowned contemporary Indian media artist. He has pioneered a unique expressive art medium termed as 'Video Painting' by blending traditional painting with contemporary video techniques [1]. This art form adds dynamism to visuals and time, creating lifelike movement in static images [2]. This technique has fundamentally altered the way art is viewed and experienced [3].

Kaleka's artwork 'Fables from the House of Ibaan' (2007) [4] blends painted canvas with single-channel video projection, creating a hybrid medium where static images gain lifelike movement. This engages viewers through its narrative, symbolism, and technical innovation.

This study explores Kaleka's artistic vision and technique, and analyzes the meaning and message woven in his work. It argues that 'Fables from the House of Ibaan' is not just an artwork, but an

experience that inspires viewers to think, feel, and imagine.

II. RANBIR KALEKA'S ARTISTIC JOURNEY

A. Early Life and Education

He was born in 1953 in Patiala (Punjab). His artistic path is a narrative of seamless dialogue between tradition and innovation. His foundational training in traditional painting had been at Punjab University in Chandigarh where he obtained a diploma [5]. He joined a teaching post for some years. In 1985, he received a scholarship for his postgraduate studies, which led him to the Royal College of Art in London. During his time there, he was introduced to Western modernism. The combination of his traditional Indian visual background and modern European artistic influences resulted in the unique hybrid aesthetics found in his works. He made his way back to India in the late 1990s.

In his early years, he was fascinated with surrealism, dreamlike imagery, and symbolism with the subconscious, animals, and primal energies.

B. Transition to Video and Multi-Media

Ranbir Kaleka has been an accomplished painter, and he created several impressive paintings. However, he began to feel that the static medium was inadequate for fully expressing the complexity of 'time' and 'motion'. His desire was not merely to depict time but to make it actively expressed within the artwork. This led him to incorporate video, not as a replacement for painting, but as its complement [6], [7].

In the late 1990s and early 2000s, this fusion resulted in 'Video Painting' [8], an innovation that firmly established him in both, Indian and international art world. Thus, technical innovation has been the hallmark of his work. He views art as a medium of

dialogue that compels viewers to think, feel, and question.

C. The Innovative Technique: The Birth & form of 'Video Painting'

'Video Painting' is a singular contribution by Ranbir Kaleka, initiating a new era of Intermedia in art history. It is defined as the meticulous projection of a video sequence onto a painted canvas surface. Kaleka consciously preserves the materiality of the painting, yet uses video to imbue it with a fleeting, life-like quality. This technique gives the artwork a non-linear, dreamlike narrative instead of a strict chronological flow.

The canvas signifies a sense of stillness and permanence, whereas the video projection represents fleetingness and movement. This combination creates an 'uncanny third visual experience' in which the delicate motions, breaths, and shadows seem to infiltrate the painted surface. The success of this interplay relies on accuracy and regulation:

1. Kaleka employs Projection Mapping: to direct video solely onto particular, important parts of the canvas (such as a figure's hands or the surface of a jug). The visuals are intentionally presented in soft, repeating motions (looping) and at a slow pace, allowing the movement to feel like an inherent aspect of the painting rather than an external addition.
2. Lighting and Atmosphere: The setup necessitates a dimly lit environment, enhancing the projection's impact. The changing lights featured in the video reflect the cyclical nature of time. The sounds that accompany the visual elements also enrich the sensory experience, drawing the viewer into the artwork's personal and introspective ambiance.

D. Recognition

He has been honored with multiple esteemed awards, such as the National Award presented by the President of India during the 22nd National Exhibition of Art hosted by the Lalit Kala Akademy in 1979, the 'Sanskriti Award' in 1985 [9], and the 'Punjab Gaurav Sanmaan' in 2019. His works are part of several art galleries and private art collections.

His notable artworks include: 'Sweet Unease' (1991), 'Man Threading a Needle' (1998/1999), 'Man with

Cockerel' (2004), 'Crossings' (2005), 'Fables from the House of Ibaan' (2007), 'Consider' (2007), 'Not from here' (2009), 'Forest' (2009), 'Wall' (2009), 'Kettle' (2010), 'Cul-de-sac in Taxila' (2010), 'House of Opaque Water' (2012), and 'The Dinner' (2015).

III. KALEKA'S ART PHILOSOPHY

Kaleka's practice is rooted in a profound philosophical inquiry into the fundamental nature of existence.

1. Challenging Linear Time: Kaleka's artworks offer a narrative that is cyclical and non-linear. The looping nature of the videos and the gradual variations in light imply that time is not linear but rather a continuous stream, resonating with traditional Eastern ideas about time. This relationship between the fixed painting and the repetitive movement creates a Temporal Ambiguity, urging the viewer to engage with both stability and transformation at once [10], [11].
2. Memory and the Mysterious: Kaleka finds inspiration in metaphorical family narratives, utilizing them to connect personal experiences with broader themes. The repetitive aspects of the video highlight the inconsistencies and cyclical nature of memory [12]. The understated visual effects the twitches, breaths, and shadows breaking through the surface emphasize the vulnerability of human life and the existence of an elusive, mysterious reality.
3. The Existential Focus: Kaleka explores the human experience through various motifs. In Ibaan, the act of pouring milk signifies sustenance and the current of life, while the man's gesture of standing and moving forward with the vessel embodies the unavoidable journey, the pursuit of destiny, and the moral significance of intent. His characters frequently appear alone and reflective, emphasizing the importance of introspection and self-discovery amidst the turmoil of the outside world.

IV. ANALYSIS OF MASTERPIECE: 'FABLES FROM THE HOUSE OF IBAAN'

'Fables from the House of Ibaan' (Fig. 1 to 10) is the outcome of Kaleka's technical and philosophical pursuits. The installation, often displayed in a quiet, darkened space, invites an intimate engagement with

the work. This artwork unfolds a multilayered narrative that blurs the lines between reality, memory, and imagination.

A. The Narrative Fabric

The artwork is a large-scale painting depicting an interior domestic scene: a man seated at a table in front of a portico. Resting on the table are static painted elements: a crystal jug and three colored glasses (red, green, and blue). The video painting combines visual and sound elements, featuring hand-painted artwork overlaid with live video effects and audio tracks. The artist masterfully employs subtle movements and light effects to breathe life into the painting.

The central events, unfolding in gentle, repetitive motions, are:

1. A motionless man seated at a table

The piece opens with an image of a man quietly sitting at a table in his home (Fig. 1). He appears thoughtful, perhaps lost in his own imaginative world.

2. Visuals begin to emerge

Gradually, animated images are cast onto the painting, bringing elements to life (Fig. 2). A young woman appears behind him moving realistically as she starts to pour milk into an empty jug (Fig. 3). A shadow appears (Fig. 4).

3. A child swings open a door

A little boy comes into view (Fig. 5) and he opens a door (Fig. 6) that leads to a field of golden grass. This scene feels expansive and liberating, in stark contrast to the peaceful interior.

4. The animated figures vanish

Once the scenes and characters from the video conclude (Fig. 7 to 9), they dissolve away. The man finds himself once again alone in the quiet house (Fig. 10).

Glimpses of the story introduce us to the unseen tales of the fictional house of Ibaan, where memories of past generations, tangles of relationships, and layers of mysteries unfold. Thus, this imaginary house becomes a living character, encapsulating numerous stories within itself, which reveal the complexities of human life fears, hopes, and faiths.

Screen Shots of 'Fables from the House of Ibaan

Video-Painting Source: volte.art [13]

Screen Shots Source: rkaleka.com [14]



Fig. 1: A Still & Thoughtful Man at a Table



Fig. 2: Images start to appear



Fig 3: A Young Woman fills the jar with milk



Fig. 4: A shadow appears



Fig. 5: A Child appears



Fig. 6: Child opens the door

Screen Shots of 'Fables from the House of Ibaan'
Video-Painting Source: volte.art [13]
Screen Shots Source: rkaleka.com [14]



Fig. 7: Outside view (Screen Shot: By Author)



Fig. 8: Video-Painting in the Room



Fig. 9: A man appears leaving



Fig. 10: Video-Painting in the Room

B. Interpretation and Motifs

Instead of narrating a single, straightforward story, this video-painting functions like a dream or a memory, with scenes emerging, shifting, and fading away. Here are some straightforward interpretations of what these images might signify:

Life, Roles, and Time

The woman pouring milk into a jug may represent caregiving, nurturing, or the mundanely of daily life. Her movement contrasts sharply with the man's stillness. The act of filling the jug implies progress and transformation, marked by time reflecting how we shape our days and lives.

Possibilities, Memory, and Imagination

The boy who opens the door to a bright field might symbolize freedom, hope, opportunity, or reminiscence something beyond the calm, enclosed space of the house. These figures might not actually exist within the house; they could represent thoughts, memories, desires, or envisioned moments in the man's mind.

Reality vs. Imagination

As the moving images fade and the man finds himself alone again, it prompts the question: are these scenes genuine? Or are they reflections of his memories, dreams, or fantasies?

A blend of painting and life

Kaleka employs this piece to intertwine static art (which remains constant) with video movement (which evolves and flows). This approach illustrates how life, memory, and imagination intersect over time, not in a conventional narrative sequence, but poetically and emotionally.

C. Viewer's Role

The power of 'Fables from the House of Ibaan' lies in its openness. Kaleka doesn't offer answers. Instead, like a modern parable, the work asks questions, such as: What do you see in the windows of Ibaan's house? The meaning is co-created in the space where the viewer's experiences meet the artist's intent.

V. CONCLUSION

Ranbir Kaleka's pioneering approach known as "Video Painting" marks a significant turning point in the development of modern art. The video artwork 'Fables from the House of Ibaan' suggests that human existence is influenced as much by internal memories, thoughts, and imagination as it is by the outside world. While the man seems physically motionless, his inner life is vibrant, brimming with transitory moments of reminiscence, desire, and opportunity. The emergence and fading of moving images illustrate how life, time, and experiences quietly flow by, leaving only imprints in the memory. The piece concludes that reality is not static; it is complex, delicate, and profoundly intertwined with memory and perception. It is observed that 'Fables from the House of Ibaan' is not just an artwork, but an experience that inspires viewers to think, feel, and imagine.

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