

# Between Stillness and Motion: Painting, Projection, and the Human Experience in Ranbir Kaleka's 'Crossings'

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**Abstract**—This study explores Ranbir Kaleka's video painting 'Crossings' (2005) by delving into the ongoing tension between personal freedom and shared tradition. Through the projection of moving images onto painted surfaces, Kaleka transforms painting into a dynamic, immersive experience where human figures seem caught between movement and stillness, departure and return. The artwork develops through repetitive, non-linear sequences of everyday actions and interactions, portraying a world in perpetual change. However, amid this instability, the consistent presence of families, recognizable figures, and ritualistic behaviors serves as an emotional grounding. The concept of "crossing" functions both as a physical transition between motion and stillness, and as a symbolic negotiation between personal goals and collective identity. Positioned within the context of expanded painting and contemporary Indian art, 'Crossings' is viewed as a reflection on rootedness during times of transition, implying that even attempts to break away are supported by lasting ties to memory, family, and cultural heritage.

**Index Terms**—Ranbir Kaleka, Video Painting, Expanded Painting, Personal Freedom and Tradition, Family and Memory, Contemporary Indian Art.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Contemporary visual art has progressively transcended rigid boundaries between mediums, adopting hybrid approaches that merge still and moving images, physical surfaces, and time-based projections [1]. Within this broadened landscape, Ranbir Kaleka has become a prominent figure through his persistent exploration of "video painting," a technique that fuses the tangible nature of painting with the dynamic aspects of video. He draws from Lev Manovich's "New Media" [2], emphasizing layers and modularity. His artworks evade linear storytelling and instead present themselves as immersive visual encounters, prompting contemplation on time,

memory, and the nature of human subjectivity. He is also inspired by Dona Haraway's "Cyber Manifesto" [3] that erodes gender binaries and adds depth.

Kaleka's video painting 'Crossings' (2005) demonstrates this blended technique by casting moving images onto painted surfaces, forming a multi-dimensional visual space where stillness and motion are present simultaneously. The piece develops through cyclical, non-linear sequences of human figures and commonplace actions, generating a feeling of endless movement without a definite start or conclusion. Instead of offering a traditional narrative, 'Crossings' serves as an experiential realm in which meaning develops slowly through repetition, pauses, and slight variations.

At the heart of 'Crossings' lies the conflict between individual freedom and collective tradition. The figures depicted on the painted surfaces appear to challenge limits physically, emotionally, and psychologically indicating a yearning for movement, independence, and transformation. Simultaneously, these desires are still rooted within family dynamics, ritualistic behaviors, and recurring patterns that convey a sense of continuity and belonging. In this context, tradition serves not as a limiting factor but as an emotional foundation that offers stability in a world characterized by change.

This study argues that Kaleka expresses this tension through the dynamic relationship between stillness and movement. The concept of "crossing" serves both as a tangible shift between painting and projection and as a metaphor for human experience perceived as a balance between leaving and returning, autonomy and connection. Instead of contrasting freedom with belonging, 'Crossings' implies that these states are mutually dependent and are consistently redefined within cultural contexts [4].

## II. VIDEO PAINTING AS AN EXPANDED MEDIUM

The rise of video painting signifies a broader transformation in contemporary art toward hybrid, time-based practices that question the independence of traditional mediums. As artists increasingly utilize digital technologies, the lines between painting, film, and video have become indistinct. Video painting holds a unique position within this enlarged domain, preserving the tangible essence of painting while integrating motion and temporality an approach that resonates with Rosalind Krauss's concept of post-medium artistic practices [1].

Ranbir Kaleka's work is fundamental to the evolution of video painting within the realm of contemporary Indian art. With a background in painting, Kaleka does not forsake traditional painting for video; rather, he views video as an extension of the painted surface. The painted panel remains physically present, embodying traces of brushwork, texture, and stillness, while video projection enlivens this surface through light, movement, and the passage of time. This coexistence guarantees that the artwork continues to operate as painting, even as it unfolds over duration.

Video painting changes how viewers engage with the image. Unlike film, which requires continuous attention from start to finish, video painting permits a more flexible viewing experience. Pieces like 'Crossings' are designed as loops instead of linear stories, allowing viewers to join or leave at any moment. This flexibility in time fosters prolonged observation and contemplation, creating an experience that resonates more with conventional painting while also challenging it through movement and transformation.

In this context, time serves as an essential artistic element. The motion in video painting is frequently limited and repetitive, highlighting duration instead of spectacle. In 'Crossings,' the projected movement engages with the painted surface in deliberate manners, underscoring the work's overall focus on continuity and transition.

### III. FORMAL DESCRIPTION OF 'CROSSINGS'

'Crossings' (2005) (Fig. 1 to 10) is an immense piece of work. It's a 4 channel video projection on paintings still 15 min loop with stereo sound measuring 190x250

cm (75x98 inches), showcasing countless images that depict a diverse array of themes, scenarios, faces, and locations, oscillating between reality and imagination. Kaleka's 'Crossings' explores the dynamics and stability, the triumphs and setbacks, of what it truly mean to be human.

The artwork and video installation 'Crossings' features a blend of rapidly shifting images and interactions, prompting viewers to either concentrate on the specifics of a single painting or to take in all four pieces as a continuously evolving panorama. Despite the perpetual movement, 'Crossings' remains anchored by its painted human figures, showcasing a narrative and cinematic quality. As the characters clash and engage with one another, recurring thematic images emerge. A narrative thread suggests a group of characters exploring the boundaries of their personal freedom while still adhering to shared traditions with others. Beneath the tumult and transformation of life, it appears that some elements remain unchanged.

The underpinnings of the 'Crossings' canvases, in shades of black, white, and grey, initially appear lifeless, hanging side by side (Fig. 1). The lighting is dim, and the figures lack expression until the video projections activate, breathing life into them. For the purposes of this study, the canvases will be designated as A, B, C, and D from left to right. Canvas A depicts a family of four a mother, father, and their two sons arranged in a semi-circle (Fig. 2). On Canvas B, a man sits cross-legged amidst two bird cages, surrounded by vials and paintbrushes laid out in front of him (Fig. 3). Canvas C once again presents the family of four, this time positioned side by side and looking to the right (Fig. 4). Painted on Canvas D is a man seated on a stool, with a sledgehammer beside him and an empty bowl positioned behind (Fig. 5). As the video projection commences, the initial images projected onto the canvas don't perfectly align with the painted figures but are thematically connected. On canvas A, a bird flits about, while canvases B, C, and D showcase a middle-aged man in a turban, a young man, and a boy (Fig. 6). Despite the rapid changes in the subsequent projections, which highlight various characters, animals, and locations, the three video characters reappear in the middle and towards the conclusion. The 15-minute video projection, accompanied by isolated sounds, is employed to craft diverse scenes over each canvas.

At times, a bustling intersection fills canvas B, while a white horse seemingly materializes beside the man in canvas D (Fig. 7). Family members from canvases A and C show up in various scenes, engaging with one another, sharing laughter, and then fading away once more. The painted figures genuinely seem to come to life, particularly when the video projection aligns perfectly with them. The images and movements projected onto the four canvases are in constant flux, yet they are anchored by grey paint, which provides them with both depth and stability.

Stability is also derived from thematic symbols and personal narratives, the subtle familial focal points within an apparently chaotic environment. Attention is given to the personal journeys of the boy, the young man, and the middle-aged man who frame the beginning and conclusion of the video projection. Whether these are distinct individuals (Fig. 8), successive generations of a family, or multiple facets of the same person is left for the audience to interpret [5]. The three characters are intricately linked to recurring motifs of birds (Fig. 9 & 10) and colorful turban fabrics (Fig. 8), which highlight not only personal development but also the importance of tradition and family. The representations of the birds and the turban textiles establish a sense of continuity that makes the ongoing change feel less disorienting. 'Crossings' stunned the art world. It held viewers spellbound. Both Indian and foreign reviewers praised it.

#### IV. STILLNESS AND MOTION: AESTHETIC TENSION

At the heart of 'Crossings' is an ongoing aesthetic tension between calmness and movement. The painted panels represent physical presence, recollection, and continuity, whereas the projected images bring forth a sense of transience and temporal movement. Collectively, they create a dynamic interplay where neither component entirely prevails.

The controlled and repetitive characteristics of movement in 'Crossings' highlight the concept of duration over that of progression, resonating with Gilles Deleuze's interpretation of time as experiential and non-linear [6]. Actions such as walking, pausing, and slight adjustments repeatedly manifest on the surface, establishing a rhythm that fluctuates between activity and stillness. This fluctuation unsettles

perception, urging the viewer to navigate the distinction between what persists and what transforms. This aesthetic tension reflects the thematic issues of the piece. Stillness represents a connection to family and tradition, whereas motion indicates longing, independence, and change. These elements are not in conflict but are rather interdependent, emphasizing that freedom is defined by continuity, and continuity deepens through the potential for movement.

#### V. TIME, MEMORY, AND THE HUMAN EXPERIENCE

In 'Crossings,' time is experienced as cyclical instead of linear. This repetitive structure interrupts traditional narrative flow, substituting it with cycles of repetition and return. Such a fluid approach to time reflects the nature of memory, where events reappear and their significance changes with every cycle [6].

The repetition of daily gestures in 'Crossings' signifies memory not as a mere static recollection but as a dynamic and lived experience, aligning with Henri Bergson's idea of memory as an ongoing duration instead of a static record [7]. The painted surfaces emphasize the lasting nature of memory, while projection brings in the element of change, implying that memory is both enduring and adaptable.

Families and closely associated individuals ground the work within a shared temporal context. Although individuals may seem to shift or wander, their ties to others stay strong. Movement does not lead to separation but rather to reconnection, emphasizing that personal liberty develops within established frameworks of belonging.

#### VI. THE ACT OF 'CROSSING' AS CONCEPT AND METAPHOR

"Crossing" serves as both a formal and symbolic element in the piece. Physically, it refers to the act of projecting across painted surfaces. Conceptually, it represents transitions that are navigated rather than settled.

In Kaleka's work, crossing is not a definitive break but rather a continuous process of balancing personal desires with a sense of community, embodying Bhabha's concept of cultural continuity built through dialogue instead of conflict [4]. Characters navigate

different spaces and borders while still being rooted in relational contexts that support their sense of self. Since scenes recur, transitions are never definitive. Identity develops through ongoing interaction with family, memory, and tradition, rather than through clear separations.

## VII. THE VIEWER'S ROLE AND SPATIAL EXPERIENCE

'Crossings' invites the viewer to engage actively. With no established start or finish, it allows for entry at any point, with meaning being influenced by the time spent and focus given. This flexible viewing format corresponds with post-medium practices where meaning is derived from engagement rather than narrative resolution [1].

The intricate connection between paint and projection emphasizes both the substance and the motion involved. This deliberate tempo encourages reflection, enabling connections to emerge slowly. The observer's journey mirrors that of the characters in the artwork experiencing movement while staying rooted to a solid foundation.

## VIII. 'CROSSINGS' IN THE CONTEXT OF CONTEMPORARY ART

In modern Indian art, 'Crossings' represents a dialogue between traditional approaches and innovative practices. By incorporating international mediums like video and installation, Kaleka maintains a painterly quality and a connection to cultural heritage. His combination of video and painting places the work within the framework of global contemporary art discussions, while still rooted in personal experience [5], [8].

Instead of viewing tradition as a barrier to change, 'Crossings' depicts it as flexible and supportive. Identity is portrayed as complex and interconnected, formed by transitions within a framework of continuity rather than a break from historical roots.

## IX. CONCLUSION

'Crossings' transforms painting into a time-oriented, immersive experience that evolves through stillness and motion. This hybrid approach conveys a complex comprehension of human experience influenced by

movement, memory, and a sense of belonging. The concept of personal freedom is examined not as a way to flee but as a negotiation within lasting emotional and cultural contexts. Kaleka's video painting ultimately implies that even amidst constant change, meaning is upheld through continuity, connection, and return.

## REFERENCES

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- [10] <http://rkaleka.com/video-works/crossings/>

Screen Shots of 'Crossings'

Video-Painting Source: [9]

Screen Shots Source: rkaleka.com [10]



Fig. 1: Four paintings of Crossings



Fig. 4: The Family standing & facing right



Fig. 5: A Man sitting on a stool



Fig. 6: Figures of three appear in background

Screen Shots of 'Crossings'  
Video-Painting Source: [9]  
Screen Shots Source: rkaleka.com [10]



Fig. 7: Appearance of a horse in the fourth pannel

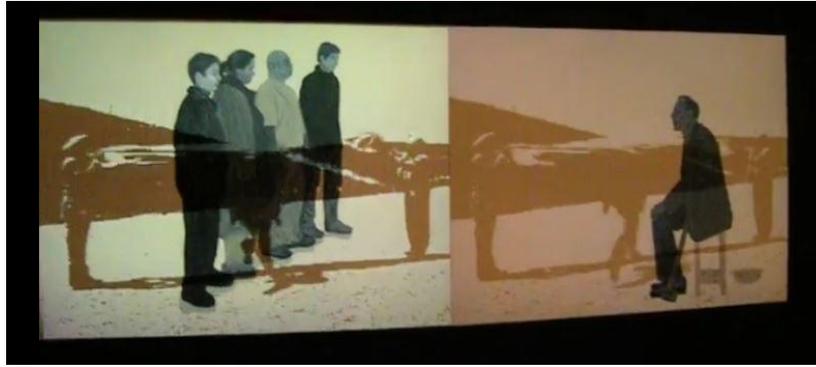


Fig. 8: Figures appear with turban



Fig. 9: The Child looks at the birds in sky



Fig. 10: Birds in sky depicting freedom