

RANBIR KALEKA | *Circle of Stories*

By Dipti Anand

What makes circles compelling is how they express continuity in their movement over the perimeter they outline. They go forth and back in loops and cycles, possessing a self-renewing energy that reframes pattern as ingenuity, with intervals, delays and gaps becoming integral to the unfurling of meaning. An old philosophical adage suggests that all that needs to be said has already been said. Yet storytelling can feel circular, moving through repetition and variation rather than final resolution, leading us beyond certitude. Only voice, breath, telling and retelling sustain the storyteller to labour on in the knowledge that it is performance, not the plot itself, that assures the meaning we so desperately seek.

For Patiala-born, Delhi-based artist Ranbir Kaleka, the temporal nature of our experiences structures our existence in the world. Kaleka's practice surveys and interprets time in varied textures, including the fragility of memory, the archiving of history, cultural migrations, and shifting psychological states and modes of perception. It also considers the experiences of other, non-human presences such as landscapes, animal beings and objects of utility or personal significance through which we form relations with the world. 'Time continues to have a presence even in stillness,' he says, 'forging a narrative even if nothing quite happens.' In one sense, circularity is a natural trope whose provenance is on loan to man-made cultures, much of which is preserved and enacted through the iterative quality of our collective imaginations. In Kaleka's view, narratives maintain a circuitous, durational quality, carrying temporal suspensions, ruptures and recurrences without resolution. Though narratives relating to socio-political realities, historical trauma and personal encounters are implied, Kaleka's oeuvre resists linear progression by emphasizing psychological time, shaped by memory, emotion and anticipation, over chronological time.

Kaleka's inquiry into temporality recalls German philosopher Martin Heidegger's reflections on human existence in *Being and Time*, which proposes that human beings are always already engaged in meaningful activity such that our interaction with the world precedes our perception of it. Through situated perception, Kaleka similarly invites spatiality into his work: however metaphorical the staging or abstracted the scenes, situation and context remain crucial in providing the internal logic within which he orchestrates a time-based manipulation of narrative, allowing viewers to contemplate conditions of time rather than a sequence of images. In so doing, spatial experience becomes inseparable from temporal perception. He often positions the viewer in an immersive installation, punctuated by sound, lighting and movement, reconfiguring the cuboidal gallery or public space to encourage endurance through a thickening of their own embodiment. The phenomenological viewer is

both alienated by the environment and drawn deeper into the dwelling of their experience even as they are inhabiting it.

American art critic Rosalind Krauss' critical coinage of the term 'post-medium' echoes here. Kaleka's hybrid technique allows new structures to emerge, wherein he expands the visual field of the image, whether static or kinetic, through moving projections onto painted surfaces that allow a painting to unfold in time for the viewer while cinematic elements gain a material, tactile quality in turn. Kaleka's training as a painter remains central to understanding his proto-cinematic practice: the moving image does not replace painting, but animates it, transforming the painted surface into a temporal membrane.

The images themselves linger. They pulse with a sense of haunting and lamentation, holding tension between movement and stillness, repetition and spontaneity, transcendence and mutation, presence and disappearance. Kaleka's visual language has an affective charge, blending states of perception with an imperceptible subconscious through surrealist, phantasmagoric modes of image recognition and association. These images emerge from intersecting timelines that precede the final work: he shoots staged video footage, creates photographic references of people, places and objects, and draws from archival and found imagery, all assembled through an intuitive editorial process. Kaleka also incorporates collaboration with musicians, actors, dancers and performers, reflecting the integral role of embodiment in the work. Over time, recurring symbols – whether drawn from memory or the world around him – take on a semiotic character within his practice. Through this process of harvesting and composting images, Kaleka constructs what can be described as 'hyper-images', in which fragments of reality are transmuted across time, context and meaning, inviting durational and embodied viewing.

Six years since his last solo exhibition in Delhi, Ranbir Kaleka brings us *Circle of Stories*, an exhibition of six multi-media arrangements from 2007 to 2025 that trace the experimental storytelling central to Kaleka's practice over past decades. The works are conceived as single- and multi-channel installations, engaging questions around personal mythology, cultural enactments and the theatre of community where ideas on consumption and capitalism unfold alongside explorations on social concerns, identity-based politics, histories of place and medieval art forms. Kaleka's throughline is seeing how individual and collective memory both endure through fragmentation: in time, histories overlap, truths diffuse and reality alters. In these pauses, viewers discover alternate possibilities.

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Circle of Stories

In the titular work *Circle of Stories* (2025), Kaleka erects a three-panel layout reminiscent of façades of windowed buildings that pique conversations among neighbours. Produced in collaboration with stage performer Lokesh Jain and storyteller Sunil Mehra – who specializes in Dastangoi, an Urdu oral storytelling artform from the 13th century – the composition is set during an unspecified period in Delhi, summoning its enduring cultural spirit and in so doing, transcends the historicity of city life anywhere. Unremarkable characters pass each other by in greeting and busy-bodied routine, while emplacement shifts from architectural sites to quieter alleys and neglected homes. Nostalgic imprints of communal enmeshment and cultural intimacy flash in unhurried scenes. The Dastango narrator laments Delhi's fall from a past glory – both of grand civilization and simpler times – momentarily drawing the viewer into a reflection on the present. The work gestures towards the power of memory to preserve culture: when so many civilizations have come and gone, a city continues to live on in the imagination of its people.

Abstruse Revelries of a Repast

In *Abstruse Revelries of a Repast* (2013), Kaleka projects a painted frame to outline a theatrical stage in which two cinematic sequences are juxtaposed: the 1963 historical drama *The Leopard* by Luchino Visconti, and a Shakespearean, operatic choreography of contemporary Indian dancers directed by Kaleka himself and set to an original musical composition. Kaleka's shots punctuate Visconti's clips like annotations, showing masked dancers in varying states of ingestion and intoxication, while the Italian film corresponds with the decadence of Art Deco cinema and character-led dramatizations of the declining feudal era in Italy. Through this interplay of images, Kaleka turns to ideas of consumption and labour, recalling the scullery where intense cleaning and household preparation were managed in 18th and 19th century Europe, with the scullion or scullery maid being a servant of the lowest rank in stark contrast to the grandeur they served. After a revelry in both sequences, a parade of commodes wafts across the screen. Kaleka's humble dancer and Visconti's aristocrat both settle into relief and satisfaction hinting at the bodily necessities shared across the human condition, regardless of rank. [Dancers: Manju Sharma, Devraj Thimmaiah, Rahul Goswami, Lalit Khanna, Rachnika Goyal, Chandan's Sarma; Choreographer: Mandeep Raikhy; Camera: Gautam Pandey; Special thanks to Volte Gallery]

Fables from the House of Ibaan

In *Fables from the House of Ibaan* (2007), Kaleka projects moving imagery onto a painting of a man seated at a table near an empty jug. A woman enters to pour milk into the vessel and disappears. Later, the projected shadow of the man steps out of his painted self, lingering in the background with the jug in his hands. Outside, night falls, and the man steps through the open door and onto the street. Inside, a pouring stream of milk cuts through the scene. The work carries an allegorical charge around family and belonging, suggesting the subtle negotiations of intimacy within domestic life, particularly in patriarchal cultural contexts where gestures of care such as feeding appear quietly coded, while other emotions remain withheld. [Performers: Raseel Gujral, Navin Ansal and Imaan; Digital composition: Gautam Pandey; Production: Riverbank Studio; Special thanks to Khushi Foundation]

Man with Tiffin; Veiled Turbulence

In *Man with Tiffin; Veiled Turbulence* (2020), a middle-class man holding a quintessential Indian tiffin, the *dabba*, stands blissfully transfixed by his own reflection. Kaleka digitally layers this composition upon which a projection moves, suggesting a riot has just taken place with burned shops and fallen motorcycles populating the aftermath. Slowly, the sea comes into view with its masterful waves, equally chaotic and capable of destruction. In time, it grows calm and settles into its depth, and mist from the sea erupts into a sparkle of fireflies. Kaleka sketches a portrait of the ‘common man’, whose quiet absorption contrasts with the larger social and natural forces grappling for power around him.

Kettle

In *Kettle* (2010), Kaleka explores the stories that objects carry, unfolding the biography of a modest household object: the kettle, painted onto a canvas. The projection begins its journey expectant and pristine on a shop shelf before quickly moving into function and disrepair within someone’s home. A chaiwallah passes through a park, and we encounter the kettle again, discarded and abandoned, prompting speculation about the circumstances of its neglect. The work invites reflection on cycles of use, repair and abandonment, raising quiet questions about consumption and the life of everyday objects.

Mobile

In *Mobile* (2013), someone has dropped a mobile on the ground, continuing to ring though no one answers it. In the far distance, an airplane passes overhead. Time and distance both reverberate through the scene, with the unclaimed phone and receding plane appearing as anonymous technologies that have either abandoned, or been abandoned by, humankind. The spatial tension between these elements evokes ideas of distance, movement and possible displacement, recalling the personal imprints we leave on the spaces we pass through and the silent witness of objects left behind.