Memory in Flames: Knowledge, Power and Regeneration in Ranbir Kaleka's Forest

Dr. Sonu Pareek

Assistant Professor, Department of Drawing & Painting, Tantia University, Sri Ganganagar-335002 (Rajasthan)

Abstract

This paper offers a multidisciplinary interpretation of *Forest*, a video painting by Ranbir Kaleka, examining its complex engagement with memory, knowledge, power, and regeneration. Blending the stillness of painting with the temporality of moving image, *Forest* constructs a symbolic landscape in which books, a lion, fire, human figures, and emerging urban forms interact within a cyclical narrative of destruction and renewal. The forest operates as an allegorical archive—an embodied repository of cultural memory—while the burning of books evokes the fragility of knowledge in times of ideological violence and civilizational crisis. The retreating lion and self-flagellating figure introduce questions of authority, guilt, and moral responsibility, suggesting that the erosion of knowledge is inseparable from human agency. Yet the subsequent emergence of flowers and a renewed lion complicates the narrative, foregrounding resilience and the regenerative potential inherent within both nature and culture. Drawing upon visual studies, memory theory, ecological thought, and philosophical reflections on cyclical time, this paper argues that *Forest* transcends medium-specific analysis to become a meditation on the precarious continuity of civilization. Ultimately, Kaleka's work invites viewers to confront the vulnerability of cultural archives while affirming the possibility of renewal within historical rupture.

Keywords: Ranbir Kaleka, Video Painting, Contemporary Indian Art, Moving Image Installation, Memory and Landscape, Visual Culture, Perception and Temporality

1. Introduction

Contemporary Indian art has increasingly embraced hybrid forms that blur the boundaries between traditional media and technological innovation. Among the significant practitioners of such experimentation is Ranbir Kaleka, whose works combine painting and projected video to produce what he terms "video paintings." This intermedial practice challenges conventional distinctions between stillness and movement [1] [2], image and time, material surface and ephemeral light. Through this fusion, Kaleka creates contemplative environments that operate simultaneously as aesthetic objects and mediations.

Forest stands as a compelling example of this hybrid form. At first glance, the work presents a painted forest landscape populated by incongruous elements: books arranged within natural space, a lion moving with symbolic gravity, human figures engaged in gestures of suffering, and later, flames that engulf the scene. As the narrative unfolds, destruction gives way to regeneration—flowers emerge from ash, and a renewed urban presence suggests transformation rather than simple restoration. The work resists linear

storytelling; instead, it presents a cyclical vision in which knowledge, power, violence, and renewal coexist in dynamic tension.

This paper argues that Forest functions as a visual allegory of civilizational fragility and resilience. By situating books within a vulnerable ecological landscape and staging their destruction through fire, Kaleka evokes the precariousness of cultural memory in times of ideological and political upheaval. Simultaneously, the imagery of renewal complicates any purely tragic reading, suggesting that destruction may be inseparable from processes of becoming. Drawing upon visual studies, cultural memory theory, ecological thought, and philosophical reflections on cyclical time, this study examines how   Forest transcends medium specific analysis to articulate a meditation on the continuity and transformation of civilization itself.

2. Review of Literature

Scholarship on Ranbir Kaleka has largely focused on his innovative contribution to contemporary Indian art through the medium of video painting. Critics have observed that Kaleka's practice destabilizes conventional categories of painting and cinema by merging static imagery with projected movement [1]. His works are frequently described as meditative, dream-like, and psychologically layered, characterized by slow temporality and subtle narrative unfolding. Art historical discussions often emphasize his engagement with themes of memory, violence, spirituality, and existential unease, situating his practice within broader conversations on postcolonial identity and global contemporary art.

Within the field of video art and intermedial studies, theoretical frameworks addressing hybridity and temporality provide important context. Scholars of intermediality argue that hybrid forms disrupt medium-specific purity, generating new modes of perception that foreground duration and viewer participation. The interplay of stillness and motion in video painting has been interpreted as a philosophical inquiry into time itself, where the static canvas becomes a site of gradual transformation. Such perspectives are crucial for understanding Forest, where temporal layering intensifies symbolic meaning.

Thematically, the work resonates with scholarship on cultural memory and archive theory. Thinkers in memory studies have conceptualized the archive not merely as a physical repository of documents but as a symbolic structure that sustains collective identity [3] [4]. The destruction of books and cultural artifacts has frequently been analyzed as an act of ideological violence aimed at erasing historical continuity [5]. Studies on cultural trauma [6] further suggest that visual art can function as an alternative archive, preserving affective memory even when material repositories are threatened.

Ecological humanities scholarship also offers relevant insights. The forest, as metaphor and ecological space, has been interpreted as a site of interconnected life systems and deep temporality. Contemporary discussions on environmental crisis often explore the entanglement of cultural and ecological destruction, emphasizing resilience and regeneration within damaged landscapes.

Despite these valuable contributions, existing literature has seldom offered an integrated multidisciplinary reading of Forest. Most analyses treat Kaleka's medium, symbolism, or thematic

concerns in isolation. There remains a need to synthesize aesthetic, philosophical, ecological, and memory-based perspectives in order to fully appreciate the work's complexity. This paper seeks to address that gap by situating Forest within an interdisciplinary framework that foregrounds its allegorical engagement with knowledge, power, destruction, and renewal.

3. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretative research methodology grounded in visual and symbolic analysis. As Forest by Ranbir Kaleka is a video painting that resists linear narration, the analytical approach prioritizes close observation of imagery, temporality, and spatial composition. The work is examined as a visual text in which meaning emerges through symbolic juxtaposition, repetition, and transformation rather than through explicit narrative explanation.

The methodological framework integrates insights from multiple disciplines. First, visual semiotics informs the interpretation of recurring symbols such as the forest, books, lion, fire, and regenerating flora. These elements are treated as signifiers operating within an allegorical structure. Second, cultural memory theory provides a lens through which the imagery of books and their destruction may be understood as reflections on the fragility of archives and collective knowledge. Third, perspectives from ecological humanities assist in interpreting the forest not merely as a backdrop but as an active site of interdependence, vulnerability, and renewal. Finally, philosophical reflections on cyclical temporality guide the reading of destruction and regeneration as interconnected processes rather than oppositional events.

The analysis remains grounded in the visual and experiential qualities of the artwork, avoiding speculative biographical interpretation or technical production analysis. The aim is not to reconstruct authorial intention but to explore how meaning is generated through the interplay of image, movement, and duration. While interpretative in nature, the methodology maintains analytical rigour by situating observations within established theoretical frameworks. Through this multidisciplinary approach, the study seeks to reveal how Forest operates simultaneously as aesthetic experiment and civilizational allegory.

4. The Forest as Archive: Memory and Knowledge

In Forest, the painted woodland does not function merely as a natural setting; it operates as an allegorical archive. Within this dense and shadowed landscape, books appear unexpectedly among trees, positioned as though they are organic extensions of the forest itself. This juxtaposition of textual knowledge and ecological space destabilizes the conventional separation between culture and nature. The forest becomes a repository—not of leaves alone, but of layered memory. Through this visual strategy, Ranbir Kaleka transforms the landscape into a metaphor for collective consciousness (Figure 1).

The archive, as understood in cultural memory studies, is more than a storage site of documents; it is a structure that sustains identity and continuity [3]. By placing books within the vulnerability of an open forest, the work underscores the precariousness of knowledge. Unlike the institutional library, which suggests order and preservation, this forest archive appears exposed to the elements [5]. Wind, darkness,

and eventually fire threaten its stability. The setting suggests that cultural memory, though revered, is never immune to erasure [7].

At a symbolic level, the forest also evokes depth and temporality. Forests grow slowly; they accumulate layers of life over centuries. Similarly, knowledge is sedimented across generations. The vertical trunks of trees mirror the upright spines of books, reinforcing the analogy between organic and intellectual growth [8]. Yet the forest's density introduces ambiguity. It is a space where vision is partially obscured, where meaning is not immediately accessible. In this sense, the archive is not transparent but interpretative—it requires navigation.

The presence of the lion further intensifies this archival metaphor. Positioned among the books, the animal suggests guardianship and authority, as though knowledge requires protection. However, this protection is fragile. The forest remains an unstable site, where destruction can erupt without warning. Thus, the work visualizes a tension between preservation and vulnerability.

Through this layered symbolism, Forest proposes that civilization's memory is inseparable from its ecological and moral environment. Knowledge does not stand apart from the world; it is embedded within it. By transforming the forest into an archive, Kaleka invites viewers to reconsider the conditions under which memory survives—and the forces that threaten its continuity.

5. Fire, Violence, and The Crisis of Civilization

If the forest in Forest functions as an allegorical archive, the eruption of fire marks a decisive rupture within that structure of memory. The burning of books constitutes one of the most potent images in the work, evoking historical acts of ideological violence in which the destruction of texts symbolizes the attempted erasure of identity, dissent, or tradition [4] [5]. Within the visual logic of Ranbir Kaleka's composition, fire does not merely consume material objects; it destabilizes the very continuity of civilization (Figure 2).

Flames engulf the books with an unsettling inevitability. The movement of fire, projected across the painted surface, introduces urgency into the otherwise contemplative rhythm of the work. Temporality accelerates. What had seemed stable is revealed as transient. In cultural memory discourse, the destruction of archives is often understood as an assault on collective self-understanding [4]. Here, the burning texts signal a crisis in which accumulated knowledge—painstakingly preserved across generations—can be undone in moments of fanaticism, conflict, or moral collapse.

The lion's retreat (Figure 3) intensifies this sense of crisis (Figure 4). Previously positioned as guardian, the animal withdraws in the face of conflagration, suggesting the impotence of authority when confronted with unchecked violence. Power, which once appeared stable and sovereign, proves fragile. This retreat can be interpreted as a commentary on the failure of institutions—political, intellectual, or spiritual—to protect cultural memory in times of upheaval [9].

Equally significant is the presence of the self-flagellating figure (Figure 5). This human gesture introduces a dimension of guilt and self-inflicted suffering. Rather than attributing destruction solely to

external forces, the imagery implies complicity. Civilizational crisis is not accidental; it may arise from human choices driven by intolerance, fear, or ideological rigidity. The act of self-punishment gestures toward remorse, yet it also underscores the cyclical nature of violence—harm begetting further harm.

Importantly, fire carries ambivalent symbolism. While destructive, it is also purgative. In philosophical and mythic traditions, fire transforms matter into ash, preparing the ground for renewal. Thus, even at the height of devastation, the work resists a purely nihilistic reading. The crisis it depicts is severe, yet not final.

Through the convergence of burning books, retreating guardianship, and human anguish, Forest stages a meditation on the vulnerability of civilization. Knowledge, authority, and moral responsibility are shown to be interdependent—and equally susceptible to collapse. The scene compels viewers to confront the precarious conditions under which culture endures.

6. Regeneration and Cyclical Time

Following the intensity of destruction, Forest gradually transitions into imagery of renewal. From the charred remnants of the burning archive, flowers begin to emerge. This shift does not erase the violence that preceded it; rather, it unfolds quietly, almost imperceptibly, suggesting that regeneration is neither immediate nor triumphant but organic and gradual. In this movement from ash to bloom, Ranbir Kaleka complicates any linear narrative of decline. Destruction, the work implies, may be intrinsic to processes of becoming.

The emergence of flowers (Figure 6) functions as a powerful ecological metaphor [8]. Nature, though damaged, demonstrates resilience. The forest, once consumed by flames, reasserts life through fragile yet persistent growth. This imagery resonates with ecological thought, which emphasizes cycles of decay and renewal within living systems. The artwork thus situates civilizational memory within a broader temporal framework that exceeds human catastrophe. While books burn and institutions falter, life itself continues to reconfigure.

The appearance of a renewed urban form introduces further ambiguity. The city that arises does not replicate the earlier arrangement of books within the forest; instead, it signals transformation. Urban structures suggest human adaptation and reconstruction, yet they also evoke modernity's distance from ecological rootedness. The viewer is left to question whether this new formation represents progress, displacement, or both. Regeneration, therefore, is not a simple restoration of the past but a reconstitution shaped by historical rupture (Figure 7 & 8).

The reappearance of a lion—now younger—reinforces the cyclical dimension of the work. Authority returns, yet altered. This recurrence suggests generational continuity rather than static permanence. Power is reborn, but not identical to its previous form. Such imagery aligns with philosophical conceptions of cyclical time in which endings fold into beginnings, and dissolution prepares the ground for renewal.

Through these visual transitions, Forest resists apocalyptic finality. Instead, it presents history as layered and recursive. Loss and recovery are intertwined; memory may be damaged, yet it is not extinguished. By embedding regeneration within the same space that witnessed destruction, the work affirms a paradoxical truth: continuity often arises through rupture. Civilization survives not by avoiding crisis, but by transforming in its aftermath.

7. Medium as Meaning: The Aesthetics of Video Painting

The thematic complexity of Forest cannot be separated from its formal structure as a video painting. In merging traditional painted surface with projected moving image, Ranbir Kaleka produces not merely a hybrid medium but a philosophical statement about perception and temporality. The canvas appears stable, yet it is animated by shifting light, flickering flames, and subtle bodily gestures. This oscillation between stillness and movement mirrors the tension between continuity and rupture that defines the work's allegory of civilization.

Unlike conventional cinema, which unfolds through rapid narrative progression, Forest proceeds with deliberate slowness. Movement emerges gradually, often almost imperceptibly. This slowed temporality invites contemplation rather than consumption. The viewer becomes acutely aware of duration, of time passing across a seemingly static surface. Such an experience reinforces the themes of memory and historical layering explored in earlier sections. Just as cultural memory accumulates and erodes over time, the painted image transforms through projection without losing its material presence.

Intermediality—the crossing of media boundaries—also carries conceptual implications. Painting traditionally signifies permanence, while video implies ephemerality. By superimposing moving light onto pigment, the work destabilizes both assumptions [10]. The painting is no longer fixed; the video is no longer intangible. Meaning arises in the interaction between the two. This formal instability echoes the fragility of the archive depicted within the imagery: what appears solid may dissolve; what seems fleeting may endure.

Furthermore, the projection of fire across the painted books intensifies the viewer's sensory engagement. Destruction becomes dynamic rather than symbolic abstraction. Yet because the flames are projected light, the material canvas remains intact. This paradox underscores the artwork's meditation on vulnerability and survival—an image of annihilation enacted upon a surface that persists.

Thus, in Forest, medium is not merely a vehicle for content; it embodies the very processes of transformation, erasure, and renewal that the imagery narrates. The hybrid form becomes inseparable from the philosophical argument it advances.

8. Discussion: Multidisciplinary Implications

The preceding analysis demonstrates that Forest by Ranbir Kaleka extends beyond the domain of contemporary art to engage multiple fields of inquiry. From the perspective of cultural studies, the burning books and vulnerable archive foreground the fragility of collective memory [5] in times of ideological extremism and political instability. The work invites reflection on how societies construct, protect, and sometimes endanger their own repositories of knowledge.

Within ecological humanities, the forest's destruction and subsequent regeneration resonate with contemporary concerns about environmental degradation and resilience. The imagery suggests that cultural and ecological crises are intertwined; the erosion of knowledge parallels the devastation of natural landscapes. Yet the gradual return of life complicates narratives of irreversible collapse, emphasizing adaptation and cyclical renewal [8].

Philosophically, the retreat and return of the lion raise questions about authority and continuity. Power is depicted not as immutable but as historically contingent. The self-flagellating figure introduces an ethical dimension, implicating human agency in both destruction and restoration. Civilizational rupture, the work implies, is not solely external but rooted in moral and ideological choices.

From a media studies perspective, the hybrid form of video painting reinforces these thematic concerns by destabilizing conventional notions of permanence and ephemerality. The medium itself becomes a metaphor for the tension between preservation and erasure.

Taken together, Forest operates as a multidisciplinary site of inquiry—an aesthetic object that simultaneously addresses memory, ecology, politics, ethics, and temporality. Its power lies in its refusal to isolate these domains, instead revealing their deep interconnection within the fragile continuity of civilization.

9. Conclusion

Forest by Ranbir Kaleka emerges, through this multidisciplinary inquiry, as a profound meditation on the vulnerability and resilience of civilization. By situating books within a forested landscape and subjecting them to flames, the work visualizes the precarious condition of cultural memory. Knowledge, though accumulated over centuries, is shown to be fragile—exposed to ideological violence, institutional failure, and human complicity. The retreating lion and the self-flagellating figure further underscore the instability of authority and the ethical dimensions of civilizational crisis.

Yet the narrative does not culminate in despair. The gradual reappearance of flowers and the return of a renewed lion articulate a vision of cyclical continuity. Destruction, while devastating, becomes inseparable from regeneration. Memory may be damaged, but it is not irretrievably erased. Instead, it reconstitutes itself in altered forms, shaped by rupture and transformation. In this sense, Forest resists apocalyptic finality and affirms a dynamic conception of history in which endings generate beginnings.

The hybrid medium of video painting reinforces this philosophical argument. The interplay of permanence and projection mirrors the tension between endurance and transience that defines cultural existence. Ultimately, Forest invites sustained contemplation of how societies remember, forget, destroy, and rebuild. As both aesthetic experiment and civilizational allegory, the work stands as a reminder that continuity depends not on the absence of crisis, but on the capacity for renewal within it.

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Stills from the Video Painting : Forest

Figure 1 : The Guardian of Knowledge
[Source : rkaleka.com]

Figure 2 : The Burning Archive
[Source : Kiran Nadar Museum of Art]

Figure 3 : Guardian's Retreat
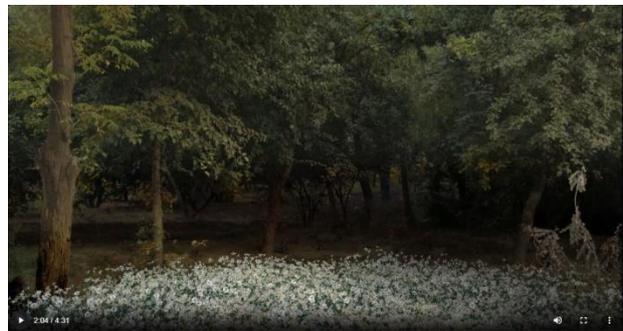[Source : Kiran Nadar Museum of Art]

Figure 4 : After the Disappearance
[Source : rkaleka.com]

Figure 5 : Self-flagellating Figure
[Source : stirworld.com]

Figure 6 : Field of White Blossoms
[Source : stirworld.com]

Stills from the Video Painting : Forest

Figure 7 : Generations in Conversation
[Source : stirworld.com]

Figure 8 : Inheritance of Thought
[Source : stirworld.com]