

# ASIAN ART

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## Profile: Kanishka Raja



Kanishka Raja, *KR II*, 2010, oil on canvas, triptych, 48 x 64 inches (overall)

For art enthusiasts particularly fond of painting, the work of Kanishka Raja (b. 1970 in India and currently based in New York) should be a most welcome sight. Placing his work at the crossroads of architecture, design, and in a certain way even craftsmanship, he is constantly looking for new ways to further develop the tradition of painting as it was conceived in the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> century. Concerned with creating a strong impact with his paintings, Kanishka Raja skillfully plays with the rules of perspective, inviting the viewer into the canvas. The viewer sets foot into a universe into which he inevitably feels drawn and that encourages exploration of what lies behind. Kanishka Raja's use of colour and ornament also plays a major part in the appeal of his paintings. He seems equally at ease working on a large canvas as on a gallery wall installation. His latest show in New York was well-received and he appears to be bubbling with ideas for upcoming projects. In the interview below, he explains 'the making' of his recent work in discussion with the Asian Art Newspaper.

**ASIAN ART NEWSPAPER:** You went to the United States for your studies?

**KANISHKA RAJA:** Yes, I went to the US when I was eighteen in order to go to university, and I stayed on after graduating. My family still lives in Calcutta. Therefore, I have a very direct and continuous relationship with Calcutta, and in a broader sense with India, where I travel back to on a regular basis.

**AAN:** The feedback from Indian artist is very diverse as to the domestic art market: some artists complain that local collectors do not understand what they are creating and hardly sell anything in India, while for others, it seems to work very well on all levels. What has your experience been like?

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**KR:** My first foray into the Indian scene was two years ago. In early 2009, I had a show in Bombay which was the first time I had ever done a show in India. It was an interesting proposition from the gallery that approached me. I talked to a number of people and thought about the idea, and personally, I was very curious about the fact that you have just brought up – about the context. To be honest, I had mixed feelings about it. However, the experience was fantastic. I loved showing there, preparing and working on the project, and interacting with various people.

**AAN:** In regard to this exhibition in Bombay, how did you come up with the title ‘I have seen the enemy and it is eye’, and on a more general level, how do you go about titling your shows?

**KR:** Usually it comes naturally, just through the process of working with the material for the show. In the case of the exhibition in Bombay ‘I have seen the enemy and it is eye’, was one of the central themes I was working with and was related to the investigation of position. It was about position of the viewer, the artist, the cultural producers, the consumers, all through the lens of the images being produced and consumed. Going back to the title, the idea of the show was to reflect on positions and implications within all the parties involved.

All the paintings were very deliberately designed or constructed to put the viewer at the threshold of the images so that you were not fully enveloped within the picture, but also not outside of it, thereby occupying that not fully defined space. That was one of the titles that came up while working through these ideas in the studio, and it stuck.

**AAN:** The way your paintings are constructed almost imply a certain connection with architecture.

**KR:** I studied a lot of original impetus and locus for the paintings. I looked at additional works, at pictorial conventions, and how images are constructed. All these paintings are essentially taking two kinds of development: one is this optically based renaissance derived from a conventional perspective system of constructing images which remains our default mode for both reading and constructing images. That is because most of our images are processed photographically and all of that is optical and based on the same ideas of perspective that were set in place in the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries. Taking this as one element, we can introduce into it other ways of constructing and reading images. One way, for example, being this very lateral textual left-right reading that unfolds almost like a scroll which inevitably evokes a narrative. It involves using time within a pictorial mode of a Renaissance picture plane of the space as something to enter, a window. This left to right reading makes it a thing to traverse, and you almost have to move from one area to another. A perspective-based pictorial system, on the other hand, assumes a kind of central position, going back to the idea of investigating position again. Most of my work is concerned about how one’s position vis-à-vis the reading and construction of images affects the way we read, describe, and develop a world view.

**AAN:** How about the other ways of constructing images?

**KR:** Within these different ways of constructing images, there is one collateral left to right which, for me, is connected not only to Chinese scroll painting which is very narrative, but also to a film strip with its horizontal unfolding with cuts in the middle where the images stop and restart. A third model is video games, for example. An even more interesting model connected to that is medieval painting which unfolds in the same narrative way, but compresses time very differently. Then, some other pictures introduce an ornamental or pattern-based mode of describing space. Pattern or ornament is often thought of in painting, photography, sculpture, and architecture as this mediator between the object

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adorned and the viewer. In preparation for this most recent work I studied Oleg Grabar's famous book *The Mediation of Ornament*, in which he holds the assumption of how ornament infiltrates all these faeries' modes. He ascribes to it that mediating function. Personally, I would like to propose much more an infiltrating function as disruption, as a way of allowing a disjunctive function to enter into this pictorial space. This unified, very perspective-based, Renaissance-based, central space gets disrupted by these ornamental or abstracted elements. In that way, it literally becomes a disruption of an ideological circuit.

Perspective is another aspect I studied very deeply whilst making these works. I looked at a series of paintings from the 15<sup>th</sup> century called the *città ideale* paintings in Italy, which were made mainly in Florence during the flowering of the early Renaissance. I am referring to people like Alberti or Della Francesca, both early innovators of perspective. These pieces are not just demonstrations of rules of perspective – this newfound science by which you can simulate the actual world – but they were also more interesting for me as proposals for ideal cities. There were called 'città ideale' paintings because they were proposals for these new cities being built in Florence and Venice based on new humanist idealist notions. The pictures became models for how later cities were constructed. As a result, when you study this kind of perspective, these rules and ideas, the fundamentals of perspective, its essential ethos is very close to and never very far from ideas of religion and infinity because it almost supposes infinity, almost literally. They were ideas developing these alternate modes for an ethical life in a sense. Taking that and using this mode of setting a very clearly developed sense of perspective, and then finding ways to disrupt that, is really the essential project of my recent work. When you look at the paintings, it sets up this clear grand type of space leading up to infinity. It is not accidental, even in smaller paintings. And finding ways to disrupt that, having this left-to-right reading, having this kind of very graphic image which is also a different way of mapping the same image, and then finding a third way of synapse between this and that is really the fundamental thrust for the ideas that generated my recent work.

**AAN:** After studying the idea of perspective, did you view the theoretical aspect as a burden while working on your pieces?

**KR:** No, it was not a burden at all. For me, it opened up a wider way of reading images because it made me realize how deeply embedded these conventions were within our common pictorial culture, and how the assumptions – as they are so old and engrained – were not thought about because in a way they have become 'automatic'.

**AAN:** In your opinion, is the concept of the *città ideale* still viable?

**KR:** What I am trying to point out is that these ideas that are 500 years old are deeply valid and current. They are not really addressed in how central they are in the way we treat and make images. That is basically because the main way we make images is through photography. Photography is essentially rooted in the same optical theories that the laws of perspective were based on. I like to ground the work in traditions or reportage or documentary images because it allows them to be part of the discussions of documentary politics, and life, etc, instead of emerging from an imagined territory. All of the images I use are from the news. I cut them out and keep them because I am interested in their narrative and political context.

**AAN:** Do you sometimes rely on your own photographs?

**KR:** I have done so in the past. In my recent work, I did not, because it is more about processing found images. Often, the story attached to them has to do with some nature of conflict. That is not that difficult to do if you just take the front page of the newspaper: eight times out of 10 the headlines describe various conflicts around the world.

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**AAN:** You said earlier that you had worked with textile and ornament. Can you be more specific?

**KR:** My interest in patten derives from looking at textile design and textile pattern similarly as the study of perspective is so deeply embedded in architecture from its point of origination. It is the same with pattern. Textiles do not exist without patterns. It is where pattern originates. I like to work backwards and look at traditions of ornament within pictorial conventions from things with which I was more familiar, like miniature paintings, for example, and then to look at where these originated (carpets, Persian rugs, etc.). To me, it is just a process – working backwards and thinking about where these lines connect and that takes you back to textile design. It is also interesting because textiles function on a grid, as does perspective which is something I can exploit very well. In any case, whenever you see patterns in the painting, you see that they function on an overt or sometimes hidden kind of grid. That is very similar to the grid that is employed in making this more perspectival space.

The conversation about textiles is very much something I have lived with for a long time, because my parents are textile designers. The notion of textiles being connected deeply to a pictorial language is something that I always have been involved with and interested in, especially in regards to finding ways to both tap into and look at the history of where it intersects with this pictorial construction.

It is also interesting for me to consider how ornament was slowly, but very definitively, removed from this part of this discourse of Modernism when it came to a pictorial language. If you look at the moment of how this idea grew out of Art Nouveau into a Bauhaus language – this kind of real emphasis on taking out everything, but the essential – it is an important element to consider in terms of how that works in our pictorial history.

**AAN:** Your paintings never depict any human presence. Why is that?

**KR:** For the most part I do not include any human presence because I do not find it very useful, I feel it becomes a type of distancing device – it adds a narrative element that always puts the viewer outside of the picture. You are always looking at something whereas in this scenario, it is much more possible to envelop you as the viewer. I am interested in the construction of narrative in a certain way (pictorial narrative), but I am not interested in a narrative thrust, per se, just for the work.

**AAN:** In your last show in New York, you completed a huge piece relying on the gallery walls as your canvas.

**KR:** I am always trying to extend the space off the paintings. There is always an intersection between the location and the images that are shown. The images end up being very involved with architecture and space, and it makes sense for me to activate the space where they are being shown. I have done certain installation-based pieces which deal with finding ways to also incorporate images into the space.

**AAN:** From your perspective, how has your work evolved since you left art school?

**KR:** In my opinion, it has just become more and more deeply involved in thinking about pictures. I believe the earliest iteration of my work is a way of placing myself within a context. It is about finding a place. My place within the world I am trying to occupy. In addition, I guess it grows from there into a deeper investigation: I am not so interested in finding my place in the world, more a wish to dig deeper into the world around me.

Interview by Olivia Sand