ANISH KAPOOR

Mirrors as Medium

Interview by KIM HEIRSTON
WHEN I APPROACHED ANISH KAPOOR

for an interview, I was convinced that I knew just about everything there was to know about the artist’s work. I had placed a number of Kapoor’s sculptures over the years. Along the way, I learned a fair bit about his background as well. I knew Anish grew up in Bombay, spent time as a teenager in Israel, and did a short, six-month stint at engineering school. I knew his father was a naval hydrographer; his mother, the daughter of an Iraqi-Jewish rabbi. However, one thing I hadn’t fully grasped was Anish’s position on the past.

As a lover of India, I thought we would have so much to talk about with respect to his amazing country – the birthplace of the Mahabharata, Dinesh D’Souza, Farida. I wanted to share with him my pilgrimage to see the rock carvings at Mahabalipuram, or to the caves of Ajanta. That he hadn’t really delved into this in past interviews, I attributed to the interviewers’ lack of interest, or intimate knowledge, in India and its magnificent traditions. However, what I found in Anish was a reticence to discuss the past. Curious, I thought, from a man who seems to delve into his own psychic history on a regular basis. “Picasso is a great artist, not because he is Spanish, or French,” he asserted firmly. No. I thought. Yet, somehow, I cannot imagine a Picasso without Goya or Velázquez. What about Picasso’s Guernica? It took me a couple of minutes to re-group, and re-think my next question about the Indian conception of time, and how that might manifest itself in his work.

1. on the other hand, have become more and more painfully attuned to the fact that I am the product of my parents the way that pink is the product of red pigment mixed with white. I am my father’s marine-indoctrinated discipline.

In our house, the measure of a well-made bed was by how high a quarter would bounce after hitting the bedspread. My quarters jumped as high as rubber balls. My mother painted - as did Anish’s - and wrote poetry. Her favorite film was The Red Shoes. Mum practiced yoga and meditation. I am my mother’s bohemian, her Age of Aquarius. I, too, am afraid of spiders.

During our time together, Anish emphatically stated that “the great inventions in art are formal.” I wholeheartedly agree. In fact, I wish more people in the art-world would apply this simple formula for assessing what is truly “great” in art. Yet, formal invention alone cannot be the sole answer to greatness. For me, great art possesses soul. Anish has given us objects so mysteriously ambivalent, and breathtakingly beautiful. And, he does this time and time again. Did this sensitivity to beauty and the power of the monumental have anything to do with Anish’s growing up with the Himalayas as a backdrop? It cannot be stated with any certainty. However, I love to imagine that possibility.

Anish Kapoor was born in Bombay, India in 1954. At the age of twelve, he and his family moved to Dehradun, a Northern Indian city located in the foothills of the Himalayas, between the Ganges and Yamuna rivers. The son of a Hindu father and Jewish mother, Kapoor relocated to Israel, where he spent two years on a kibbutz. In the early 1970’s, he moved to London to pursue his passion for art. The young artist received a BA in Fine Art from Hornsey College of Art (1977), and completed his postgraduate studies at Chelsea School of Art and Design (1978). Kapoor’s work gained early recognition in 1978 during the Hayward Gallery’s group exhibition, New Sculpture, which spotlighted young figures of the New British Sculpture movement. Influenced by introspective explorations, Kapoor’s artwork navigates “psychic matter,” or the notion of an “absent object”, which parallels the physical object itself. His sculptures resonate with both spirituality and mythology, raising questions about human perception, the body, and broader dualities inherent in nature. Employing hollow and absorbent, or sleek and reflective surfaces and forms, Kapoor’s work captures darkness and light, presence and absence – sometimes within a single sculpture.

In the mid-1990’s, the artist embarked on his first experiments with more massive scales, and a broader range of non-conventional and industrial materials, which have come to include steel, fiberglass, dirt, limestone, marble, concrete, PVC, colorful pigment, and, most recently, vantablack. As Kapoor began working in monumental proportions, he also began to delve more deeply into aspects of site-specificity. Marsyas (2002), a steel-ringed, PVC structured work that dominated the Tate Modern’s expansive Turbine Hall, and, Dirty Corner (2015), which occupies the main garden corridor of Versailles, are among the artist’s many site-specific masterpieces.

Representing Britain at the 44th Venice Biennale in 1999, Kapoor won the Premio Duemila. In 2001, the artist was awarded the Tate’s prestigious Turner Prize, participated in Documenta IX in 1992, and was knighted in 2013. In 2008, the Institute of Contemporary Art in Boston presented the artist’s first mid-career survey in the United States. Kapoor’s work has also been of major subject solo exhibitions at the Tate Modern, London; Royal Academy of Art, London; Guggenheim Museum, Bilbao; Grand Palais, Paris; Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia, Madrid; Chateau de Versailles, France. Kapoor’s work has been acquired by leading private and public collections, including those of the Museum of Modern Art, New York, Art Institute of Chicago, Illinois; Tate Modern, London, and Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia, Madrid, among many others.
AS IF: Let’s start with a little background…

Just about everybody knows you were born in Bombay, now Mumbai. You moved, at around age twelve, to Dehradun at the foothills of the Himalayas with your family. Your father was a naval hydrographer.

I am curious to know a little bit about how your father’s profession might have affected your work - apropos your exhibition at Versailles, apropos your engagement with landscape…

ANISH KAPOOR: True. I love maps; they are an abstract of what is real. Sea maps (Hydrography) are even stranger. As for origin we should not be concerned about where artists come from, what matters is what they do. Most of the great innovations in art are formal.

AS IF: Yes, absolutely. Speaking of innovations, you talk a lot about space. You once said, “I am absolutely sure that to make new art, you have to make new space.”

AK: Space, time, the status of objects, the status of the image, if you like, and all those things.

AS IF: But our experiences of space and time, to some extent, have to do with our backgrounds.

AK: They are definitely cultural. Certain kinds of ritual matter; internal, ritual matter is cultural. Space and time along with other abstract notions have a great deal to do with cultural context.

Abstract questions…

AS IF: Well, let’s talk about that. Let’s talk about your views on site-specificity, because you have very strong viewpoints about a work in its location.

AK: I do. I am particularly interested in the problem of scale. Scale seems to me, to be one of the real tools of sculpture. Occasionally, I make works that are big. Big-ness in itself is uninteresting. But, big-ness when it relates to content I think, deeply important. In my practice, there is the idea that scale and the sublime are related to each other. When you walk into a beautifully proportioned square in Italy, let’s say in Florence, your eyes open a little wider; a touching moment. It opens your sensibility. What you’re undeniably experiencing is connection. Your body is responding to something about scale and proportion which, when it’s right, gives you a buzz. This is the sublime. These are the essential parts of sculpture - objects in place. All art occurs with a sense of place, art doesn’t just float, at least good art doesn’t.

Art owns a sense of where it is and why it is where it is.

AS IF: And it’s about the relationship of the viewer to that sense of place.

AK: Correct. But, of course, it’s also about where you stand, in a way, who you are. Perhaps, first of all, where you stand and how you move. Space and time. Scale is infinitely mysterious. When it’s right, you often can’t tell how big or small a thing is. It does strange things to you. To your body and its space. Scale has all the subtlety of poetry.

AS IF: You work a lot with mirrored or reflective stainless steel. This certainly allows you to distort space and time. You have also frequently used pure pigment, stone, and PVC. With respect to medium and message, would you tell us a little more about the connection between the material and what you are trying to say?

AK: Well, one of the things I have discovered over the years is that artists who have a lot to say are problematic. Essentially, there is nothing to say. I think that is terribly important. Art reveals truth, but truth has nothing to do with meaning. However, in the process of having nothing to say, things happen. You come across matter. And when I say matter, I mean psychic matter. You come across intellectual, poetic, psychic matter, which keeps reoccurring and coming back - and you can’t help it. It’s there, and then it’s there again. This is something deeper, it may be the real content. This is what artists work with - at least those that I am interested in… I feel that this deeper content is more than what I know or I think I am. An artist may have one of these moments in a creative life, or he/she may have several…

One of those moments, for me, has been the idea of the ‘absent object’, or what I have come to call “the non-object.” The thing that is in-between the actual object, the actual physical presence of the thing, and the parts of it that are not present. One might say that every physical object has a non-physical counterpart or parallel object. This is not as complicated as it sounds… Initially, I made objects out of pigment, which is a very physical substance, very material… And at the same time, pigment is ephemeral – not physical. It is powder and the opposite of physical. Then a few later, I happened on the idea of the void object – these are hollow forms made out of fibre-glass or stone and I covered them with dark pigments that gave them the quality of a hole. I was trying to make things that was not there, yet fully present. Then I began to wonder if the void object could be mirrored. Could the dark hole be a mirror hole? Then I made the first mirror void. Surprisingly, just as the void object was an object of darkness, the mirror void is an object full of darkness, of the real and the illusory are part of a kind of cultural reality for me. It would be stupid to say anything else.

AS IF: You have mentioned very openly, and very bravely, that you have undergone psychoanalytical for a long time. Is that something you still do?

AK: I do.

AS IF: And how does that help you in your practice? As I understand, it is part of a self-discovery. May I ask, was it an existential crisis that brought this on?

AK: One does not do psychoanalysis for fun. I am interested in psychoanalysis partly because there is something about the psychoanalytical method that I have always liked.

AS IF: You and Jackson Pollock. You know, Pollock did a lot of drawing while under analysis. [From 1939 to 1940, Pollock was under the care of Jungian psychologist, Dr. Joseph Henderson, to treat his issues with alcoholism. During that time, Pollock created more than eighty “psychoanalytical drawings” as a form of therapy.]

AK: You lie on a couch. There is a relationship, inevitably, between the analyst and you. Eventually, there is some matter in the room, matter that you keep coming back to… That is where it is.
Anish Kapoor, no one draws a crowd like you do. Your monumental Maraya, installed in the Tate Modern's Turbine Hall in 2002, was viewed by more than 1.8 million visitors. Millions and millions have seen Cloud Gate in Chicago’s Millennium Park, and your Orbit tower during the London Olympics. Jeff Koons once said that he hoped his piales was born out of a healthy competition with his older sister, who seemed to please was born out of a healthy competition with his older sister, who seemed to please Was, or is, there a similar catalyst for you? AK: No, art is too serious an activity for such a lower angle. It is this very odd, kind of strange simplicity. Anish takes me on a tour of his studio - the creator - as a part of his creative process. I have tried to draw the whole of the site into the studio. Here my idea is that the whole site is the object. I have attempted to put together as one thing, as if it comes out of the ground. I am working on the idea that one might be able to enter the space that it encloses through an underground tunnel. I am interested in it being both an art space and a kind of social space. AK: Dirty Corner is one of the best works I’ve ever made. It’s a painting about Blackness. It’s a painting about the blackest material in the universe, just behind black holes themselves. AK: Vantablack is a nano black. It’s so black that it just eats space, time… It just absorbs. AK: Yes. I am interested in that terror. I am interested in looking, walking and imagining that’s what interests you.

AS IF: Of being on one’s own. Completely alone. In the void. AK: Yes.

AS IF: Yes, Vantablack. I read about the development of this “super black,” which was featured in your recent solo exhibition at Gladstone in Brussels this past spring [Vantablack absorbs 99% of all light, which effectively makes it the blackest material in the universe, just behind black holes themselves]. AK: Vantablack is a nano black. It’s so black that it just eats space, time… It just absorbs.

AS IF: Just thinking about the space is terrifying! Yet, I really want to experience it. I imagine that’s what interests you. AK: Yes, I am interested in that terror. I am interested in the questions that it poses about being.

AS IF: Going back to concept of Maya, and illusionism… AK: The object is always a kind of construction we put together for ourselves.

AS IF: Is this PVC? AK: I’m not sure yet.

AS IF: I just returned from your major exhibition at Versailles. There are so many glorious sculptures there. Dirty Corner just stood out for me. Dirty Corner is one of the best works we’ve made in the last ten years.

AS IF: You should be really proud of that work, because you know, it really messes with Le Nôtre’s garden. I can’t imagine that André Le Notre, 17th-century principal landscape architect
of King Louis XIV of France, who designed the park of the Palace of Versailles]. I actually just read a biography on Le Nôtre, because I am very interested in architecture and landscape design. I am also in discussion about an art project for Château de Vaux-le-Vicomte – the pre-Versailles. Of course, you know the story... [Nicolas Fouquet, Superintendent of Finances to King Louis XIV, commissioned Château de Vaux-le-Vicomte in 1657. While constructed to impress and win the favor of the King, the Château resulted in the exact opposite. Louis XIV arrested Fouquet, and charged him with the misappropriation of public funds. Following Fouquet’s arrest, the King stripped Vaux-le-Vicomte of everything, including its trio of designers, André Le Nôtre, Parisian architect Louis Le Vau, and French painter, Charles Le Brun, to realize the Palace of Versailles].

So, mirrors and reflection... You really are the perfect person to pay homage, as well as challenge Le Nôtre. You do it with such conviction.

Anish, very rarely do I hear the word “Surrealism” with respect to your work. Perhaps critics have addressed this. However, I am not aware of it. Do you think about surrealism at all? I do, particularly in terms of your mysterious titles. More importantly, I think a lot of René Magritte. It is inevitable, and really important, I think a lot of René Magritte. When gazing at your Sky Mirrors and watching the clouds go by, I always think of Magritte. It is inevitable, and really strong, and genius – a kind of convulsive beauty. I have to ask you, when did you happen upon the disc as a sort of perfect form? It is a perfect form. Was there a eureka moment?

AK: For many years, I made works that were round. Sometimes, one makes decisions with-out making decisions. You just follow what you did before.

AS IF: I am seeing that type of dichotomy right here [referring to an installation of polished stainless steel discs, alongside mounds of rough, cement-poured pieces]. You think you know everything about an artist until you start digging a little deeper. Before I looked it up, I was convinced you were a Gemini - because of the dual-personality of your work.

AK: I’m a Pisces.

AS IF: Exactly! I was going to say that it is the opposite side of the coin, it’s balance. AK: It’s balance, and opposition.

AS IF: It is total opposition. One minute, you’re doing something absolutely slick and sublimely beautiful, like your stainless steel discs. The next minute, you’re giving us something that is rough, and scatologi-cal, and globular, and messy.

AK: Yes, exactly. I am really interested in those two sides of practice. Geometry is fascinating, it has rationality and order. But disorder is fascinating too. Life seems to be a bit of both and there is great symbolic power in the space between the two. These works are made from building rubble from the space next door, which I am renovating.

AS IF: Incredible. So that’s my idea of con-vulsive beauty. That’s really sexy. AK: It is very sexy. I like what happens to the gold. It reflects back on itself and goes a deep orange. I like also that its infinite reflections slowly allows the objects to emerge without ‘design’. I’ve always been interested in dark, interior spaces – in caves. Do you know that painting by [Paolo] Uccello where he’s fighting the dragon?

AK: Yes. Preconceiving an object doesn’t always yield the best results. Sometimes, it’s better not to. With these works we start the process by casting lumps of earth. The process slowly allows the objects to emerge without ‘design’. I’ve always been interested in dark, interior spaces – in caves. Do you know that painting by [Paolo] Uccello where he’s fighting the dragon?

AS IF: Saint George And The Dragon? I know the painting very well. It’s in The National Gallery [in London].

AK: I think I am making the dragon...

AS IF: You must watch Game Of Thrones! AK: I am interested in the kind of proto - proto-form, proto-object - forms that confound us as to whether they are made, or found. Maybe it’s an extension of the Duchampian found object, which is the natural object that is found in nature, but, yet, made, not made... Sometimes, you say, like a meteorite. Like some found object. I’ll show you a work I’ve just made. That’s a building from the space next door, which I am renovating.

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Taratantara, 1999
PVC and steel
Baltic Centre for Contemporary Art, Gateshead 2000
51.8 x 32.6 x 16 meters
Photo: John Riddy
Dirty Corner, 2011-2015
Mixed media
Dimensions variable
Château de Versailles 2015
Photo: Tadzio
AS IF: So this is pretty tough stuff. This is Anish saying, “Don’t put me in a box!” “I will refuse to be put in a box!”

AK: huh!

AS IF: It’s really beautiful.

AK: You saw the one we were just beginning to make, a much bigger one.

AS IF: How were these made?

AK: That one is fiberglass and oil paint.

AS IF: It’s beautiful. It almost takes the form of a rose. It’s funny, I was thinking about you a lot during my recent trip in Paris. Following Versailles, I went to the Velázquez exhibition at the Grand Palais. I started thinking about your work vis-à-vis drapery. The types of reds Velázquez used made me think of your work. As I said, I had just been out to Versailles, so perhaps the connection was natural.

AK: I’m really interested in what happens… See these spaces [points to the crevices in the folded canvas]? They look darker… And I’m wondering where else I can take it - what happens to them to make it even darker.

AS IF: It also makes me think of Renaissance drapery. In university, I studied Renaissance art history. I did my senior thesis on frescoes by [Florentine painter] Domenico Ghirlandaio. In the Renaissance era, drapery was a reflection of one’s skill as a painter. So, it’s something that I am always thinking about. This is a new take on drapery… Fantastic!

AK: That group of work dates from four or five years ago.

AS IF: They’re really tough. They look like human innards.

AK: Insides and out.

AS IF: Christian themes seem to present themselves.

AK: Yes, they do. I am particularly happy with this painting here, it’s both inside and outside, containment, and an inability to contain. I think it has a lot to do with shame. The curtain hiding.

AS IF: There is the body. There is this raw physicality. I am really drawn to this painting. This is bringing it back to Barnett Newman. That’s a ‘zip’. You seem to revel in a pure sense of color. Obviously, you are not like Yves Klein, for whom gold was literally symbolic of the Father, whereas blue for the Son, and rose, the Holy Spirit. For you, do particular colors carry spiritual associations?

AK: Too boring. I’ve made a lot of things that are red over the years, as you know, I’m obsessed with it. Red is not just a color; it is also a thing. We can’t disassociate the color red from our interiors.

AS IF: You once said something very interesting about red. You suggested that “Red makes a kind of black.”

AK: I’m interested in the way color denotates darkness or tends to darkness, red makes a darker black than blue or black. This is because we don’t see color just with our eyes. Red is a surrogate for ourselves and we, human beings, are the most mysterious, the darkest things there are.
Dismemberment, Site I, 2003-2009
PVC and steel
25 x 8 x 8 m
The Farm, Kaipara Bay, New Zealand
Photo: Jos Wheeler