

GLADSTONE GALLERY

Christopher Allen, "Spiritual paradox at play in the work of Anish Kapoor," *The Australian*, February 2, 2013.

Spiritual paradox at play in the work of Anish Kapoor

CHRISTOPHER ALLEN *The Australian* February 02, 2013 12:00AM



IT is interesting to hear Anish Kapoor, whose work is lavishly displayed at the MCA, declare: "I have nothing to say as an artist."

This is clearly neither something that has just occurred to him nor a casual aside, but rather a carefully formulated defence against the social, political and art-theoretical bogs that lie in the path of any artist who tries to explain what his art means.

It is very like Jeffrey Smart's refusal to comment on the urban alienation of contemporary life that seems to be evoked in his pictures: frustratingly to the commentator, but prudently from the point of view of a painter, he blandly assures us that he finds apartment blocks and freeways beautiful.

GLADSTONE GALLERY

Christopher Allen, "Spiritual paradox at play in the work of Anish Kapoor," *The Australian*, February 2, 2013.

Kapoor is acknowledging, in effect, that art works on a deeper and more intuitive level than messages and morals: it is experienced primarily aesthetically, which is to say through the senses, and imaginatively, which is a matter of sympathetic participation by the viewer in the realisation of meaning.

If you have anything to do with the teaching of art in secondary or tertiary institutions, you will know curriculum writers have no understanding of these subtleties and can only think of art through cliches such as "pushing boundaries" or "challenging conventions", and as the vehicle for social messages or what they like to call concepts.

If Kapoor repeated that he had nothing to say in the context of the Higher School Certificate examination, he would be marked down for lacking that will-o'-the-wisp known as "conceptual strength".



But Kapoor's words have an even more specific relevance to his work, and one may well suspect that his apparently negative proposition contains a hidden and paradoxical affirmation, which might be glossed as the intention of revealing nothingness, or absence. If this sounds dangerously like the kind of post-structural wordplay that can so often run on empty, the spectacular work that greets us outside the MCA, *Sky Mirror*, demonstrates exactly the principle that underlies much of the work inside as well.

Sky Mirror (2006) is a very large object - and very expensive, too, but more of that below - and yet it exists only to reflect something else. It is essentially self-effacing, not something you look at, like most sculptures, which generally act as monuments, centres of attention or focal points of a public space, but something with which you look at something else. It is an enormous disc of polished steel set on an angle and reflecting the sky with its moving pattern of clouds and, depending on the time of day and the position of the viewer, the sun as well.

What this piece has in common with any work of art is that it claims our attention, but what is different is that it simultaneously deflects attention away from itself and towards a reality above and surrounding us. On a fine day in Sydney it would be a static and rather bleak vision; on a cloudy day Kapoor's disc presents us with a picture of continuous motion and change. It invites us to stop, to suspend our own activity, to contemplate and allow ourselves to be absorbed in the very different rhythms of nature.

The spectacle offered to us is, indeed, potentially available to anyone who looks up into the sky; but its framing in the round aperture we associate with astronomical observation, and its transposition from the heavens to earth, as it were, offers it to the viewer in a new way, just as the painting of a cityscape may lead us to renewed perception of a too-familiar reality.

GLADSTONE GALLERY

Christopher Allen, "Spiritual paradox at play in the work of Anish Kapoor," *The Australian*, February 2, 2013.

Significantly, the very nature of Kapoor's mirror disc requires viewers to give themselves to it in a way completely unlike the characteristic response to an earlier monumental installation in the same location, Jeff Koons's *Puppy* in 1995-96. This work forced itself on one's attention, and yet could be glanced at in the lazy and disengaged way that audiences have become used to looking at contemporary art. *Sky Mirror*, on the other hand, demands that we stop, surrender ourselves to its vision and enter its particular temporality; and this was clearly too much for some viewers, who took a photograph and passed on.

There was a lot of photography going on in the exhibition itself, too - so often a substitute for the challenge of real looking, but here particularly absurd when so many of the pieces were similarly self-effacing, when their reality was not the shape of a mirrored surface but the shifting world reflected in it, and above all in the mirrored image of the viewer.

The first works encountered - apart from the red wax installation downstairs - are mostly mirrors, either convex or concave or fragmented to create, in one case, an effect reminiscent of a fly's view of the world. We seem to be transported back to the visual conundrums and conceits of anamorphic distortion that fascinated artists in the mannerist period, but updated with new technologies that allow steel to be as reflective as glass, or a flat surface to give the illusion of concavity, or the inside of a hemisphere coated with super-reflective paint to create another illusion, of a non-existent plane suspended in the middle of the void.

At the end of the exhibition are a couple of much larger pieces like curved walls that we have to walk around - but unlike Richard Serra's wall sculptures, which are consciously erected as barriers in space, these are again reflective and they interfere with our experience of the environment in quite a different way. *S-Curve* (2006) not only distorts scale and dimensions as you walk past but, above all, although more subtly, deforms our experience of time as well, so that it seems to slow down at moments and then suddenly lunge forward.

The paradox is even stronger in the other piece, *C-Curve* (2007), in which time seems to accelerate as we walk past the concave side and slow down on the convex. The geometrical logic underlying this is the same one that explains the opposite phenomenon in the velocity of a wheel, where the outer rim turns faster than the centre; but the disparity is exacerbated by the vertical as well as horizontal concavity of the outer surface, making our reflected image seem smaller and farther away.

If one category of Kapoor's work can be described as self-effacing because it is less object than mirrored surface, another evades vision in precisely the opposite way, by not reflecting light at all. Thus *My Body Your Body* (1993) looks at first like a rectangle of deep blue-black painted on to the wall. It is only as we approach that we realise it is in fact a kind of funnel opening, in the centre, into a black void, and we have to examine it very carefully from an oblique angle to determine the location of the curving edge and begin to get an idea of the shape of the funnel.

GLADSTONE GALLERY

Christopher Allen, "Spiritual paradox at play in the work of Anish Kapoor," *The Australian*, February 2, 2013.

The artist has employed here a pigment so deep and so unreflective - in contrast to the super-reflective surfaces mentioned earlier - that it absorbs almost all the light that falls on it and thus becomes nearly invisible; one thinks of black holes or of the radar-absorbent surface of the stealth bomber.

The same kind of paint is used on the interior surface of *Void* (1989), an elongated hemisphere mounted on the wall, so that from the front it appears to be a flat surface rather than a hollow space. For it is the variations in the fall of light and shadow on a solid body or within a void that allow us to read them as three-dimensional. When the illuminated areas are not perceptibly brighter than the unilluminated ones, the eye is deprived of the cues of form.

What all of these works have in common is not only the way they try to evade their own status as objects, but also their refusal to allow us to see them as such - either by reflecting our gaze or swallowing it up.

It is as though they were all attempts to frustrate the functional or instrumental way we look at the world, especially in our materialistic and disenchanting age, but more generally within the rationalist tradition that underlies modern science.

And it is here that we can discern the influence of the Indian way of thinking. From the earliest Sanskrit texts, the ancient Indians set themselves a path that was the opposite of that adopted by their ethnic and linguistic cousins in the West. The Greeks loved distinctions, oppositions, contrast, discriminations, debate and the very idea of contest; and thus they invented philosophy and science as well as democracy, the inevitable corollary of the belief that we are all capable of thinking for ourselves.

The earliest Indian thinkers, on the other hand, were persuaded that distinctions and discriminations alienated us from the wholeness of being; they adopted the principle of non-dualism (*advaita*), and because the primary dualism is the distinction between the perceiving subject and the world, they conceived of the highest form of knowledge as one in which the subject and the object coincide: *atman*, the individual soul, becomes identified with *Brahman*, the world soul. Essentially, therefore, India chose mysticism and Greece philosophy.

Of course this a simplification, and there are rationalistic and anti-rationalistic traditions within both Western and Indian thinking, as well as more coincidences, connections and mutual influences than is usually realised. Nonetheless, Kapoor's deepest inspiration does seem to have its roots in a kind of non-rational, anti-materialist thinking and specifically in the instinct to break down the primary distinction between subject and object.

GLADSTONE GALLERY

Christopher Allen, "Spiritual paradox at play in the work of Anish Kapoor," *The Australian*, February 2, 2013.

It is impressive work, too, but it is hard not to feel some disquiet about the way that these spiritual and non-materialistic insights have become the basis for what is now a very big business. Kapoor has a factory and a large team of assistants who make his work for him. The commissions from public authorities and immensely rich private collectors are hugely expensive: the Cloud Gate sculpture in Chicago is supposed to have cost \$23 million in 2006. His exhibition in Sydney is sponsored by one of the biggest multinational banks in the world.

The deepest problem, however, is not so much that spiritual art is sponsored by the rich or that the works are produced in the way they are; the question is rather how much spiritual insight is produced for the material and financial outlay, compared with, say, a single page of Persian miniature illumination. But it seems that only such colossal scale is capable of making an impression on a public unaccustomed to attention. Kapoor's art is thoughtful and refined in its inspiration, but it has been deformed by the reality of a thoughtless and unrefined audience.

