

GLADSTONE GALLERY

Dorment, Richard, "An awe-inspiring riot for the senses," The Daily Telegraph, 9/22/09, 25

An awe-inspiring riot for the senses

*Anish Kapoor's retrospective is making a mess of the RA's galleries,
but it's an exhilarating experience, says **Richard Dorment***



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EXHIBITION

ANISH KAPOOR

ROYAL ACADEMY

SOMETHING and nothing, form and formlessness, concave and convex, hard and soft, rough and smooth, inside and outside, slow and fast, presence and absence, colour and non-colour, reflection and absorption, surface and depth, clean and dirty, big and small, movement and stasis, austerity and excess, illusion and reality, creation and destruction: Anish Kapoor's joyful mid-career retrospective at the Royal Academy is like an inventory of the possibilities of sculpture.

The show begins with pieces made from wood covered in gesso and powdered pigments such as you see sold in neat conical piles in Indian street markets for use in dyes, cosmetics and at Hindu festivals. Small in scale, they sit on the gallery floor, spikey red stalactites, orange-yellow breasts, a lemon wedge of pure yellow, a miniature mountain range of intense blue. By turns sensual and cruel, they look so fragile that you fear a sudden gust of wind could blow them away.

Looking through the door leading into the next gallery, we see what looks like a veil of saturated yellow floating in front of the wall. In fact, it is a six-square-metre disc made from fibreglass and covered in 12 coats of yellow paint which, when seen from a distance, fills our field of vision.

Only when you approach it do you understand that the wall is not flat but concave, and that what looked solid is actually a void. Drawn into its inviting nothingness, we are suffused with pleasure even as our sense of self feels diminished by its enveloping radiance. The last time I felt something similar, it was in front of another giant disc – Olafur Eliasson's famous mirrored sun in Tate Modern's turbine hall.

Elsewhere Kapoor shows free-standing stainless-steel sculptures and hanging discs, in whose polished curves we expect to see our own reflections, as in the sculptures of Michelangelo Pistoletto. But Kapoor's surfaces are concave, so that when you see yourself in them, you and your surroundings are either upside down or grotesquely distorted in a way that makes you feel that what is important to Kapoor is not the object, but the animated gallery space around and behind you. More worryingly, in a vertical statue entitled *Non-Object (Pole)*, from certain angles and distances you can't see yourself at all.

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Almost the opposite sensory experiences occur in Kapoor's new series of sculptures, where concrete shapes that look like slugs, turds or phalluses, are piled up to make dozens of mounds of different shapes and sizes. Some look organic, like worm casts or piles of dung, while others feel architectural, like the crumbling ruins of a forgotten civilization. Whereas in the first galleries Kapoor seduced with light, colour and sleek, inviting shapes, here he repels by using a material that absorbs the light and evokes things that either disgust us or feel ancient, damaged, decayed.

So far, you could say that for all his innovation, Kapoor is at least working with the materials and techniques of traditional sculpture. But in two other

works in the show, he moves decisively into the realms of performance art. Not since the days when JMW Turner arrived at the Royal Academy on varnishing days to work in public with brush and palette knife on pictures he had submitted as mere dabs of colour, has Burlington House seen anything remotely like what will go on in those galleries this autumn.

Kapoor is using a powerful cannon to shoot heavy pellets of crimson wax from one gallery onto the wall of another. By the end of the show's run, 20 tons of wax will have built up on the gallery floor and splattered the walls.

But the essence of the art work is not on the walls, but in the performance. Every 20 minutes, an attendant in black enacts a carefully choreographed

ritual, and I defy you not to feel a shiver of fear and excitement when he loads the cannon and the gallery explodes with the sound of the shot.

Shooting into the Corner has been discussed in terms of its Freudian symbolism, but I think it is closer to Kapoor's intention to see it as following on from the famous sculpture Richard Serra made in 1968 by flinging molten lead against a gallery wall.

The other never-to-be-forgotten performance Kapoor is staging for this show takes the form of a 40-ton block of red wax, paint and Vaseline that moves on tracks through five galleries at the RA. So high and so broad that it only just fits through each archway, the huge object leaves a splattered residue of crimson gunge on the walls and

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Art meets gallery: left, 'Shooting into the Corner'; above, 'White Sand, Red millet, Many Flowers'

floors as it passes, like the great juggernaut that is dragged by devotees of the Hindu god Jagannatha at the festival of Rathayatra and which is said to crush everything in its path. The silent presence travels so slowly that it takes an hour and a half to complete its journey. It's like a dream in which all the paint in all the paintings ever shown at the Royal Academy has somehow returned in the form of a giant brushstroke slapping paint back and forth, back and forth, all over the galleries.

No other contemporary British artist has Kapoor's range of imagination and no one else routinely works on this scale. Over the years, he's become more of a public than a private artist – or at least one whose most effective works are intended not for private contemplation, but to inspire awe in large numbers of people.

In the courtyard of the RA, there's a giddy example of Kapoor at his most grandiose and light-hearted, a new sculpture in the form of a column of large polished, stainless-steel spheres that appear to rise up from the ground weightlessly like giant bubbles in a bottle of champagne, and look so precariously balanced that they could come tumbling down with a gentle push.

Stop to look and what you'll see in the mirror-like silver surface of each sphere are reflections of the buildings surrounding the courtyard and the people walking among them. It's like an animated version of Brancusi's *Endless Column*, reflecting the whole world, in fact, in constant change.

From Sat until Dec 11. Tickets: 0844 209 1919 or royalacademy.org.uk

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