

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

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Sculptor Anish Kapoor on sex, race, big art and Brexit

As his heavyweight exhibition opens in Hong Kong, the British-Indian artist behind Chicago's monumental Cloud Gate offers a glimpse under the mirror-like skin of his sculptures and the controversies some have sparked

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Anish Kapoor reflected in Vertigo, one of the works in his exhibition at the Gagosian Gallery, in Central. Picture: Jonathan Wong

One recent wet night, at about 10pm, a crane was manoeuvred into Theatre Lane, in Central, and positioned at the back of the Pedder Building. It was there to hoist sculptures by the British-Indian sculptor Anish Kapoor from street level, through a 1.4-metre x 5-metre window and into the Gagosian Gallery, on the seventh floor. Three crane-hire companies had already declined the task, apparently declaring it impossible.

Kapoor is known for the monumental nature of his creations. For the 2012 London Olympics, he designed the *ArcelorMittal Orbit*, which, at 114.5 metres, is Britain's tallest sculpture. In Chicago, his stainless-steel work, formally titled *Cloud Gate* (2006), but generally referred to as *The Bean*, is 110 tonnes. His imagination loves to play with volume and space, and as he's got older – he's now aged 62 – his sculptures seem to have become correspondingly bigger. They tend to bear names like *Leviathan* (2011, Paris) and be part of huge projects, such as the proposed (but only partially completed) series of five sculptures in England officially designated the *Tees Valley Giants*.

By such standards, the Gagosian's eight exhibits were diminutive. Still, it was the job of the crane driver, plus a specialist team of fine-art installers, to ensure Kapoor's inner creativity and the outer dimensions of the grade II-listed Pedder Building were a perfect fit.

Matters were complicated by renovation scaffolding on the eighth floor. At one point, a 2.5-tonne crate in mid-air was found to be 5cm off-kilter and had to be gingerly brought back down. It contained Kapoor's 2006 stainless-steel piece, *Vertigo*. Work continued, through the rain, until 6am.

"That's 1,400 kilos ... That's a tonne ... That's a tonne and a half ... The whole show's about 12 tonnes," calculated the crew supervisor the following afternoon, as he pointed to a selection of unopened crates. (Gagosian prefers that the company remains unnamed but it was described as "one of 10 in the world" who could do this job.) It was difficult to hear the supervisor's voice above the shriek of ripping tape as the works were gradually unboxed. *Mirror (Black)* (2014) was already gleaming on a wall, throwing back a deep, unsettling reflection. Under the gallery lights, the mounting layers of sloughed-off packing skin held a lovely artificiality: you could imagine Gagosian holding an exhibition of enormous photographs – by Andreas Gursky, say – of this strange, behind-the-scenes unveiling.

Vertigo – still swathed in thin, non-scratch polythene typically used for wrapping cars and printed with the words "Warning: Do Not Use On Damp Vehicles" – had just been placed in position by a pair of gantries. One of the many delicate tasks when installing works in a Hong Kong building that dates back to 1923 is guesstimating the thickness of the floor; the architectural plans are long lost.

With Kapoor's work, however, it's never merely the solid surfaces that need to be considered. Several of the all-male crew, carrying a large swaddled object, asked the gallery, "How will we suspend it in the air?"

In 1999, British arts programme *The South Bank Show* filmed Kapoor setting up an exhibition in Bordeaux's Museum of Contemporary Art. He was already a star. He had represented Britain at the 1990 Venice Biennale and had won the Turner Prize the following year. He had also had a record-breaking show at London's Hayward Gallery, which would shift him out of the art world and into public consciousness.

In Bordeaux, some of his sculptures weighed up to eight tonnes. There were gantries, crew, wrappings, complicated installations.

At one point, Kapoor (long of hair, radiant of eye) is chastised, in French, by the museum director and admits, in English, that there's been "quite a big wrong measurement".

Viewers see him in his studio contemplating a small, bean-shaped object that will eventually grow into *Cloud Gate*. "The site is vast, which is one of those things that interested me," he says, of the Chicago project. He thinks it may end up being pretty expensive: "I wouldn't be surprised if it's two or three million". Presumably he means pounds but whatever the currency, the calculation was a bit off: in the end, *The Bean* cost US\$23 million, paid for by private donations from individuals and companies.

By a similar exponential factor, Kapoor – officially Sir Anish Kapoor, since being knighted in 2013 – has become a superstar. This requires trailing his glow across the known universe, or at least Asia, where the Gagosian show is his third in two weeks. (The others were in Seoul and Tokyo.) There's been, he says later, "too much travelling".

ARRIVING AT THE GALLERY on the morning of the opening, his radiance seems a little dimmed. As he passes in front of *Vertigo* (2016), his reflection grows artfully misshapen but, on the whole, time has barely distorted him. Inevitably, he's smaller than expected and his long-ish hair is grey, yet he's lithe and alert. He seems to be taking in every millimetre of the now-immaculate space.

Is it difficult seeing his works again? "No, no – they're all friends," he says.

He pauses in front of the bisected golden curve of *Hysterical Sexual* (2016). Problem? "No, just ... checking something."

In Gagosian's back room (he stands aside to let me pass, he pours tea for the two of us – he's a very polite superstar), I tell him the response of women friends to his work. Those I've spoken to over the years who've seen it don't just like it, they love it. The same can't always be said of men. Witnessing the installation has made the distinction sharply apparent: the physical demands of the crated-up work required a male crew but the revealed inner is definitely female.

Kapoor perks up at this (as he will do, increasingly, for the next hour – he's enjoyably chatty when he wants to be).

"When I first showed my work, I was often written off as a woman artist," he says. "My name's ambiguous enough. There's something in the work, of course. I'm always interested in roundness, dark womb spaces, interiors."

But it's not his interior. Kapoor smiles. We're heading towards a particular topic. In June last year, he showed six pieces at the Château de Versailles, in France. Five of them reaped modest publicity but the sixth, called *Dirty Corner* (2011) and initially described as looking like a funnel – or possibly a gramophone horn – erupting from the earth, received worldwide coverage when Kapoor was said to have compared it to Marie Antoinette's vagina. (Her husband, Louis XVI, had been a resident of Versailles until his untimely end.)

Did he actually use the word "vagina"? "No!" he says. "I knew it was provocative. I said, 'She is resplendent on the lawn'. I used the word 'she'! Why wouldn't I? And the journalist said 'the vagina of Marie Antoinette'. Interesting psychology – the moment it was named as female and sexual, the hate began."

The hatred took the form of anti-Semitic graffiti. Initially, Kapoor removed it.

"I spent a large amount of money doing that," he says. His money? "Mostly. Versailles was pathetic." After a pause, he adds, "I believe it was an inside job".

Not wishing to be the sort of journalist who causes a further international incident, I glance over and say I'm writing that down. But Kapoor, with the look of a man getting into his enjoyable stride, continues: "The next lot of graffiti arrived. I don't quote my friend Winston Churchill often – or ever – but he did say, 'Never waste a good crisis'. Interesting that art should produce such hate. It's about as sexual as turning that cup on its side."

He demonstrates the sexlessness of the situation with one of the Gagosian teacups.

“So I decide to leave the graffiti there. I’d made three reports to the police and to this day have had no response from them. The councillor managed to get a court hearing within hours. I’ll say it again – it was an inside job.”

The councillor was a right-wing politician called Fabien Bouglé, who, incredibly, took Kapoor to court for displaying anti-Semitic material: the graffiti. Kapoor, finding himself caught in a bizarre bind, refused to remove the offending words. “So they covered it with a black cloth,” he begins, and suddenly cries out with delight, “Like a burkini! I’m going to put that on Instagram!”

French President François Hollande requested a meeting.

“He said, in French – it was very French – that from a pedagogic point of view, he’d understood why I’d want to leave it there.” A second court case loomed. “I thought, Oh dear, oh dear. So I did a Louis Quatorze and covered the graffiti with gold leaf.” Where is *Dirty Corner* now? “It’s in storage, still with graffiti. It’s about to go to a show in Denmark, some remote place.” (He isn’t sure of the name but it seems to be Heart – Herning Museum of Contemporary Art, in Jutland.)

The trouble is, if you call a piece *Dirty Corner* ... “You’re inviting it? I know there’s a sexual tone in what I do. It’s part of this internalised space of the feminine, it turns from biology to culture. It’s as old as human beings. Science has not been able to answer, what is consciousness? What is the beginning? All those questions that are highfalutin but necessary ... One of the things about what I still think of as abstract art is that we should at least seek the possibility to look at some of them.”

The point about the anti-Semitic graffiti (or at least part of the point) is that Kapoor is Jewish through his mother, who was born in Baghdad, Iraq. His father was Hindu, born in what is now Pakistan. Kapoor was born in Bombay (now Mumbai), and the family didn’t keep kosher, rarely observed Passover and almost never went to the synagogue. But after the Six-Day War, in 1967, he says a strong Jewish consciousness began among the community and when he was 16 and his brother was 15, the pair emigrated to Israel.

“That was one of those strange, terrifying changes,” he remarks now. “Complete upheaval, very, very hard. Terrible.” Why did it happen? “Parents.” In those days, a plane ticket would have cost “about five times” what his father, a hydrographer, earned; the state of Israel paid their fare.

“The whole thing was weird. I don’t know how my parents allowed it to happen. It’s OK.”

Well, now it’s OK.

“Kind of OK,” he amends, quietly.

Both boys left Israel within three years, just before their military service. Kapoor hitchhiked to London, where he’s remained ever since. He went to Hornsey College of Art and Chelsea School of Art and Design; he also went into psychoanalysis, a process he continues. You often feel the interior he’s exploring isn’t only the warm female, it’s the terrifying hollow; I didn’t visit the Versailles exhibition but the piece I’d like to have seen is not *Dirty Corner* but *Descension* (2014), a whirlpool of darkness. Kapoor, known for his early use of bright

powdered pigments, is also the man with exclusive rights to Vantablack, the blackest black in existence.

In E. M. Forster's *A Passage to India*, there's a central image of a cave, with walls so smooth they cast a reflection, and a woman, with the telling name of Quested, and an unnameable, overwhelming force emanating from within the Indian landscape. When I lay out this thread to Kapoor (a little diffidently, given that Forster was colonial-era British), he says – very bright-eyed – “Correct. Correct. Correct.” In the book, a strange sound echoes through the pages: does he hear it? “It's in my work. It's in all my work.”

The scale of his work is Indian, too, in a – literally – geographic sense. Because of his father's job, the family lived in Dehradun, in the foothills of the Himalayas, where the Survey of India, which maps the entire country, is based.

“Dehradun is in a valley surrounded by mountains, and those objects were very influential ... The other thing about Dehradun is that it's deeply in touch with ancient religion. My father refused to go into a temple, ever, of any kind. But I was fascinated by this ritual renewal as a part of everyday life. It ties society in knots but it's an acknowledgement that we are cosmically connected.”

Connection, incidentally, is a very Forster word. The tying-in-knots comment, however, is an allusion to India's current prime minister, Narendra Modi, whom Kapoor has accused – in a piece he wrote for *The Guardian* newspaper last November – of presiding over “the frightening and shrill” reality of a Hindu version of the Taliban.

Yet political events in Britain have moved on and Brexit is bringing its own shrill reality to Kapoor's doorstep.

“I'll tell you my little story,” he says, leaning forward. “We live in Belgravia. On the day after Brexit, I walked out of my front door and I passed two men and one said to the other, ‘I bet he doesn't even speak English’. I was so taken aback! I hadn't heard that since the 1970s.”

Kapoor is fascinated by skin as a surface. In 2002, he created a massive 150-metre, red sculpture for the Tate's Turbine Hall titled *Marsyas*, after the Greek mythological figure who was flayed alive. The press release for his Gagosian show begins with a quote about skin: “It is the moment of contact between the thing and the world”. Now, in a moment of contact, he was being dismissed solely because of his skin. Did he feel flayed?

“I have two children, they're 19 and 21. Their mother [from whom he's separated] is German. I'm mixed up but they're British. It's a cliché to say I'm leaving, but it's how I feel.” Where would he go? “Italy!” He laughs. “Somewhere with no governance ... but I'm such a studio-based person.” (His studio, where he employs about 20 people, is in south London.)

It's all the fault of your friend Boris, I say. Boris Johnson – former mayor of London, current British foreign secretary, prime mover of Brexit – was also the person who kickstarted what eventually became the *ArcelorMittal Orbit*. “Boris is hardly my friend,” replies Kapoor swiftly. “I've had some things to do with him. He's shameful. He's disgraceful! Venal!”

The accusation of venality may have more to do with the *Orbit* than with Brexit. After the London Olympics, Johnson wanted the tower to make money and eventually Kapoor asked the Belgian artist Carsten Höller (who'd memorably installed *Test Site*, a slide, in the Tate's Turbine Hall in 2006) to create what is now the world's tallest and longest tunnel slide. I had a look at the website (among the FAQs: "Can I wear fancy dress on the slide?") and it seems to me a great shame that the work most people will associate with Kapoor is his least typical.

KAPOOR WASN'T in chatty mode at the Hong Kong press preview. He came, he was photographed, he left: no questions, no interaction. By then, the first Yinchuan Biennale had opened, in Ningxia, and although Kapoor had told journalists in Seoul that he was thinking of withdrawing in support of Ai Weiwei (who'd been dropped), a Kapoor piece was on display.

Presumably it's genuine, although, in China, this isn't a given. The city of Karamay, in Xinjiang, for instance, has a massive copy of Chicago's *Cloud Gate*, over which Kapoor is taking legal action: "I've started the process," he said, when we met. "It's an expensive process but what choice do I have? I asked the mayor of Chicago [Rahm Emanuel, Barack Obama's former White House chief of staff] for help. He's pathetic. 'You should be flattered,' said Mr Emanuel."

The pieces in the Gagosian exhibition, some carved from alabaster and pink onyx, are the real thing. I loved them. You may not. Art, like food, relates to an individual's experience.

In 2007, by chance, I saw Kapoor's *C-Curve* (2007), a large mirror set among the Assyrian bas-reliefs of the Louvre's Khorsabad Court. I'd been in Baghdad in the autumn of 2003, when visiting the Assyrian gallery in the ravaged National Museum of Iraq – its massive winged bulls and calm giants unmarked – had been an almost overwhelming moment in a terrifying city. I'd wanted to recreate that spiritual shock.

I hadn't known the Kapoor work was at the Louvre, and I certainly didn't know his mother was from Baghdad (a city he's never visited). From a distance, *C-Curve*'s reflections were a distortion of the huge, man-made sculptures. But as you stepped closer and closer, and looked into its interior, civilisation came into focus. I thought it the most perfect piece of contemporary art I'd ever seen.

Anish Kapoor continues at Gagosian Gallery, 7/F, Pedder Building, 12 Pedder Street until November 5.