



INTERVIEW CHARLES SHAFAlEH

**ANISH KAPOOR, ONE OF THE MOST INFLUENTIAL SCULPTORS OF HIS GENERATION, TALKS ABOUT THE MYSTERIES THAT DRIVE CREATION, WHY SOCIETY IS SO SQUEAMISH ABOUT BLOOD AND HIS DISMAY AT BRITAIN'S DEPARTURE FROM THE EUROPEAN UNION.**

The apparent simplicity of Sir Anish Kapoor's work seduces and disarms the viewer. His sculptures' dark voids, concave mirrored surfaces and stretched fabrics often seem easily comprehensible. Encounters with them, however, are akin to sacred rituals. Human scale or gargantuan, they compel us to confront fears, anxieties and desires hidden in the unconscious.

Born in Mumbai in 1954 to an Iraqi Jewish mother and a Punjabi Hindu father, Kapoor, a Turner Prize winner, has resided in London since the early 1970s. His biography, which includes time on an Israeli kibbutz, exemplifies a worldly cosmopolitanism that challenges segregation, whether by nationality, skin color or religion. His work reflects an antipathy for hard borders, too, as it dissolves distinctions between sculpture, painting, music and theater. Considering his vocal opposition as well to the art world's penchant for tokenism, Kapoor's fierce opposition to Brexit is unsurprising.

A constant innovator in his studio – a site for experimentation central to his practice – Kapoor created a virtual-reality piece in 2018 and, at this year's Venice Biennale, plans to reveal his first sculptures made with Vantablack, one of Earth's darkest substances. Despite the unpredictability of medium or material, his exploration of the human condition's most primal elements remains constant.

**CHARLES SHAFAlEH** What consequences are entailed in the declaration, "I am an artist"?

**ANISH KAPOOR** How one takes the métier of the artist seriously is a difficult question. In a way, the artist is irrelevant. I don't say this to be facetious. We are the same as all our

brothers and sisters who occupy this world. And yet, somehow, we allow ourselves a mythological inner mission. The job of the artist is to take that terribly seriously. To say that out of my ordinariness, what can there be – or can there be something – that is other than ordinary?

I have said 100,000 times that I have nothing to say. But I believe in the inward vision or force that acknowledges that out of the process of working alchemically, psychic matter gets mixed up with physical matter. Through that, something truly surprising arises. That's the real job of the artist: to look for the unexpected, the unknown, the irrelevant. This attempting to hold – and occasionally even actually holding – something that's transformative or even transcendent. In a world obsessed with capitalist materialism, what can we do that speaks of something other? It's a true, deep, lifelong mission.

**CS** What should the spectator do or let themselves do?

**AK** In a very corrupt art world, much of what artists do gets turned into a commodity, the ordinary. Even though it's what I live off, I say, "Ugh!" Having said that, if I can acknowledge in myself a poetic part, so can the viewer. True poetics lives in an interim space between the viewer and the artist. It isn't about delivering meaning. It is about space for the viewer. It is about the propensity of the work to ask questions, to propose the possibility of a meaning, which requires something of you. In this curious conversation, something – we hope – happens.

A dark void: why should anyone care? But somewhere in this void space, I recognize that there is a rather terrifying notion about end and beginning. When I close my eyes and look inward, this body that defines me isn't all. There's

# A Terrifying Space of Unknowing ANISH KAPOOR



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some other space, and I recognize somewhere in myself a kind of infinite darkness. It prompts questions about death, birth, after death and before birth.

**CS** This journey into the unconscious requires acknowledging our foreignness to ourselves and our vulnerability, which causes discomfort. **AK** I want to believe that the true creative act is a joyous, celebratory flowering of psychic reality. As my dear friend Homi Bhabha said recently, the truth is that every artwork worthy of the name holds death in its grasp somewhere. Since the work itself has deathly presence, it also constantly renews itself. One has to acknowledge that our mortality lives in a work, that we respond to it very strongly.

**CS** Does this deathly presence manifest the same way in mirror works, such as *C-Curve* (2007), and in void objects like *Adam* (1989)?

**AK** In my public career, I started out making objects made of volumes of pigment on the floor, very ritualistic and laid out like a perfectly brushed carpet. Color does very strange things. My interest in it is between its materiality as pigment and its illusory unreality. It always has this double play. This led me, slowly, to the void object, meaning the emptying out of the object, where color plays the role of filling up the object. It became a concave negative space that then seemed full of darkness. So, emptying out was not emptying out.

I then wondered whether it was possible to do the same thing with a mirrored object. They have a much more quotidian language, but that's not what interests me. The history of sculpture is full of convex objects that were polished. But concavity has only been a reality since around the 16th century, in science. Concave space has the weirdest phenomenological reality. Dark or mirrored, it has a focus. It focuses sound, but it also focuses the eye. It's almost like a mystical point in space, where

light transfers an object at point X: beyond this point, you're upside down, and when you cross it, suddenly, you become the right way up. What's happening, in effect, is vertigo. There's a point where you fall into it. That's the connection to the void objects.

**CS** Do you, as the artist, "fall into" your own works, as it were? Do they surprise you?

**AK** In 2008, I was invited to do a show at MAK Vienna. I'm a great admirer of the Viennese Actionists, so in a silly, naughty-boy way, I thought, "I'm going to do what they didn't do: I'm going to put a cannon in a space and shoot some wax into the corner, just for the hell of it!" That's what artists do – weird things.

Once I'd made *Shooting into the Corner* (2008–09), I suddenly thought: "Oh my god, this is Goya's *The Third of May, 1808*. This is Jackson Pollock throwing paint. This is Marcel Duchamp's male and female." Suddenly the corner, which I'd always known had a potent propensity to meaning, became a feminine object being aggressed in the most horrible, violent way. All sorts of things were going on, and I didn't know that would happen.

**CS** Like Hermann Nitsch and other Actionists, you have an interest in blood, but you don't use it as material. Does the symbolic have the same potency as the real thing?

**AK** In *Totem and Taboo*, Freud talks about the original sacrifice: the father is sacrificed, literally, so that he might rise to so-called heaven and be beyond death. He sits there, undying, while the rest of us die. It says that we hold – and continue to hold – sacrificial victims in our cultural space.

Chris Knight, a controversial anthropologist, writes that culture originates with women and that menstruation in groups of women living together is synchronized. During this period, women covered their bodies in earth blood, which is red ochre, in order to bring the group



Svayambhu, 2007.

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**“Descent into Limbo’ is a hole in the ground, but when you enter the room in which it’s situated, it appears like a black carpet on the floor. It is a space full of darkness.”**

together almost in a Marxist fashion, to have solidarity and to deny sexual activity to men. Men have no blood rite: there's hunting and ritual circumcision, a forced blood rite.

According to me, women's blood origin means that all culture was horizontal – blood flows into the ground, it sits on the ground, and it goes back into the ground. The gods that arise from it are horizontal, and they die – because they bleed. Later, culture turns the horizontal into the vertical. It puts the gods into the sky; they're all blue; they sit there and judge us – and they never die. What a horror! Christ has to imitate, if you like, the blood flowing by getting a little wound in his side.

We have huge prohibitions against blood – not just galleries, but right across our culture. To me, there are two real ritual materials: blood and earth. They are very deeply connected to each other. That's what this blood matter really might be.

All art is fiction. Fictional reality is deeper than actual reality and becomes much more dangerous. Is it necessary to take blood into a gallery? Why not? But can blood substitutes do just as much? Absolutely. We, however, have a huge taboo about the stuff that all of us are filled with.

**CS** *Descent into Limbo* (1992) illustrates the dangers of the fictional and the actual. In 2018, a man injured himself when he jumped into its eight-foot-deep hole. But was that less traumatic than the psychic terror he may have experienced by engaging the work without literally falling?

**AK** I would agree. Kant proposes that the sublime is full of danger, that fear lives alongside aesthetic pleasure. *Descent into Limbo* is a hole in the ground, but when you enter the room in which it's situated, it appears like a black carpet on the floor. It is a space full of darkness. I think this guy, despite warnings, went in there and



*Descent into Limbo*, 1992.



decided that he did not believe. I'm interested in the mixture: the confusion between the illusory and the real and which one is which, in the fact of confusion.

**CS** To paraphrase John Cage, there is no such thing as a void. Your void objects are distinct, which implies many voids exist and that they're not "empty."

**AK** John came to the first show of void works I did in America. We had a very interesting discussion over lunch about void space – the idea that it's always illusory, fully real and yet ungraspable.

Emptiness is not emptiness. There are two or three ways to look at it. One is that, in the right circumstances, what we do is fill in because of our inability to look without commitment. To just look. We always look with something – desire, fear, disbelief – and fill up the space.

It is also pregnant with possibility, with the idea of emergence. Science is good, but it hasn't done terribly well with consciousness. What is this strange amalgam of bits that give me a sense of "I"? When we are put in a situation where, to use Buddhistic terms, we contemplate a space of no-I, where there's nothing, what happens to us? To the sense of self? What we do, of course, is fill it.

**CS** We've discussed your work in terms of space, but in them you also incorporate time. By making the viewer move in the gallery, you stage an event. What about time entices you?

**AK** In my favorite painting, Andrea Mantegna's *Descent into Limbo* (1492), is what appears to be the mouth of a cave. Christ is standing in front of it with a staff in his hand and one foot forward. He's held there, it seems, in stasis. In action about to happen. It's a very interesting painting about time. Because he's there, as if ready – but nothing happens. It's a kind of "wait" moment. It could be symphonic, as if it's a note pulled and elongated.

**CS** That evokes *Marsyas* (2003), which could be read as an inaudible scream or note. The "un-done" *Dirty Corner* (2011-15) at Versailles, you said, acknowledges a time that ends and thus disrupts the circular time suggested by the mathematically precise gardens.

**AK** Other than *Shooting into the Corner*, all my works are attenuated in their

timespans. *Svayambhu* (2007) is a work that consists of a great big block of wax that slowly squeezes through the architecture of the museum space; its movement is so slow it's hardly perceptible. It's as if descent or even violence in timeless slow motion has something mythic, which removes it from real life. It isn't moving in real time. It's moving in some other time. I'm deeply interested in that because it adds some element of the unreal.

Einstein said that time and space are linked to each other in mysterious ways, and whatever one brings to it remains mysterious. And yet it ticks by, and mortality is ever present. That's the weirdest thing about it. One can hardly speak of time without speaking of death. It is one of those recurring conditions. Moments of absolutism, which hold time in suspension, are rare.

We live in a world of objects. Of those objects, 99.999 percent of them are completely knowable. We know them in every way, and we keep knowing them. That's partly why those pictures of Mars are so incredible. Even in art, there are few moments of real mystery. In the Modernist idiom, Duchamp's *The Large Glass* (1915-23) is one. To spend a life looking for what is truly not understandable seems to be a life well spent.

**CS** A stark contrast to the mysterious is Brexit. **AK** Britain has reluctantly come to a recognition that it is irrelevant as a nation on the world stage. In the 40 years during which I've lived in Britain, there have been huge steps in building what might be called a multicultural society. Brexit is a neocolonialist fantasy that makes the claim that Britain can do it on its own. It can't. Political fantasy has it that the great days of the British colonial presence are still to be had. Bullshit! Can you believe that there's no mention of colonialism in British schools?

Brexit is a disaster from a business point of view and from a brotherhood or sisterhood point of view. From every perspective. Of course, the European Union is a bureaucratic nightmare – so, deal with it! Grow up! The E.U. is a hugely successful peace project, which has now been abandoned by Britain under the umbrella of fascist idiots.

Since World War II, we have lived in a period of relative optimism: that we can make things

better, that Enlightenment matters. We are most certainly in a post-Enlightenment period, all over the world. Look at our seeming willingness to give up hard-won individual freedoms. For example, artists in India don't dare make works criticizing the government because they know they'll be arrested. Phooey to Indian democracy. It's turning into a Hindu nation. The British, in 200 years in India, didn't manage to turn it into a singularity. [Indian Prime Minister] Modi is doing this in 10 years. It's horrible.

**CS** It's a crisis, like Covid-19. Many artists consider it necessary to respond directly to such moments, but your work never speaks in such specific terms. "Content," you've said, "emerges in spite of whatever issue is being discussed."

**AK** With the pandemic, we have entered a very terrifying space of unknowing. That feels new, as if it's a kind of revelation. In reality, it has probably been there all the time. We face it as individuals, but we haven't had to face it as a group. Facing it is really terrifying.

I'm not for being a representative of quotidian questions. Fast art that responds to the pandemic? Boring, and generally not very good. If we take the most horrific things, like the Holocaust, there's so little art that responds or responded to. Isn't that a terrifying reality – that when there's urgency, psychically, it dumbfounds us? There are the rare abilities to do this. Picasso with *Guernica* (1937), a symbolic work that doesn't describe much. The image of the horse with its tongue out and mouth open. The sense of helpless inability that still works and gets us to this day. That it's linked to a particular event is tangential.

I have no message for my colleagues. Go for it! But facing the fact that it's confounding is important.

**CS** You prefer a dissolution of the ego.

**AK** It comes back to where we started, to whether I have something to say, whether there is deeply meaningful commentary to be made or whether art has another function that sits alongside what I have to say. Of course, I can never get myself out of the way. But ... clear off, Anish! Get out of here! And let the work do what it has to do. 🍷



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*Shooting into the Corner*, 2008-09.

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