

# CEREAL

In this volume, we look to the restorative power of art and nature. We meet with artists Torkwase Dyson, Edmund de Waal and Anish Kapoor, visit Hiroshi Sugimoto's Enoura Observatory in Japan, and traverse the expanses of Western Australia, the Atacama Desert, and Patagonia.

VOL.20 A/W 2020 £12





two

2

OBJECTS OF  
THE VOID

*Anish Kapoor's  
Illusory Practice*

words

Ollie Horne

photos

Iringó Demeter



Stepping through the warehouse doors of Anish Kapoor’s studio in Camberwell, London, I am greeted by what could be the scene of a massacre. Huge wooden trays with spouts protruding from their sides support chaotic compositions of globby red wax. One work is structured like a staircase, splattered with blobs of thick, dark red blood. Another, a purple-red mess in the centre of a cloth, resembling some placenta or other mysterious human organ. Scribbles in pencil scratch along the white walls.

“I see my work as a ritual process,” says Kapoor, smiling behind black-framed glasses, and dressed in a black puffer jacket, black jeans, and bright red trainers. “I am working with blood and body, horizontally — like Jackson Pollock, pouring himself out onto the canvas with his stick and pot of paint. But unlike Pollock’s paintings, these works will remain horizontal, as ritual trays.” He speaks deliberately and thoughtfully. “Anthropologists say all culture stems from blood. I am very interested in this idea of the feminine, of childbirth, menstruation; where the body begins and where it ends, of origins — I am Indian, so I’m concerned with these things.” He booms with laughter.

Born in Mumbai to an Iraqi-Jewish mother and Punjabi-Hindu father, Kapoor attended the Doon School in Uttarakhand, an ivy-clad, Eton-style boarding school for boys. As a young man, he travelled to Israel, where he worked on a kibbutz with his brother. From there, he hitchhiked his way to the UK to enrol at the Hornsey College of Art in 1973, and has lived and worked in the country ever since. Since these beginnings, Kapoor has represented Britain in the Venice Biennale in 1990, completed high-profile public sculptural commissions such as *Cloud Gate* (2006) in Chicago and *ArcelorMittal Orbit* (2012) in London’s Olympic Park, and presented shows in Tate Modern’s Turbine Hall, the Grand Palais in Paris, and London’s Royal Academy — the first living artist to hold a solo exhibition there. He was awarded the Turner Prize in 1991, a knighthood in 2013, and is regularly reported to be among the 1000 wealthiest people in the UK. He is also the begrudging target of a rather tenacious Instagram trolling campaign, and tomorrow is his 66<sup>th</sup> birthday. Anish Kapoor’s career is, more or less, as big as the art world gets.

We walk through the studio, passing masked assistants in white overalls polishing a large stone sculpture, and enter another unit where Kapoor’s circular, concave mirror works are displayed. These have been a major part of his practice since the 1990s; versions of *Sky Mirror* have been installed across the globe, including as part of Kapoor’s exhibition at Houghton Hall in Norfolk, where the five-metre-diameter disk, positioned on the neat lawns of the stately home, appears to conjure an otherworldly portal opening directly to the clouds above.

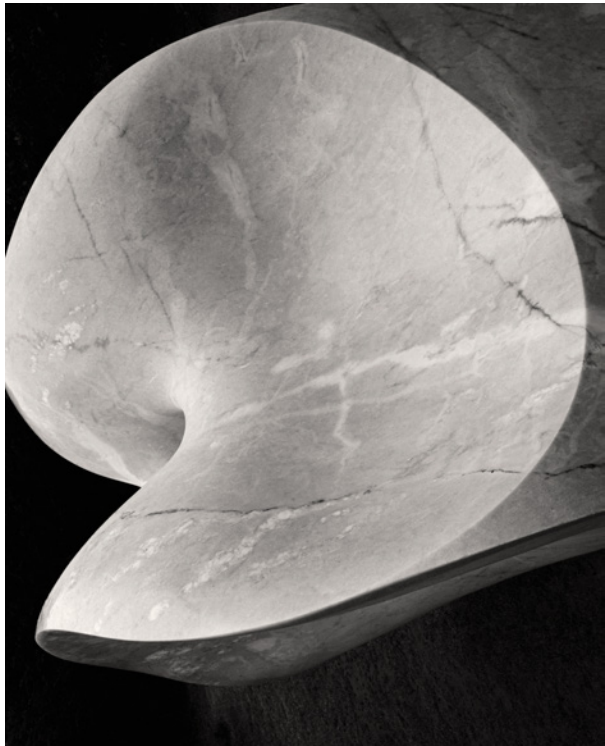
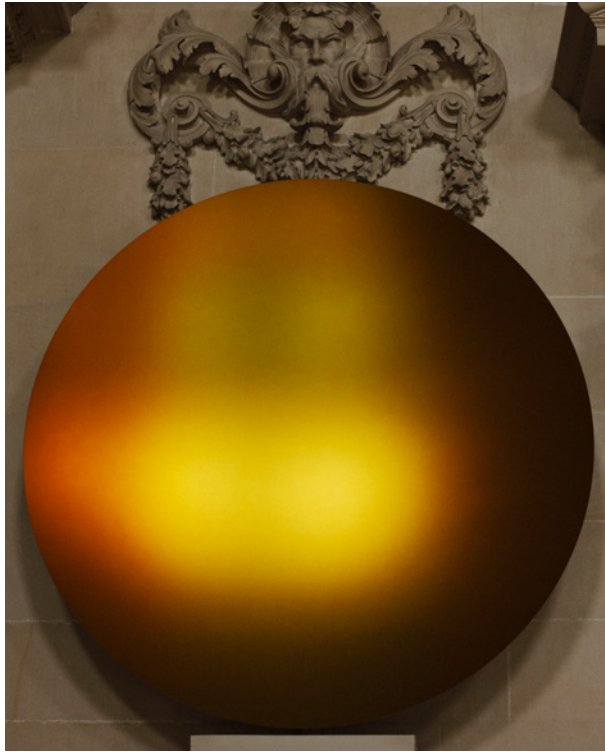
The mirror works in Kapoor’s studio are tinted green, yellow and purple. Some are entirely reflective, while others are semi-polished with a layer of pigment left on their surface, allowing for almost painterly gestures to mingle with the partial reflections within. Standing in front of one produces an uncanny apparition that seems to exist deep within the shadowy world of the mirror. Their concavity does bizarre things too, flipping the room upside down, and steadily magnifying the image as the viewer approaches. I instinctively flinch as I pass the first work, thinking a large object is hurtling towards me. The others bob along the wall violently as I walk by. It is delightfully disorientating.

“Traditionally, painting is of course concerned with an image on a wall, and the illusion of a deep space that exists behind that image,” says Kapoor. “Concave mirrors create a space that is somewhere in front of them — they leap out at you. By turning the mirror into a painting, I am trying to fuse the two. It creates a space both forwards and backwards; it is a mirror, and a painting. And so it plays an interactive game with the viewer, changing form and colour as their reflection inhabits the work.” Kapoor turns towards the green mirror behind him. As he speaks, his voice is suddenly amplified, as if he is talking directly into my ear. “I am interested in the art historical implications of this too,” he continues. “One of the great challenges of classical portraiture was getting the eyes to follow the viewer around the room. All Medieval and Renaissance paintings were fundamentally concerned with god. The question of the eyes was really, ‘Is god omnipresent and omniscient in the painting?’ I think these mirror paintings share some of that subject matter: they are absolutely to do with your body and its position, and they really do follow you around the room. I propose they are a radical new form of painting.”

Dotted around a loft studio upstairs are seemingly unprepossessing paintings of black 2D shapes, each one a single square, circle or diamond on a white background, encased in a glass box. “What you see here is no less than the blackest material in the universe,” says Kapoor. “It is a nano-substance developed for the defence industry, a cloaking material for hiding satellites and stealth jets from all forms of detection. A few years ago, I heard that Surrey NanoSystems had developed this material called Vantablack, so I called them to ask if they would be interested in working







together. When we began our collaboration, we could only make objects a few inches in diameter. Over the last five years, we have developed a way to create things that are a metre or so in size — so, we shall see.” I picture the monumental scale of some of the works Kapoor has created over his career — *Leviathan* (2011), *Marsyas* (2002), *Dirty Corner* (2015) — and wonder at the potential of this material.

“It is a highly technical substance to work with — it is not a paint you can simply squeeze from a tube,” says Kapoor. “The material is sprayed onto the object and placed in a reactor. I don’t know the specifics — it is highly classified — but the long nanoparticles that make up the substance stand up, like a kind of velvet. To give you a sense of scale, if each particle were a metre wide, they would be 300 m tall. So almost all of the light that reaches the material gets trapped in these nanoparticles and cannot escape. That’s how it’s able to absorb 99.8% of the light that touches it.”

I approach the first Vantablack work, a black 2D circle in the centre of a white background, displayed at eye level. As I walk around its glass case, it transforms into a three-dimensional shape: something like the top of a trilby hat jumps out of the white border into empty space. I fix my eyes on the tip of the 3D form, walk back round to the front of the work, and watch as it completely vanishes into a black void, which seems both entirely flat and infinitely deep. I can’t help uttering, ‘What the fuck?’ under my breath. It is utterly mind-boggling.

“At one level, one might almost say it is a trick,” laughs Kapoor. “In a way, it is. But who said art was about anything other than unreality? And maybe it is in unreality that deep reality lives. I am really invested in that process of exploring what is real and unreal, what is appearance and what is illusion. Science is very good at describing a lot of things — we live in a world where almost everything is nameable — but only in art can something remain profoundly mysterious and unknowable.”

I continue my ritual of disbelief, circling the Vantablack works. “The art of the Renaissance was principally concerned with using paint to allow objects to emerge,” says Kapoor. “In that respect, these works are the opposite; they remove the object. They also refer to Malevich, the great early modernist who created *Black Square*. He conceived of the painting as a suprematist, four-dimensional object: the three dimensions we know, and a fourth that is far more mysterious. I think that is the idea I am playing with here: these objects have other dimensionalities to them.” He gestures to another black circle. “With this work, you cannot walk around its side. It is closed. You cannot see its form no matter where you stand. Now, it is either a fiction — there

is no object here — or, there is an infinite number of possible objects it could be. Can we play these games? Of course we can — we must!”

I think of Kapoor’s 1998 sculpture *At The Edge of the World*, permanently installed at Axel Vervoordt’s Kanaal outside Antwerp — an enormous dome suspended in the air and lined with intense red pigment that, when viewed from inside the centre of the dome, appears to have no beginning or end. In his memoir, *Stories and Reflections* (2017), Vervoordt describes the experience of the work as ‘a glimpse of the infinite’, and writes, ‘[Kapoor] has the ability to give body to the void — to use material to show us what immateriality is ... to contemplate infinity by showing us a vision full of emptiness.’ It is remarkably applicable to the Vantablack works, which, at the time of writing, are yet to be shown to the public.

I sit down with Kapoor in the office portion of the studio. My mind feels as if it has been stretched in every direction all at once before snapping back together again. I have the happy thought I will never truly fathom what I have seen in that room with the Vantablack works. “It’s Alice tumbling down the rabbit hole. I keep returning to that in my practice — the void objects, the mirror works — how these things confound our understanding of space,” says Kapoor. “All my work emerges from experimenting. I only ever partially know what I’m doing. I come into the studio to do, and in the doing, things arise. I’ve had two or three moments in my entire working process where something completely unexpected has jumped out at me and made me think, ‘What the hell? Where has that come from?’ I began with making three-dimensional objects from pure pigment, which over the years started to turn in on themselves. Then one day, I decided to make a bowl. I painted it a very dark blue and placed it on the wall. I didn’t know how it happened, but it suddenly became void, this dark object that was also a non-object.

“I suppose that’s what being an artist is all about: daring to take a leap into the unknown, and somehow doing it with conviction,” he says. “As artists, I hope we have the liberty to say, ‘I haven’t got a fucking clue what I’m doing, but I’m going to spend my whole day doing it anyway.’ It is a *huge* liberty — and one you must claim for yourself. No one is going to give it to you. I believe in that very deeply. It is the only way of discovering anything at all, however minor.” •



