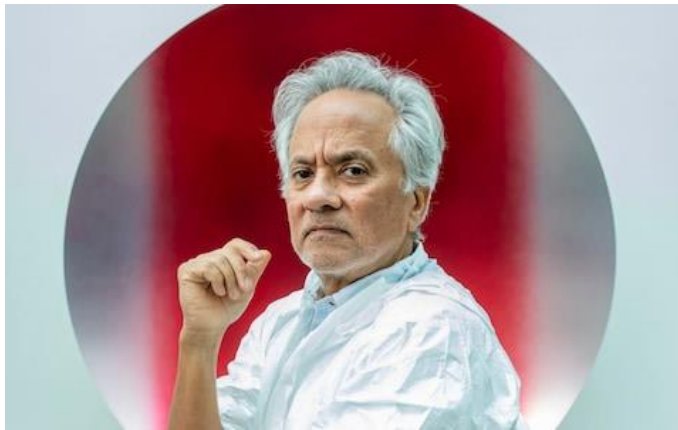


Anish Kapoor interview: 'How can a bit of paint on a canvas be worth £50 million?'

May 23, 2020 | By Chris Harvey

Page 1 of 8

The British painter and sculptor talks about making art from 'the universe's blackest material' – and saying no to Boris Johnson



Anish Kapoor in his Camberwell studio | CREDIT: Guardian/eyevine

At eight o'clock one Sunday morning in 2015, Anish Kapoor received a telephone call from Boris Johnson. Kapoor is the celebrated British-Indian artist behind the nation's tallest sculpture, the ArcelorMittal Orbit in the Olympic Park; Johnson was then the Mayor of London. "I don't know how he had my number, but he had," Kapoor tells me before slipping into an amusing impression of the Prime Minister: " 'Anish. I want to put a slide on Orbit. You should design it.' " He groans as he remembers the conversation. "Oh dear, Boris, are you joking? I'm not going to design a bloody slide."

For an artist whose work is sometimes accused of being too big, too attention-grabbing, too populist, it was an encounter with a character even-more-so. In the end, though, Johnson's "bad idea" worked out. Kapoor talked to Carsten Höller, the artist who turned the Turbine Hall of Tate Modern into a tubular theme park in 2006, and Höller wrapped a slide around the Orbit, giving the work an unexpected twist of his own, and making it the visitor attraction that Johnson desired. "I think it's an elegant way of dealing with it," says Kapoor, although something in his tone suggests that the 376ft tower may no longer be among the most beloved of his own artworks.

He believes that is part of being an artist. "Making the work is half the problem. The other half is looking at it. Interrogating it. And being willing to say, it's rubbish," he tells me. Kapoor is not a man afraid to question himself. His booming officer-class laugh bespeaks the assurance instilled by an education at the Doon School – the "Eton of India" – but ask him about a topic that he has clearly wrestled with before, and his fingers reach up to massage a troubled forehead: "Difficult, difficult, difficult, difficult," he'll sigh. He does it when I question him on the ethical dimension of art today – should artists show work in Saudi Arabia, for instance? But more of that later.

Awarded the 1991 Turner Prize, Kapoor's work has a global reach. His shining Cloud Gate sculpture in Chicago, for instance – "The Bean" as it is affectionately known – is as certain to be appreciated by visitors to the city as the Eiffel Tower in Paris, or the Statue of Liberty in New York. But to define him by monumental public sculptures alone would be to underestimate his range, and his willingness to experiment.

We're in his enormous six-room studio, a former factory in south London, where Kapoor works with 11 studio assistants, most artists themselves. It's early March, two weeks before Britain will go into lockdown, and one day before Kapoor's 66th birthday. Around the room are giant wooden trays, into which thick rivers of paint have been poured. One, containing an upright rectangular box, suggests a coffin spewing blood and viscera. "We contain in ourselves all this liquid stuff, which is hidden from us," Kapoor says. "I am interested in pointing to end, death, and its relation, weirdly, to the beginning."

Does he think about his own mortality? "I do," he says. "Science is good at lots of things. But it's not that good at questions around consciousness. It has singularly failed to answer, 'Where was I before I was born? And where do I go when I die?' Art can at least speculate on death – what is it? What happens to me when I die? And how do end and beginning reach into each other? That may be my Indian psyche speaking," he adds.



The ArcelorMittal Orbit is one of London's most distinctive landmarks | CREDIT: Alamy

The beginning is very present for him right now. Kapoor recently became a father for the third time. He has two older children, Ishan and Alba (with his first wife, Susanne Spicale) and now, with his second wife, Sophie Walker, an 18-month-old daughter, Habiba, named after his Iraqi Jewish mother. "It is a gift," he says, "exhausting – my wife does most of the work, bless her – but it's a joy." (At 34, Walker is 32 years his junior.) He has tried to continue working as normal despite the inevitable disruption. "I had a good night's sleep last night, but the night before was a disaster."

Kapoor has been working on other new wonders. The large upstairs room contains a set of works that up to now he has kept secret. As you step into the room, the eye at once picks up something that feels futuristic and almost frightening. It's as if Darth Vader had invited you into his private gallery. These are the works that Kapoor has created from Vantablack – "the blackest material in the universe," as Kapoor describes it; a nano-substance invented for the defence industry which he read about several years ago and decided he wanted to use in his art.

Vantablack absorbs 99.8 per cent of all light, is invisible to radar, and had been developed to conceal objects such as satellites in space. Its maker initially repelled Kapoor's approach, but eventually agreed to work with him, although he still needed permission from the Ministry of Defence.

"It's not a paint that comes out of a tube," he explains. "It's sprayed on to a surface and put into a reactor at a very high temperature, which makes the particles stand up, like a kind of velvet." What results is an impossibly tall forest of tiny particles from which light cannot escape. "The material is very fragile, highly toxic," Kapoor says. Coating larger objects was a technical challenge, but those in the room are about twice the size of a human head, and Kapoor hopes to go bigger still.

What is frightening about them? You are staring into a bounded formless dark. Many of them are inspired by Russian artist Kazimir Malevich's seminal painting *Black Square* (1915). From the front, these Vantablacks appear as depthless squares. Viewed from the side, however, they reveal sculptural forms that stand up to 18in proud. The effect is mind-boggling. They will surely be a sensation when they are exhibited, although it's uncertain when exactly that will be, given that Kapoor was intending to take them to the Venice Biennale, which has just been pushed back to 2022.



Kapoor is now working with Vantablack, which absorbs up to 99.97 per cent of visible light | CREDIT: Anish Kapoor

“Even in art there are very, very few truly mysterious things,” he says later. “Almost everything we see is knowable and nameable.” He thinks by contrast the Mona Lisa is mysterious. “It’s some fiction about her smile... something unnameable. And yet there’s always a queue 10 deep... I’ve stood in the queue. It’s fabulous. How many objects are there like that?” He mentions Marcel Duchamp’s urinal – Fountain (1917) – as another. He sees it as part of the way that artists create “mythologies, not objects”.

“You see a Picasso and you know, for argument’s sake, that it’s worth £50 million. Part of what you’re looking at is £50 million, and that’s mythological... How can a bit of paint on a canvas be manipulated in such a way as to turn into this gold thing worth £50 million. And yet it is. It’s completely useless. And yet it is.”

Art and money is a vexed issue, though, for Kapoor: “I think part of what’s happened in the art world in the last 20 years is that artists, me included, play the game. We’re part of this big, active, \$65 billion market of which contemporary art does more than half. Are we makers of luxury goods? Is that what it is? Does Louis Vuitton do it better? I’m old enough to know that in the 1960s and 1970s art was radical. That’s hard now, if everything’s for sale.

“Of course, I play the game,” he adds. “And my work’s not cheap at all. At all.” Kapoor’s pieces have long been in the million-plus bracket: in 2008, one of his untitled alabaster sculptures from 1999 sold for \$2.84 million (£2.3m).

What did he think of Italian artist Maurizio Cattelan’s banana taped to the wall, which sold for \$120,000 at Art Basel Miami last year? “I think he’s a wonderful, naughty boy,” laughs Kapoor. “But he’s a much more serious artist than that work displays.”



The Cloud Gate (2004), a public sculpture by Kapoor in Chicago | CREDIT: Getty

Sponsorship, too, increasingly causes concern in the art world, especially from the major oil companies. "Big business uses artists for its own ends," says Kapoor. How does he feel about the activist-shaming of institutions such as the British Museum? "Good on 'em. I think it's great," he says. "I think it's absolutely essential that we remain hyper-aware of the way that objects are used to further political motivations."

He brings up India. "Here we have an extreme, I'd say fascist, Right-wing government under [Narendra] Modi. And culture, science and everything else is used to further the Hindu agenda, to pretend that 600 years of Muslim rule in India never happened, that Muslims are not Indian."

In October last year, Kapoor had his first solo exhibition in China. This was the "difficult, difficult" question mentioned earlier. Is it OK to show in China, where there is widespread state control of art and culture? He took the view that there was a conversation to be had with artists working in China, but still he interrogates himself.

"Did we do the show hoping to make sales in China? Vaguely. Did it realise anything? Not much at all. Does it matter? Not at all." Part of the show was held in Beijing's Central Academy of Fine Arts, part in the Imperial Ancestral Temple, by the walls of the Forbidden City. "It's a hundred yards away from Tiananmen Square [where hundreds were killed when student protests were brutally suppressed in 1989]... highly sensitive. Everything was vetted very carefully. Even though I don't make obviously political work, they were very clear that anything too bloody wasn't allowed.

"I did it in the end, but had to negotiate with them. I thought to myself at one time, shall I pull out of this show? I refuse to be vetted... but the invitation itself came from Chinese artists. So, one has to, you know, jolly oneself along into a process that I know is not totally free."



Kapoor at the reopening of the Pitzhanger Manor and Gallery last year | CREDIT: Julian Simmonds

Kapoor has a strong political voice that he tries to keep out of his work "because I think it makes less good art". He's withering when I ask him about the return of anti-Semitism in the UK. "I actually don't believe in this story of the return of anti-Semitism," he says. "Not to say that anti-Semitism doesn't exist. But I think you can be anti-Zionist and not anti-Semitic. It's as if Jewish people have become so highly over-sensitive about the smallest kind of criticism of Israel. Look, Israeli politics are disgusting. And one can have a progressive view on this subject. I'm not Zionist, I don't believe in it. And yet I'm not anti-Semitic. I'm Jewish, after all."

I want to know how he thinks Britain has changed since the 1970s. When he first arrived, to study at Hornsey College of Art, the country was in "deep, deep crisis", he says, recalling the three-day week. It was also "very much divided into white and non-white society. And, frankly, it was pretty damn racist. But in the subsequent 20, 30 years, the atmosphere changed. Britain became exemplary in its integration of people from other places... more secure in its fully postcolonial reality. And then we've seen a terrible, sad return to a fantasy colonial Britain."

He's talking about Brexit. "Growing up in just post-independence India, I was very aware of this image that we carry of the good British, the sense that in the end, whatever injustice there might be, goodness prevailed. And I see that eroded in ways that truly terrify me. It really makes me sad to see a return to them and us, to the foreigner, the outsider."