

## Surprise in store as Anish Kapoor's 'reflective' UK exhibition opens

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Anish Kapoor's shows tend to the spectacular. The Indian-born British sculptor, a leading light in international contemporary art, has made waves across the world, and clearly enjoys making them.

Sometimes it's about sheer size. Among dozens of super-sized works, the giant blood-red swoop of "Marsyas" that filled Tate's Turbine Hall in 2002-03, or the mighty stainless-steel "Cloud Gate" (aka The Bean) in Chicago's AT&T Plaza, a construction of staggering engineering complexity and expense. Or London Olympic Park's 114.5-metre-high "Orbit", an awkward twisting tower evoking at once a jaunty funfair and a hellish labyrinth. His vision is nothing if not expansive.

Sometimes it's about drama and the shock factor. At the Royal Academy in 2009, his "Shooting into the Corner" involved great blob-bullets of red wax noisily fired from a phallic cannon against the pristine walls — there was something disturbingly transgressive about the chaotic, bloody daubing of those ordered historic halls.

At Versailles in 2015, he courted controversy with "Dirty Corner", a giant tubular rusted-steel piece that opened into a suggestively cavernous void — as the artist put it at the time, "very sexual, open, dark". It was quickly dubbed "Marie-Antoinette's vagina", though the term more commonly used was less decorous.



Kapoor's circular painted mirrors replace ancient Roman busts in the alcoves of the Stone Hall © Pete Huggins

In Versailles, Kapoor explicitly set his work in face-off contrast to the geometric formality of Le Nôtre's famous gardens, as if to reassert nature's mess and entropy against the over-controlled world of Louis XIV's *mise en scène*. The sculptor placed his image of rampant female sexuality in proud political challenge to the Sun King, for whom the whole palace stood as both artful frame and act of worship.

So what would Kapoor do, five years on, at Houghton Hall? A few miles from Sandringham in rural Norfolk and designed in the 1720s for Sir Robert Walpole, Britain's first prime minister, it is another elaborate palatial house and unabashed hymn to power. Replete with classical sculpture, gilding and grandeur, it also has gardens laid out on formal grids of lawns, vistas and alleyways. Would Kapoor make a further attempt at naughty-boy chaos, blowing a raspberry at the social structures that such houses symbolised?



'Grace' (2004) and 'Imminence' (2000) on display in the gardens © Pete Huggins

A surprise is in store. Kapoor's Houghton Hall exhibition, which opened this week, is restrained, well-mannered and low-key. Thoughtful, respectful of its surroundings, it comprises 20 and more sculptures, mostly made in earthily, solidly natural materials — limestone, granite, marble, onyx. They are sited in the house and gardens by curator Mario Codognato in ways that invite a quiet and contemplative mood, at the same time as they reflect the beauty and opulence spread before us in Palladian splendour.

"Reflect" is literally the word, in the case of Kapoor's circular painted mirrors installed (in place of some ancient Roman busts) around the alcoves of the Stone Hall. A spectacular double-cube space designed by William Kent, this was once the entrance hall of the house — before, as story has it, Walpole's grandson sold off a glorious front staircase in stone to settle gambling debts.



'Spanish and Pagan Gold to Magenta' (2018) in the Stone Hall © Pete Huggins

Arguably, Kapoor's mirrors, polished to impossible perfection, have been his best-known work for many years now. Made over and over in differing sizes and shapes, they have come in anything from bubblegum, peachy, Pop-arty tones to intensest yellow or fathomless deep blues. In the Stone Hall, the sculptor takes his cue from his surroundings, making the discs in rich, layered-up, jewel-like colours — ruby, garnet, gold, sapphire with deep glints of emerald — so that the multiple, bounced-back reflections of the formal space around are dark and lush.

The sole wrong note in this otherwise fabulously well-thought-out room is a piece in the middle of the floor. An indeterminate blob of curvy, shiny marble entitled "Mollis" (from the Latin, I imagine, for soft or delicate), it evokes another vagina, or possibly lips and the back of a throat, or even a giant gum shield.



'Untitled' (2018-20), 'Untitled' (1997) and 'Rectangle Within a Rectangle' (2018) at Houghton Hall — 'an elaborate palatial house and unabashed hymn to power' © Pete Huggins

One of the pleasures of Houghton Hall's contemporary art exhibitions — over the past few years, they have staged Richard Long, Damien Hirst, Henry Moore and, stunningly, James Turrell — is that we have to search out the pieces. Long strolls through different avenues of clipped beech, formal but pleasingly mazelike, bring a distant perspective of works placed at angles against the Norfolk fields beyond the gardens, with marble or stone abstractions echoing the swollen, sensual rounds and voids that have been Kapoor's obsession since his earliest years.

More smooth, ambiguously erotic curves and hollows are featured in works — several of them made between 2000 and 2003, clearly a gentler moment for this sculptor — positioned in courtyards and other parts of the garden. Facing the West Front of the house are heftier, manlier sculptures that play with blocks and rectangles, made in the past couple of years.



'Untitled' (2018) © Pete Huggins

And finally, the unrivalled star of this show, placed in the middle of the Versailles-scale avenue, is a five-metre circular "Sky Mirror". For the past 20 years, Kapoor has made a number of these plain mirror discs, which scoop up the sky and bring it down to us, bafflingly reversed and reflected in vivid glory — they have been shown in parks, cities, museums, from St Petersburg to the Netherlands. A massive 11-metre version faced down Fifth Avenue in 2006; another has its permanent home with the Dallas Cowboys.

But I have seldom seen its magic more powerful than here, with the wide Norfolk sky, brilliant blue with scurrying fluffy cloud forms, playing across its surface. The reflections conjure up an almost filmic parade of optical illusions: one moment it appears to be a void (again), the next a surreally floating sphere, the next it's as if someone has ripped a piece off an Old Master canvas and suspended it, bizarrely, in the long garden vista.

It's a fascination; you could watch it for hours. And, of course, it provides the spectacular note in this satisfying, carefully unspectacular show.