

# Avoiding niceties at Versailles

PARIS

Show by Anish Kapoor is intended as a 'mess' as well as a confrontation

BY CLAUDIA BARBIERI

For the past six months, Anish Kapoor has been grappling with the challenge of putting on this year's solo summer show at the Palace of Versailles. The sculptor and installation artist is walking in the footsteps of some sacred monsters of contemporary art, starting with Jeff Koons in 2008, and including Takashi Murakami in 2010 and Joana Vasconcelos in 2012.

In recent interviews here, Mr. Kapoor, 61, cheerfully acknowledged making a mess of the royal domain.

Or two messes: one in the Versailles Palace garden; the other in the Salle du Jeu de Paume museum, the former indoor Royal Tennis court a few hundred yards from the chateau proper.

"My work has two sides," Mr. Kapoor said. "One is things that are very carefully made — very precise, pure — and one is much more scatological, abject, problematic; and it's that side of the work that's coming to Versailles."

Chosen in December by the domain's president, Catherine Pégard, Mr. Kapoor is a sacred monster himself. Born in Bombay and based in London, he was the winner of the best young artist's prize at the 1990 Venice Biennale and the Turner Prize in 1991, and he is probably best known internationally as the creator of "Leviathan," a monumental sculpture at the Grand Palais in Paris in 2011 and then the ArcelorMittal Orbit, an observation tower built in London for the 2012 summer Olympic Games.

His exhibition at Versailles, which officially opens on Tuesday and runs until Nov. 1, consists of six large sculptural installations, including one in the Jeu de Paume and five others placed throughout the grounds.

In choosing Mr. Kapoor, "I could see that he understood the dimensions of this place," Ms. Pégard said. "The biggest difficulty of working in Versailles is Versailles itself. Anish Kapoor's work enters a sort of dialogue and confrontation with this place and its history?"

That history marks a milestone this year: 300 years since the death of Louis XIV, who conjured the baroque elegance of Versailles out of the local marshes. The place and time invited a reflection on power and its manifestation.

His installation at the Jeu de Paume is an example of this interplay. The museum houses a large painting and statues commemorating the "Serment du Jeu de Paume," a pledge to democracy sworn there by the National Assembly in June 1789 that led to the French Revolution. In his own take on that history, Mr. Kapoor has installed "Shooting into the Corner," a paintball cannon brooding over the splattered remains of sticky red wax bullets, piled like a heap of bloodstained rubble in a corner of the room.

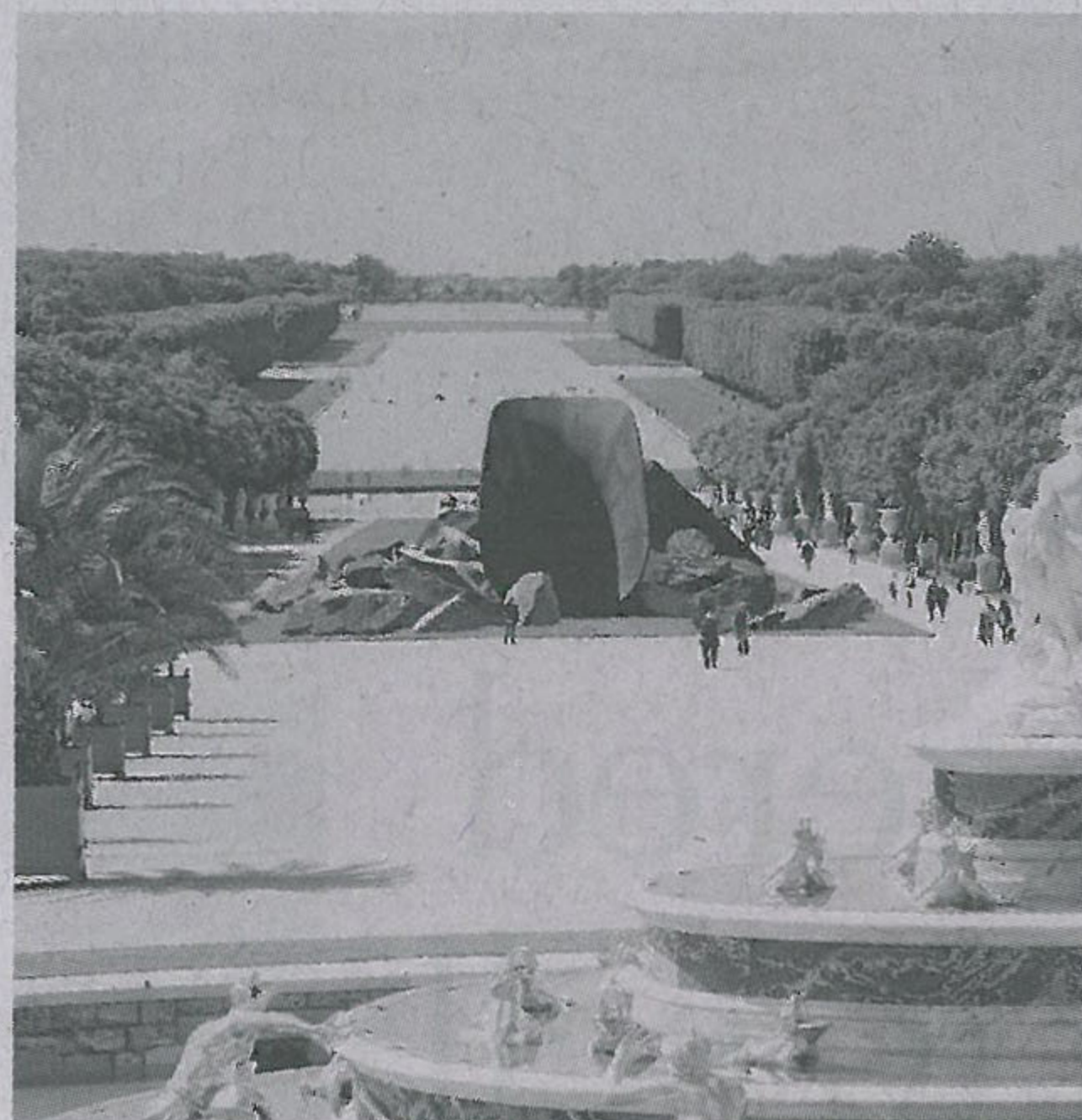
The gun references the composition of the museum's artwork, Mr. Kapoor said, noting that its barrel is tilted at the same angle as the upraised arms of the deputies taking their oath. He said it also references the shifting power relationships between citizen and state; gender wars (there are no women in the painting) and even the nature of the act of painting.

"The work itself is a cannon, very

Anish Kapoor's show at the Château de Versailles includes the installation "Shooting into the Corner," in which a paintball cannon broods over the splattered remains of sticky red wax bullets, piled like a heap of bloodstained rubble in a corner of the room. Below: "Dirty Corner" is the main focal point in a chain of installations along the central axis of the garden.



TADZIO/COURTESY KAPOOR STUDIO/ADAGP, 2015



COURTESY LISSON GALLERY, GALLERIA MASSIMO MININI, GALLERIA CONTINUA, KAMEL MENNOUR AND KAPOOR STUDIO/ADAGP, 2015; LEFT, FABRICE SEIXAS

phallic," Mr. Kapoor said. "The corner is symbolic of architecture, so one might read it very easily as a symbol of the feminine."

He added, "The point is to open a conversation between a work and a place."

That conversation continues in the formal 17th-century palace gardens laid out by André Le Nôtre, a symbol of the French monarchy's claim to divinely ordered power, where a jumble of concrete and stone boulders has sprouted around a rust-colored steel tube with a flared mouth, reminiscent of a gargantuan Tibetan horn. Called "Dirty Corner," it is the main focal point in a chain of installations along the central axis of the garden. Other links in the chain include "C-Curve" and "Sky Mirror," two of Mr. Kapoor's signature mirror sculptures, silvery reflecting dishes placed on the upper terraces of the garden to create

distorted, topsy-turvy images of the chateau and the sky; and "Descension," a growling whirlpool that seems to pour its black waters endlessly into the earth. Sitting alone in a glade in a far corner of the garden is the sixth installation, "Sectional Body Preparing for Monadic Singularity," a hollow, house-sized cube with wall piercings connected internally by tubular pathways, like wormholes.

"It's a little complicated," Mr. Kapoor said last week as he surveyed a team of 25 assistants putting finishing touches on the installations, including a bright red layer of paint on two of the "Dirty Corner" boulders.

"It's exactly the opposite of Le Nôtre," he added. "This whole place, every tree, every bush is ordered, geometrical, formalized, almost as if it's hiding nature. And 'Dirty Corner' is like a big queen sitting in court, displaying herself

to her courtiers, completely chaotic."

Mr. Kapoor said about 400 or 500 tons of stone had been scattered across the "Dirty Corner" site, including two big cast-concrete stones that are seven to eight meters tall and four to five meters wide, "with a big vulvalike form sitting watching."

"I hope it's a mess," he said of the work. "That's what I'm after. It's also very sexual. It's taking all those things Le Nôtre has hidden — that ordered space, it hides nature, it hides everything. This is an attempt to bring it into the conversation."

In similar vein, the "Descension" pool, dug near the garden's great cruciform lake, aims to disrupt the geometry of Le Nôtre's conception.

"I say this as a great lover of geometry," Mr. Kapoor said. "This is not just a naughty gesture. I'm hoping to

take it to something a little bit deeper. If the maelstrom can go to the center of the earth, it is saying something about the surface that Le Nôtre gives us."

This is not the first time Mr. Kapoor has mused up society's veneers in the name of dialogue. In 2006 in London, he wheeled out the same paintball cannon to splatter the dignified halls of the Royal Academy of Arts; and several other elements in the Versailles show have also been repurposed from earlier exhibitions, including the "dark queen" of "Dirty Corner," seen previously in Milan at the Fabbrica del Vapore (Steam Factory) arts center in 2011.

Yet if the show reprises some old material, he said, it all adds up to something new. "Somewhere like this is full of good taste," Mr. Kapoor said, "and what we're saying here is, maybe making art isn't good taste."

It's a provocative view of art that has duly ruffled some feathers. Even before the show's opening, some commentators in the French media have taken offense at its implicit sexuality.

"It's difficult to understand why so much money is being spent to inflict this trial on the visitors who have paid for a normal visit to the park," the essayist Christian Combaz wrote in *Le Figaro*. He went on to accuse Mr. Kapoor of using Versailles for "a 10 million euro selfie."

That sort of reaction will probably please Mr. Kapoor.

"I heard two American tourists walking past 'Dirty Corner' the other day, and the man said to the woman, 'What's that thing doing, blocking the view?' That was absolutely right. In the end, art is not dealing in knowable niceties — what's the point of another pretty thing in a nice place? I don't need another nice place to show and Versailles certainly doesn't need another pretty thing.

"One wants to look at something and wonder, 'What the hell is this? Why is it here?'"