

'You could disappear into it': Anish Kapoor on his exclusive rights to the 'blackest black'

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Architect and artist defends controversial deal with developers of Vantablack, the blackest material 'after a black hole'



Anish Kapoor with Gathering Clouds, his new installation at Kukje Gallery, Seoul. Photograph: Keith Park/Kukje Gallery.

In Seoul for the opening of his Gathering Clouds exhibition at the Kukje Gallery, the British artist Anish Kapoor is discussing his controversial deal with developers of Vantablack: the "blackest black" pigment of paint, a colour Kapoor now owns exclusive rights to use.

After reading a newspaper story about the discovery of the pigment – which "we think is the blackest material in the universe, after a black hole", Kapoor says – the excited artist contacted the British manufacturers, NanoSystem, and offered to collaborate with them.

The pigment is comprised of microscopic stems of colour that are 300 times as tall as they are wide, so that about 99.6% of all light "just gets trapped in the network of standing segments", he explains. "It's literally as if you could disappear into it."

The pigment was being developed for scientific and military use due to its "masking ability" – it has the potential to hide stealth aircrafts and block out all light from entering "super powerful" telescopes, enabling them to see the faintest stars.

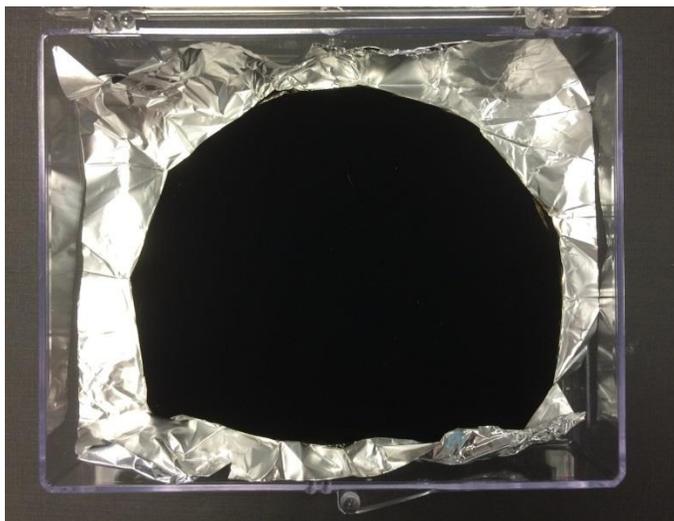
Kapoor, who immediately recognised its artistic potential, has been working with the pigment since 2014 but says it's proving difficult to make sufficient quantities to apply to any artworks, because of its density.

"They were only able to make bits that are 2cm square [at a time] and what we are trying to do at the moment is try and make a certain bulk of it," Kapoor says.

"[Vantablack] is very technical. It needs like a furnace – pressure and heat – before this material can do what it does, [which is] become super black," he says. "It's necessarily a collaboration between them and me. I say, 'C'mon guys – we can make it bigger and we can make it applicable in others ways.'"

The artist was attracted to the pigment not only because he felt strong emotion when he saw it (the closest experience, he said, would be staring into a black hole) but because he had long been interested in working with "void forms", and the pigment would be entirely non-reflective.

But when Kapoor won exclusive rights to the material in February, it came with backlash from the artistic community. "I've never heard of an artist monopolising a material," the artist Christian Furr told the Daily Mail. "All the best artists have had a thing for pure black – Turner, Manet, Goya ... This black is like dynamite in the art world. We should be able to use it. It isn't right that it belongs to one man."



Vantablack, a pigment that absorbs all light that hits it. Photograph: Surrey Nano Systems

Kapoor defended his exclusive use of the material: "Why exclusive? Because it's a collaboration, because I am wanting to push them to a certain use for it. I've collaborated with people who make things out of stainless steel for years and that's exclusive."

He believes much of the debate comes down to emotion. "The problem is that colour is so emotive – especially black ... I don't think the same response would occur if it was white."

Kapoor, who has had two decades of psychotherapy, said it's the "psycho side" of black that makes us want to possess it.

"Perhaps the darkest black is the black we carry within ourselves," he says. "It's not the night where you switch the lights off – it's the night where you close your eyes. There's a psycho side to blackness that we don't associate with other colours readily. I suspect red does the same. I've worked with red a great deal, for not dissimilar reasons."

Kapoor's fascination for the non-reflective pigment is particularly interesting in light of the centrepiece of his new exhibition at Seoul's Kukje Gallery. Made from reflective stainless steel, the sculptures are twisted to 90 degrees, distorting the viewer's reflection when they walk around the work. It is disorienting, almost an anti-selfie work of art, in contrast to the Instagram-friendly installations that seem to be taking over major spaces; it's tempting to take a picture but your reflection is twisted and deformed.

"I have been trying out these forms for a number of years," Kapoor says of his Non Objects series, to which these new sculptures belong. Fabricated from mirrored forms and concave objects, the sculptures investigate the "in-between state" of objects whose internal makeup is at odds with their surface.

"In a way they are technological but they are also a very, very simple idea. I have been deeply interested over a long period of time in geometry. I'm interested in taking certain forms, triangles, squares and turning them into something else ... It's a stupid, simple idea but it does something – it becomes something else."

Kapoor is still bemused by another controversy that recently dogged him. Last year in France, his Versailles Garden public art show, Dirty Corner, was dubbed "The Queen's Vagina" – and landed him in court.

"That became hugely controversial, I still don't know why," he says. "It seemed to offend people for reasons I can't understand."

The work was defaced with anti-Semitic graffiti, which Kapoor refused to remove to make a statement on "humanity's intolerance" – a decision that saw him sued by a Versailles politician. The sculpture (and graffiti) was later covered in gold leaf.

"It's interesting that the work got sexualised," Kapoor says. "Our cities are full of masculine objects. No one makes the slightest noise about another phallus on the horizon but it seems a vagina is really a problem."

Kapoor says the response to the work says more about the people than his own artistic intentions.

"All I ever did in an interview was use the word 'she' – I didn't use the word 'vagina'. I said, 'She sits here in on the lawn'," he says. "It's interesting [that], when it got named as a feminine sexual object, all the hate came out – real hate. So I decided to leave it there."

"You can't make art for other people. You can't make art for an audience – the work has to live the story of itself in a way."

- Anish Kapoor: Gathering Clouds is on view at Kukje Gallery, Jongno-gu, Seoul, until 30 October
- An earlier version of this article incorrectly stated that Kapoor had used Vantablack in a public artwork. It also referred to Kapoor as an 'architect and artist'; he has completed architectural projects, but is not trained as an architect