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Anish Kapoor by Ameena Meer

Jan 1, 1996

Interview

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Alchemy is the art of turning stone into gold. Anish Kapoor is an alchemist, turning chunks of granite into metaphorical ones, like hollow blue corners echoing with the black secrets of the unconscious. Ten years ago, he was a young sculptor who was being lauded by critics and collectors alike as the well-to-floor, through-which-nature-remains-unspoiled-because-it-is-the-room-like-world-divide. His work transformed with his new-stronger-than-steel-but-lighter-than-air-and-more-beautiful-than-anything-else-in-the-world-but-it-looks-like-a-blackhole, aka the space-time-continuum-in-miniature, his adolescence in Israel, and had his work on training in England, where he now lives. Kapoor's work will represent the United Kingdom in the Venice Biennale.

Ameena Meer

Some of your early works are called A Thousand Names. What does that mean?

Anish Kapoor

It's always felt that my work had to be about something else and that's what saved it, what made it like of any interest. I began to evolve a language of forms that was not about the thing I was actually making the object/piece, it occurred to me that they all from themselves out of each other. So I decided to give them a generic title. A thousand names, a thousand forms, a thousand ways of being in the world. The people stands up in the floor is projected from the wall. The people on the floor stiffens the surface of the floor and the objects appear to be projected from the floor. The point is that the work is not about something being painfully there. Now there's actually takes another turn. They're all about another place. They're all about something here, which is the space between the thing and the place it's projected into. Something with emptying-things-out, making-things-rarefied. That seems to actually fill them up. Emptying them out is just filling them up. And that's somewhere else. I don't know how she is say it.

Q

Making them up with what?

A

I suppose something inevitable. Something unspeakable, unknowable, something that's not there. It's not there. It's not there at all. Now I guess, in depth. (laughter) That I don't like to say.

Q

We're not talking about death yet. The other title you used was Part of the Rest?

A

I began to evolve a pure sensibility for myself. Although I don't think very much about colors now, I still feel strongly about it. So things came out of that. I began to see that I was making work that was a kind of pure part of me, and that is the purity part of me. But not in a very physical color. It's very much about earth, it's black, obviously. It's very there. That's the part of me that I feel I can't actually talk about very much. I can't also be to do with form. A flat out isn't the same as a round, isn't an square out. If the corner is controlled, if the corner is a given one.

Q

The contest being what?

A

I'm thinking, of course, about the way of looking art. Right now I'm trying to make something settle. And once you start doing it in artifice, there is a kind of knowledge that comes with that. And I don't want that. I want to be so artless that it's another thing that I don't know what that is but I guess I'd about. It's actually artless in relation to something that's like artifice.

Q

In some places, the holes, or parts of Africa, white represents death. In other places, black represents death and white represents life. Black represent dead people. But it's black, artless soon artifice.

A

The work is actually called I think, anyway, A Virgin is a Void. White meaning virginity, in the sense that I understand it here.

Q

Because then the virgin is a void, and the virgin can be death as well.

A

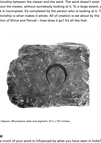
All for (laughter) exactly. But there you go.

Q

I'm not getting back to sex and death again.

A

Why not? It's a good subject.



Anish Kapoor, Red Mass, 1989 Red pigmented limestone, plaster, earth, weather, pigment, 20'x 20'x 20' (6 x 6 x 6 meters)

Q

I want to go back to the whole, to the work being part of a whole. What's the artifice?

A

The artifice is no life and not one that's it. A relationship with some deeper line. That's a complicated subject because the whole doesn't just refer to the whole of the body of work. The "whole" refers to something bigger—religious ideas, which are unspeakable.

Q

Going back to what you were saying about truth. Your work expresses some truth, that's not being made to look, being made to look at.

A

Yes, I mean, the artist as a dynamic vehicle and not an expression of interesting thoughts.

Q

It's substantive thoughts.

A

Yes. Inevitably, everything is substantive and substantive is vital, because that's the only way there is of reaching anything. Substantive is everything.

Q

Substantive meaning part of, individual opinion.

A

I think I do. It must be. But I think there's a moment when individual opinion is not individual any longer. When it's something that you recognize, that everybody recognizes, that everybody understands, that we live in a post-psychoanalytic era—so let's say a post-Freudian era. Whereas the surrealists, let's say, lived in the Freudian era. At the time, they were very, very, very, very, very, very, very, very, very, very, very. It's very difficult to define, there's some country no not deal with the second left to a way, there's nothing else I can do, but through it, to deal with something that's actually, I don't know what it is, but it's something that which is but later. It's like a very difficult topic because of our time. It's most have something to do with being able to have worldwide communication, which is very important. Having this huge quantity of literature, Things, ideas to be accessible to us from all over the world, cross-cultural. Does this make sense?

Q

Yes.

A

Do you agree?

Q

But I agree! I don't know, but probably that's because I don't believe in truth. But I don't have to agree with what you're saying.

A

No, that's true. It's an interesting idea, though. I'm not even I believe in truth as a fixed reality. I think it's always changing and, in our everyday life, we have to make decisions. We have to make decisions. We have to be able to suspend the everyday world. I'm more that's one of the reason I'm an artist, to suspend the everyday world and define it entirely in terms of what you make.

Q

Do people that's only the case with abstract art.

A

I don't think it is. I don't think it is. I think the relationship between abstract art and figurative art is much more—there's no such thing as figurative art.

Q

Well, as opposed to representational art.

A

But I think abstract art is representational art, at least mine is.

Q

What do you think there's no such thing as abstract art?

A

In the end, I'm talking about myself. And thinking about making nothing, which, like a void, is not nothing. It's not nothing even though it really is nothing. Why can you think of that's more interesting?

Q

Which made abstract art? Well, how about Mark Rothko?

A

I don't think there's abstract art at all. I think that it's deeply spiritual. But I have already, I'm sorry.

Q

But it's not a picture of something.

A

But a picture of a thing. It's the cause of it. That's not abstract. I understand abstract in absolute terms. Anyway, it's a big argument.

Q

We're not arguing, you're talking and I'm asking questions.

A

I'm serious, this idea about something painted is also there in the relationship between the canvas and the work. The work doesn't exist without the canvas, without somebody looking at it. To a large extent, work is incomplete. It's completed by the person who is looking at it. That relationship is what makes it whole. But it's not the whole. It's the relation of Shiva and Parvati—have does that? I'm with Shiva.

Anish Kapoor, Marsyanasa, steel and pigment, 87 x 118 inches

Q

How much of your work is influenced by what you have seen in India? The pigment pieces made me think of piles of Holi colors, and the hollow stones remind me of temples.

A

I think there's an aspect of the Indian psyche which is about the other place. That's important to me. But then, it seems to have been a feature of Indian thought and Indian art from the beginning. The colors I mean a lot to me. I'm very sensitive to them. Consequently, the colors from being Indian because I'm Indian.

Q

Some colors belong to places. You work down the street in London and everything is gray and everyone is wearing gray. Whenever I see gray walls the desert in Rajasthan, everything is brown and gray, but everyone is wearing pink or purple or yellow.

A

Yes, but light has a lot to do with this. Generally, even London gets brighter in the summer. I mean the way people dress. I find that that's something I insist, one of those things you carry with you—light. It's very important. I'm very sensitive to it.

Q

Sometimes when I'm coming back from India, wearing all these clothes I bought, I feel like I'm carrying around a piece of Rajasthan in my head I think, "Oh my God, what am I wearing? People are going to get off the plane wearing this stuff!" Suddenly all the colors I was attracted to there look totally bizarre.

A

(laughter)

Q

I wonder how much of that is light and how much is the context.

A

I think it's much more to do with what the artist's about. Actually I'm a very, very, very, very, very, very, very, very, very, very,

Anish Kapoor, *Adam*, 1988–89, sandstone & pigment, 47½ x 41 x 94 inches.

AM
Back to what you were saying about expressing truth. If truth is relative, then your expression of truth is different from someone else's expression.

AK
Yes.

AM
Well then, how do you know that yours is the truth?

AK
It's only true to me and I think if it's true enough for me, then it's true enough for you. Or for somebody else.

AM
In which case, truth is truth. One doesn't need your background, or any background to see and understand the truth.

AK
Of course you do, as usual. It's all got to do with the media. Contemporary art seems to include everyone and every way of doing things. In fact, it's a very closed world that requires prior knowledge. Without it, there's no way of understanding the language that it functions in. But that's true of physics and it's true of everything.

AM
But do you think the truth in art is an absolute truth, relative only in the sense that you need a certain background to understand it? If you take E=MC², obviously, one needs a certain background to understand it, but it is true, no matter what the context.

AK
It's also true in art. A good work is a good work. Whether it's in Africa, Latin America or New York.

AM
Let's go back to *A Virgin As A Void.*

AK
To me, the notion of origin is very important, so I've made a number of works which have titles rather similar to that. It's trying to engage with the place from which I emerge as an artist, which I feel to be feminine. I feel my creative self to be feminine. I feel that creativity itself is feminine. I think this is also very Eastern. One can speak of Western tradition, certainly in modern art, being basically phallic. Western sculpture is a phallic art. My work seems to be the opposite. All the works I have here in the studio, they're all upright, and in that sense, phallic, but they're all empty so it's an inversion of that phallic-ness. They're not towards the flat, but towards the concave. That's very important for me.

AM
Then they're hermaphrodites.

AK
It seems to me that that condition is desirable. It seems to be truth.

AM
What is truth?

AK
Your word, hermaphrodite. In talking about a post-Freudian culture, I'm obviously continually referring to union culture, which is less theoretical and much more cultural—more to do with global culture. Seeing the human being as manifesting the same things, the same truths, in various cultural forms. But the same truths. That's a steady constant. These are themes which reoccur over and over again. Hermaphrodite being one of them. The joining of opposite things.

AM
Which you see as being opposed to making phallic things.

AK
No, I think that was in a special context. In terms of modern art, in my peculiar view of it. It's another theme that's been around a lot for me: opposition. Opposite things coming together.

AM
With *A Virgin Is A Void*, the idea of death in terms of black or white—death being black and nothingness and then sex being white and everything, or the other way around.

AK
Potentially, they're both everything and they're both nothing. It's too vague to talk about death in these large terms. I think one has to somehow engage with it in particular—we're going to, each one of us—but specifically in the work, in these dark spaces. They are spaces of wonder but they're also featureless, also, in a sense, nonexistent. It's the idea of making a sculpture that is actually not sculpture, just a hole in space that's a non-object, a non-physical thing. It's also futile because it's not possible. Grappling continually with this impossible thing seems to me to be a direct parallel for any ideas about God. It's totally intangible. One can't illustrate it, make it, or have it be. One can only remotely refer to it. I think that's worthy. That's the stuff, for me, art ought to be made of. And that's why it will always be incomplete. It's impossible to complete.

AM
So art is about being and not-being.

AK
Exactly, exactly.

AM
Is that the truth?

AK
I made this very strange discovery, that by emptying out—it seems to be about being and non-being—as the works become more hollow, they also have become much more physical. The stones are very present and very physical. So there's this curious dichotomy there. Sculpture has been about physical space: here, three-dimensional, projecting. The thing that I seem to be doing is the opposite. Making sculpture un-three-dimensional. The physicalness of the stone is about non-physicalness. About fear, about the other place, taking in rather than giving out.

Ameena Meer is writing a novel about a Bombay pop idol in Paris.

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We need our own space to think and digest what we see. And we also have to trust the viewer and trust the power of the object. And the power is in simple things. I like the kind of clarity that that brings to thought. It keeps thought from being opaque.

— Felix Gonzalez-Torres

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