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Strangely detached

Robin Richmond finds an emotional void in Anish Kapoor's latest works

Malcolm Gladwell in his recent best seller *Blink* coins a neat turn of phrase that he calls "thin slicing" and he uses it to refer to rapid cognition, the very fast thinking we do "in the blink of an eye".

These particular thoughts that appear in our minds are often, according to Gladwell, the most useful, instructive and helpful in forming judgements. So upon entering the courtyard of the Royal Academy and being confronted by *Tall Tree and the Eye* by Anish Kapoor, one's first impression is that this will be an exhibition that delights in playfulness.

Like a huge cluster of highly polished steel balloons, these 76 spheres, reflective of the architecture of the courtyard and the sky, float 15 metres up into the air, and coax us into the Academy with gentle friendliness. In fact, seeing the audience reaction over the last week, the work seems to have given much pleasure to the public.

What this public will make of the show once they have paid over their £12 entry fee is another matter altogether. Sculpture which explicitly invites touch and yet denies it categorically might be conceptually complex and fascinating semiologically but it is negative in the domain of the real.

Hive, which occupies the central hall, invites the viewer to place their heads inside its internal space yet we are forbidden to do so in very strict terms (what children will do under these circumstances is a good question). Richard Serra's *The Matter of Time*, in the Guggenheim Bilbao, is made from a similar material and much bigger than Kapoor's steel sculpture (made in a shipyard in Holland) but Serra's work is made with the idea of the viewer in mind. One is encouraged to walk around it, hide inside it and touch/feel its industrial mass as a metal maze – a steel labyrinth that envelops the audience and embraces it.

Kapoor's work, in which the curators tells us evokes Courbet's *L'Origine du Monde*, (the French painter's daringly explicit and close-up landscape of a woman's vulva) is not an involving experience. This perception is emphasised continuously. *Svayambh* which occupies the five galleries of the rear enfilade of Academy rooms, involves a block of red wax that moves slowly on tracks through its august doors and which is "exemplary of [Kapoor's] interest in self-authored sculpture" is tantalisingly physical. One yearns to put ones hands into it. No. No. NO. It is displayed



Anish Kapoor *Hive*, 2009, installed at the Royal Academy of Arts London, 2009
Corten steel 5.6 x 10.07 x 7.55m
Courtesy of the artist, Lisson Gallery, London and Gladstone Gallery, New York

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Photography: Dave Morgan

as an emblem of “eternal tragedy”, its body “flayed by the building”.

There is a continual reference to bodily functions in Kapoor’s work yet it is all so cerebral and uninvolved. *Slug*, apparently inspired by the classical Laocoon sculpture, so beloved of Michelangelo and dug up in 1505 in front of him in Rome, is a huge and very ugly grey intestinal coil which ends in a bright, shiny, smiley vagina. The now notorious *Shooting into the Corner* (2008-9) is a cannon that, very loudly, shoots shells of red wax at 29 minute intervals into the corner of the Small Weston room from the Large Weston room.



Anish Kapoor *Shooting into the Corner*, 2008-09, installed at the Royal Academy of Arts, London, 2009
Mixed media, dimensions variable

MAK, Vienna, Austrian Museum of Applied Arts/Contemporary Art

Photography: Dave Morgan

Ejaculation, evacuation, menstrual blood, wounds and violence abound, but there is a strange emotional void and dislocation in the work. All is “gory and violent” in Kapoor’s words because he says that “making a mark in the world is an act of violence” but the work shows such strange detachment.

The older work, such as *As if to Celebrate I discovered a Mountain Blooming with red Flowers* (1981) and *Yellow* (1999) may be work that he has moved away from formally and psychologically these days in his role as grandee of the Academy and high priest of our times. But in its simplicity, it speaks quietly and eloquently and with dignity. To strive for the totemic and sublime is invidious, hubristic and pretentious.

2 October 2009

Anish Kapoor, [Royal Academy of Arts](#) to 11 December 2009

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