

Royal Academy of Arts, London

Review by Estella Hung



“I have often said that I have nothing to say as an artist. Having something to say implies that one is struggling with meaning. The role of the artist is in fact that we don’t know what to say, and it is that not knowing that leads to the work”, said Anish Kapoor in the accompanying pamphlet to his monumental retrospective at the Royal Academy of Arts.

This may be a slice of humility on the part of the India-born, Turner-Prize-winning artist but this retrospective appears to indicate Kapoor in the role of God. After all, he sets processes in motion – as in “Svayambh”, a self-generating sculpture, and “Shooting the Corner”, a cannon that “paints” by firing at regular intervals a ball of red wax into the wall of a gallery room – and leaves us to find meaning in the results, whether or not there is one. Kapoor’s painstaking removal of his fingerprints from his work merely serves this ambiguity, alluding as it does to the spectre of the blind watchmaker in the fabrication of the universe.

“Svayambh” undoubtedly best justifies Kapoor’s credentials as one of the most exciting sculptors of the past thirty years. The installation apes the imperceptible creation of mountains and the like, as a colossal slab of red wax takes over an hour to traverse a track that spans five rooms of the academy. The slab is at once shaped and defiled by the building’s archways. But because building and sculpture are essentially one, the slab also defiles the RAA with its residue. “Shooting the Corner” is similarly subversive as it applies Pollock’s action painting to sculpture – to a violent extreme.



The theatrical and unkempt nature of both “Svayambh” and “Shooting the Corner” finds its counterpoint in the serenity and near perfection of “Pigment Works” and “Yellow”. These explore Kapoor’s fascination with ambiguity of form and colour. Bearing both organic and geometric qualities and an ostensibly sandy consistency, the red, yellow and black structures of “Pigment Works” are neither sturdy nor fluid. They appear to be frozen in a state of dissolution. The

spectral boldness of the sculptures captures Kapoor's curiosity with the illusory nature of colour and the simultaneously unassailable reality of pigments. Meanwhile, "Yellow" uses colour to describe the haziness of form as the viewer puzzles over whether the large yellow wall mount is concave or convex.

If there are any surprises here it is with "Greyman Cries, Shaman Dies, Billowing Smoke, Beauty Evoked," one of Kapoor's most recent works. The formal perfection of "Pigment Works" is absent in these myriad cement formations, which evoke intestines and other gnarly configurations. Yet, we are told that they are manufactures of Kapoor's own computer programming, squeezed out from an ultra-sophisticated 3D printer. Is this a hint that God is imperfect?

*Until 11 December 2009*