

## Scratching surfaces: Kapoor at Versailles

Since Jeff Koon's debut in 2008, the palace of Versailles has annually invited an artist to display work in its grand surrounds. This year is the turn of 61 year old Bombay born, British artist, Anish Kapoor. Unlike previously commissioned artists, he has decided not to show work inside the palace, focussing instead on the 800 hectares of gardens that were carefully designed by André La Nôtre in 1661. He has assembled an exhibition of only six sculptures that succeeds in filling the massive space at Versailles, through illusion, and by positioning work in proximity to historically significant structures. He successfully augments the visitor's perception of the gardens, and the royal history that unfolded within them.



On invitation by curator Alfred Pacquement, Kapoor was initially inspired by the orientation of Versailles to the sun's East-West axis in association with King Louis XIV's reputation as the 'Sun King'. Four of the six sculptures have been positioned on the Grand Perspective which is aligned to this axis. The first of these is *Sky Mirror*, a concave mirrored bowl spanning five metres that dominates the landscape, simultaneously resembling an ancient artefact and a satellite

dish. Ignorantly oriented towards the sky, it draws attention to the sun which paints a mesmerising and constantly changing image of the environment above. Close by, wittily positioned just outside the Hall of Mirrors, is C-Curve, another unconventional mirrored object some two metres tall and seven metres wide. Its reflection flips the world upside down turning the visitor and palace into bulbous forms, bending the articulate lines of the building and gardens out of shape. Both these works afford distorted perceptions of the palace, offering visitors the opportunity to investigate previously unexplored narratives residing at Versailles.

At the furthest end of the Grand Perspective, by the foot of the placid Grand Canal, *Descension* is built directly into the ground. It is a dark maelstrom, eternally sucking water into a deep abyss. Unlike the decorative and carefully programmed water gardens that populate Versailles, here is an unsettling display of fluid. It feels dangerous and visceral, portraying water's destructive nature. Its circular shape is in keeping with the show's other smooth forms that interrupt La Nôtre's linear garden design. Unlike the water gardens that are set to music, here the dominating sound is a deep and ominous vibration felt beneath your feet. *Descension* is a reminder of the chaos of natural forces, in direct contrast to the highly fashioned landscape of La Nôtre's garden that has been stripped of its inherent wildness. In this work's presence, the gardens are viewed as a skin-deep, elegant surface created to cover up true natures, both literally and with respect to royal characters who dwelled there.

*Dirty Corner* sits uncompromisingly smack bang in the middle of proceedings, seemingly erupting from the ground, raising its ugly orifice toward the palace. Just as *Descension*, *Dirty Corner* looks like it has been excavated from beneath the gardens' surface. It is a massive 70 metre long Cor-Ten steel tube which flares out into a trumpet 10 metres tall at one end. Flanking it are colossal vulvalike boulders of concrete and pink marble, such as used inside the palace, but in crude, natural form. The sculpture's obvious sexual connotations have been admitted by the artist: it is "the vagina of a queen taking power", a not so subtle reference to the French queen Marie Antoinette who lived at the palace. The mayor of Versailles expressed disgust at the work on Twitter, suggesting that Kapoor had "skid on the green carpet", referring to the Grand Perspective that *Dirty Corner* sits on. This piece has also been the subject of praise, notably by feminist historians believing *Dirty Corner*, among other works on show, to recognise the role of women in French history.



*Dirty Corner* has also attracted a lot of press attention after repeated bouts of vandalism defaced the surface with antisemitic gratified phrases. Against the wishes of the palace, Kapoor decided not to remove the phrases, but cover them up. Damaged sections of the artwork have been partially obscured by rectangular panels of gold leaf; what a suitably royal gesture to cover up dirty behaviour with a thin surface layer of grandeur. As I stood staring into the

depths of this structure, a man in the restricted zone between me and the monumental artwork swept away dirt, an action symptomatic of Versailles' tireless effort to maintain order that Kapoor has consciously strived to disrupt.

Although mostly reprisals of past works, at Versailles they find new meaning, especially in reference to French history. This is the case for *Shooting into a Corner* which is the only indoor work on show, residing in the historically significant Jeu de Paume where the Tennis Court Oath was sworn in 1789. Exhibited at his Royal Academy solo show in 2009, the work is comprised of a cannon shooting hefty missiles of viscous, red pigment into a corner, creating an accumulation of matter bearing resemblance to blood and guts. Here the cannon has been angled to match that of the arms raised in a painting cohabiting the space that depicts the famous event. Lacking any women in this painting, the combination of red pigment and corner in this work alludes to the missing female voice in documentation of this event among others throughout French history.

The final work is new, made especially for Versailles in collaboration with engineering firm Serge Ferrari. *Sectional Body Preparing For Monadic Singularity* resides in the wildest area of the gardens, Bosquet de L'Étoile, a pentagonal meadow-like space. It therefore seems fitting that unlike the other works which are disruptive and chaotic, the form here is measured and precise, sitting like a carefully cut gem. It is a hollow 23-foot-high cube with red PVC stretched between orifices on three of the faces to form the wormhole-like apertures that characterise Kapoor's work. Stepping inside the structure, you enter a warm, womb-like environment flooded with red light. An intimate immersion within one of his sculptures comes at the end of a string of purely visual and distant interactions, mirroring the lack of tactility found at Versailles that is imposed by its wardens. It comes as closure to an exhibition that is as intellectually engaging as it is visually stunning. Anish Kapoor hoped the show would be a 'mess', and it is, successfully disrupting the maintenance of Versailles's artifice.

'Anish Kapoor Versailles' is open until 1 November 2015.