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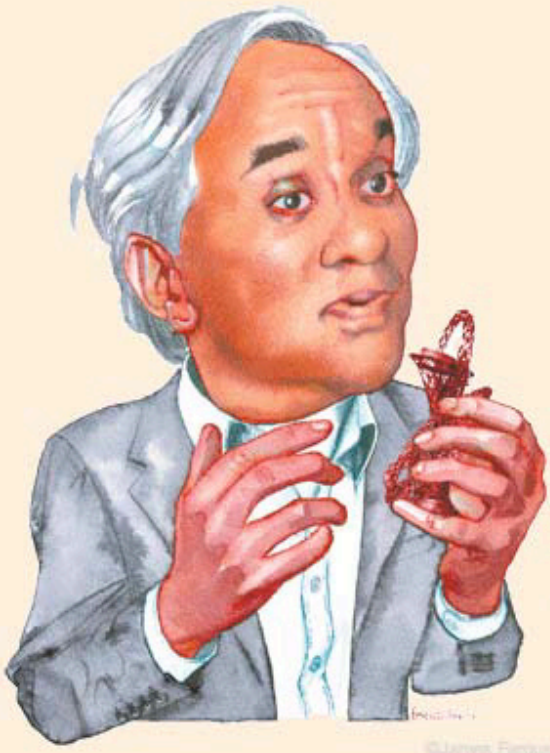
Lunch with the FT: Anish Kapoor

By Jackie Wullschlager

Over a fusion takeaway feast at his London studio, the artist talks to the FT’s Jackie Wullschlager about sex, psychobiography and the ‘madness’ of his towering new sculpture at London’s Olympic Park



Although I have the address, it is impossible to pinpoint the entrance to Anish Kapoor’s studio in Camberwell. It turns out that the artist owns all the buildings in the street – a low-rise row of former rollerblind factories that line one side of the road. On the other side is a construction site, piles of rubbish and an abandoned Routemaster bus – nothing to do with Kapoor. All around are the tower blocks of south London.

“I’ve been here for 25 years,” says Kapoor, a trim, small figure with floppy silver hair and matching grey glasses, when he emerges at the end of the terrace. This is

where, a few months ago, the last factory was converted into a huge, glass-walled, white-painted box, the atelier where he works alone, undisturbed by the 20-strong technical and office staff on the rest of his site. "Life's gone pretty well and I've been able to get the whole street," Kapoor explains, speaking softly but precisely, with a slight Indian accent – he was born in Mumbai in 1954. "I hope it's not just megalomania – well, a certain amount of it is, of course! – that drives all this."

Dressed in jeans, open-necked shirt and dark jacket, he is relaxed and immediately friendly, taking my arm to negotiate the muddy puddles on the pavement as we begin a tour. One of Britain's most acclaimed sculptors, he has made an estimated fortune of £80m from his art and won the Turner Prize. But this summer his work, which is abstract and depends on formal contrasts of light and dark, surface and depth, inside and outside, will reach a vast new public with "Orbit", at 115 metres the largest public sculpture in the UK. Commissioned for London's Olympic Park after a competition in which Kapoor was chosen ahead of other celebrated names, including his keen rival Antony Gormley ("He did make a bit of a scene about it"), "Orbit" was completed days ago and launches next week.

Kapoor first suggested meeting at La Petite Maison in Mayfair but a last-minute visit to the Olympic Park in the East End of town left him short of time, so we relocate for a studio lunch, beginning in his serene working space. Walking past walls lined with his characteristic concave mirror pieces and yellow, purple, pink discs which look solid but are radiant voids – "Monochrome is incredible, isn't it?" – we arrive at a model of the rollercoaster steel coils and giant canopy of "Orbit".

"It's a bit of madness," Kapoor laughs. "The canopy is dark and menacing. I'm interested in this journey from dark to light – you go into this dark heavy object, then up the lift and you're tipped out into an observation platform with two concave mirrors, so you're in a kind of instrument for looking. You're inside a telescope ... I've been looking at this for two years and it still looks uncomfortable. That's the point. I can make long, sleek elegant things, but this object needed to be the opposite.

"There's so much in the tradition of the tower that's about symmetry but even though 'Orbit''s bolted steel is a 19th-century method, it's a 21st-century result, it's asymmetrical, it's tipping, a mess of a knot, the elbows sticking out. I hope Cecil [Balmond, the structural engineer, Kapoor's collaborator] and I get away with it! It has the language of sculpture, but also archaic architecture – the Tower of Babel, an ant's nest, people storming, climbing all over an object. It's the idea of participation, performing, you act it out, you go up."

I think "Orbit" (or "ArcelorMittal Orbit" to give it its full title, after the company that contributed £19.6m towards its cost) manages to combine a mythic quality with the inventiveness, humour and subversions of history that are a mark of 21st-century sculpture. But it is also the most extravagant example yet of how, in the past two decades, sculpture has become spectacle, performance, architecture – from Gormley's "Angel of the North" (1998) to installations in Tate Modern's Turbine Hall Unilever Series such as Rachel Whiteread's mountain of 14,000 white boxes in "Embankment" (2005) and Carsten Höller's giant slides "Test Site" (2006). With this gigantism, sculpture has won wider popular engagement; but has it also suffered losses – of seriousness, of innovation and experimentation?

"Public sculpture is problematic because it always becomes an emblem," Kapoor says. "I've tried to avoid it being a logo. I'm interested in scale because it's a genuine, actual tool of sculpture. We live in a world where there are lots of big things but few have scale. That jaw-dropping moment – when you say, 'Can it really be?' – there are only a few of those: like in a cathedral, when your body is thrown into it, and it brings all kinds of emotional repercussions. That's what I'm aiming for."

At this rather hubristic instant, there is a loud, resounding bang: a mirror piece crashes down from the wall, shattering into fragments. Kapoor strolls over, phones a technician and shrugs: "Stuff happens." But he hurries from that studio into another, packed with a cement mixer and a work-in-progress of piled-up cement turds, then invites me into a long pristine room with oak floors, white walls, two white chairs and a white table set with salads and platters of fish. Kapoor's studio manager, Lucy, offers drinks: he chooses Coke, I request mineral water.

The food has been ordered from the fashionable delicatessen Ottolenghi. Its rich western/Middle Eastern/Asian mix of colours and flavours offsets the streamlined purist interior in a way that almost parodies Kapoor's aesthetic of late-minimalist abstraction revitalised by brilliant hues and sensuous textures. The artist, however, surveys the luscious offerings mournfully, presumably thinking of what might have been. "Have you been to La Petite Maison?" he inquires. "You must go, Jackie! It's superb, Provençal food done so well – and owned by an Indian!"

Nevertheless, he tucks in readily. We begin with chargrilled tuna steaks with chilli, on which Kapoor heaps miso yoghurt. "I love food!" he announces, adding some salad – a spoonful of mixed green beans, shaved asparagus with spinach, chilli, garlic and chervil; another of cucumber, celery and radish with coriander, mint and nigella seeds. I follow suit and, wondering whether these dishes share something of the fusion cuisine of his childhood – Kapoor's maternal family came from Baghdad, emigrating to India where his grandfather was cantor of the Pune synagogue – I question him about his mother.

"My mother? Oh God, don't ask! God knows!" he answers hastily, adding without enthusiasm, "It was a great childhood." The oldest of three brothers, Kapoor left India at 17 for Israel: "My parents were very cosmopolitan, we grew up with Judaism as a cultural reality, a family reality, rather than a religious one – which is right, I believe in that."

Initially, he lived on a kibbutz, then studied engineering before realising "it really wasn't for me, it was too tight. I went back to the kibbutz and decided I had to be an artist. I got myself a little studio and made some really bad paintings. My parents weren't over the moon. I was so young and so naive. I'd hardly looked at any art, hardly ever seen a painting. Then I came to art school [Hornsey College of Art] in London and felt utterly liberated. They were very difficult years emotionally, but in a way I'm grateful for them. It took me many years of psychoanalysis to get over it."

Was the problem a standard coming-of-age neurosis? Kapoor looks vaguely amused at this understatement. "Er, no. It was much, much, much more than that. It was a sense of disorientation, not culturally, but with myself, which I needed to live with, understand, be less afraid of. Perhaps I was also coming to terms with an idea that I wanted to do something. No – wait, it's difficult to find the right words – a sensation that I had something to do, but I didn't know how to do it and didn't know if I could allow myself to do it.

"The first years when I was making art, I felt as if I didn't exist if I didn't work. Now I don't. The work got better when I didn't feel that. Now I've allowed the work to be the work, I can be me, and somehow we can live together." He quit psychoanalysis around the time he married medieval art historian Susanne Spicale in 1995; the couple have a daughter, Alba, 16, and son Ishan, 15.

We move on to grilled salmon served with avocado, coriander, chilli onion and mustard seed salsa, helping ourselves to further salads: baby potatoes with parsley pesto, courgettes, walnuts, radicchio and watercress; roasted squash with green olive and yoghurt sauce, red onion, capers, mint and sumac. Everything is fresh, robust and tastes less complicated than it sounds.

"The psychoanalytic method is somewhat the studio method," Kapoor expands. "The speculative process, the space between analyst and patient where there's a third object, the fantasy object – that's very much like sculpture. In a post-Freudian world, it's not very interesting if you don't speculate. After the idea that human motivation is complex, that there is Jewish guilt and taboos, that there is anxiety in all projects, there's no such thing as an innocent eye. All looking is done with envy, hate, love.

"That's a problem for the maker of things, this question of the anxiety of the viewer and therefore the anxiety of the object. [Marcel] Duchamp came to the idea that the viewer needed to look with a particular stance. 'The Large Glass' ('The Bride Stripped Bare By Her Bachelors, Even') is divided into male and female – looking is divided, it's about desire, stripping something bare."

I say that I often ask artists whether creativity and sex come from the same place. "Definitely, yes! Does any artist ever say 'No'? It's pretty bloody obvious, isn't it? A fundamental thing of the world is that it's made up of male and female, night and day, up and down, all opposites, from the moment we are born until we die, life and death. It's almost silly to say it. One of the riches of abstract language is that it can point to these bits of deeper content."

Kapoor's earliest powdered pigment pieces in the 1980s featured thrusting red stalactites and rounded lemon-orange breasts. Tate Modern's popular "Ishi's Light" (2003, named for his son) is an incomplete egg with a distorting mirrored red lacquer interior that you enter through a slit. In "Shooting into the Corner", an installation at his 2008 Royal Academy show, a gun of red paint was fired across a gallery ("Corners are crucial to sculpture. A corner has all kinds of implications – sexual, architectural, the secret part of the room, womb-like"). This was a parody of masculinity – as is the curving, looping "Orbit", which can be read as a feminised, circular, open-ended version of the phallic tower form.

Why has Kapoor so relentlessly explored abstract forms of sexual polarity? "Look, Henry Moore spent his whole career making women in a landscape. I think he didn't acknowledge fully the sexuality – they were almost asexual presences. I have always been interested in involuted form, which is often vaginal, female. It would be dishonest not to recognise that it's blatantly sexual. You can't be coy about it. Art is good at intimacy: it can say, 'Come here, be part of this', beckoning. It's a tool of intimacy."

Is his art, then, autobiographical? "No! No, but yes. You can't avoid your psychobiography. In psychoanalysis, you go into the room with a problem, lie on the couch, and something else emerges, which has repercussions way more interesting than anything you might have gone in with. Similarly when you go into the studio, you get unexpected connections. If I had a great message to deliver, god how boring it would be. Boring for me above all. Not knowing, yet daring – that's the métier!"

Lucy comes in to offer coffee – "Oh I'd love one!" he exclaims. "No I wouldn't, I've already had too much" – and pudding: chocolate fondant cake and lemon mascarpone tart. We both declare that we are full, yet the cake, moist and flavoured with coffee and rum, is irresistible. "I can't help it," says Kapoor.

"I love poetry, I read a lot," he continues, as we each slowly slice wedges off the cake until we have finished it all. "Rilke was a great constructor. And Twombly, a bit of paint and he scribbles something on canvas, how does he get away with it, the fucker – conveying a whole passionate universe with the smallest of means!

"That's what poetry is about – condensing experience into a meaningful few words, gestures. 'Vir Heroicus Sublimus' by Barnett Newman, it's a big red painting with a strip in, and yet it isn't – it's something mysterious. Newman is one of my favourite artists. Duchamp is another – 'The Large Glass', there are very few objects in the world that remain mysterious like that. And the third artist for me is Joseph Beuys: if Duchamp's idea was that all objects are art, Beuys' was that all objects have mythological potential.

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"It's compelling, a deeply serious idea but also playful. I hope with increasing confidence that I'm being playful ... You know, who cares? I have the guts to do it."

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