

Anish Kapoor

INSTITUTE OF CONTEMPORARY ART, BOSTON
Caroline A. Jones

WHO KNEW THAT MINIMALISM would have such generative power for those once seen as beyond its borders? It is as if all the women and "others" once presumed not to get it, got it—and got more of it than the founding fathers (Stella, Flavin, Judd) ever dreamed. This "it" was the abject body, as the art historian Michael Fried made explicit a decade ago when rereading his own previous take on Minimal art (or "literalism," as he termed it):

[L]iteralism theatricalized the body, put it endlessly on stage, made it uncanny or opaque to itself, hollowed it out, deadened its expressiveness, denied its finitude and in a sense its humanness. . . . There is, I might have said, something vaguely *monstrous* about the body in literalism.

In fact, Fried's 1998 gloss plausibly accounts for the work Anish Kapoor was making that same year. Titles such as *Her Blood* or *Wounds and Absent Objects* seemed to leach into more neutrally named pieces such as *Resin, Air, Space II*, in which maroon resin begins to look like fluid bathing the (hollow) body trapped inside. Kapoor had been sprinkling salt on Minimalism's geometry for years, turning it inside out to reveal the viscera within. Perhaps seeing what Kapoor (or Mona Hatoum or Janine Antoni) did with Minimalism made Fried aware of the "monstrous" bodies latent in its abstract forms. To *monstrate* (demonstrate, remonstrate) is to *show*—the tawdry requisite of our trade in the visual. But it is also

the "show" that performs the thrall of the fetish—a body (or part) that is both "in" the object and yet, ultimately, only a projection.

Kapoor's rightly selected ICA Boston survey brought Minimalism's monstrosity to mind with ostentatious reticence—big objects that hover at the edge of visibility, or project eerie reflections into the space between us and their actual surfaces, or ply waxy goop in a visceral deep maroon. This last is the newest phase in Kapoor's succession of material vocabularies ("the pigment language, the void language, the mirror language, the wax language," as he calls them), represented at Boston in the exhibition's eponymous work: *Past, Present, Future*, 2006. An enormous section of a sphere squats between the floor, wall, and ceiling, slathered with gallons and gallons of viscous wax and oil-based paint (which staff kept calling Vaseline); a motorized planing device systematically scrapes the sphere, seeming to shape its curves. The device completes its solemn rotation once every one hundred minutes, attesting to Kapoor's avowed desire for objects that are "self-manifesting," "unauthored," "self-made," and "auto-generating." (Indeed, one of Kapoor's most recent motor/wax pieces is titled *Svayambh*, 2007, Sanskrit for *self-manifestation*—a monstrosity, to be sure.) Certainly, such preoccupations have precedents in Jasper Johns's paint-scraping devices, Richard Serra's castings into a corner, Matthew Barney's oozing materials, and even Gerhard Richter's "automatist" abstractions. But perhaps most telling is this work's relation to Mona Hatoum's important motorized piece *+and-*, 1994–2004, which critiques the very manliness of such mechanical "forming" activities with an ephemeral drawing in the sand that is canceled as promptly as it is made. Kapoor's mechanism shares Hatoum's ambivalence about the authorial gesture. Like an enormously slow potter's shaping tool, the mechanism of *Past, Present, Future* seems intent on making a perfect hemisphere, but it can never complete this task. The walls themselves get in the way, as does the wadded wax that accumulates on either side. It is not as deft as Hatoum's piece, but Kapoor's is striking for its conjunction of bodily mess with squared and

trued technical perfection. As he says of *Svayambh*, in which a train track mechanism carries its mass of wax sloppily through the Haus der Kunst in Munich, where the work is on permanent display, "the building is shitting this thing."

Kapoor's willingness to put the excrement back into modernist hygiene might be one way of understanding the postcolonial contemporaneity of his work. Most who have written on Kapoor are careful to downplay any essentialist "Indian" qualities and situate his practice in a pluralized, global market of ideas. Yet early on, historical texts by Sri Lanka—and Boston-based curator Ananda

For Kapoor, the "organic" has long been a question of non-Platonic forms, erratic shapes, and sometimes frank invaginations imposed on the standard Minimalist geometries.

Coomaraswamy were reprinted in publications on Kapoor's work, and in the current ICA catalogue, an essay by art historian Partha Mitter frankly acknowledges the "postwar phenomenon . . . of transnational artists and architects making their mark in the global community." This is a delicate balancing act, one in which Kapoor "has tended to prefer the organic and the curved to the constructivist geometry of modernism," baffling viewers through "an undefinable transcendental quality" that "may well be an unintended effect of the colonial legacy of the last two centuries, which created a culture of multiple heritage." Among the forms of alterity that Mitter identifies in Kapoor's work are the Buddhist stupa, the Mesopotamian ziggurat, the Aztec pyramid, and the mosques at Samarra, all of which the artist brings to the global table for sophisticated aesthetic consumption.

For Kapoor, the "organic" is not simply a question of materials (although the early pigment-laden works could be seen that way). Rather, the organic has long been a question of non-Platonic forms,

continued on page 407



From left: Anish Kapoor, *When I Am Pregnant*, 1992, paint on fiberglass, 71 x 71 x 17". Anish Kapoor, *Past, Present, Future*, 2006, wax, oil-based paint, 11' 3 3/8" x 29' 2 3/8" x 14' 7". View of "Anish Kapoor: *Past, Present, Future*," 2008, Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston. From left: *S-Curve*, 2006; *Inwendig Volle Figur (Internal Full Figure)*, 2006; *1000 Names*, 1979–80.

