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ARTNEWS

A Hole Beyond Measure: Anish Kapoor on His Watery New 'Descension' and the Intersection of Meaning and Not-Meaning

BY *Robert Ayers* POSTED 05/25/17 10:30 AM



Anish Kapoor, *Descension*, 2014, installation view at Brooklyn Bridge Park, New York, 2017.

JAMES EWING, PUBLIC ART FUND, NEW YORK/©2017 ANISH KAPOOR

As part of its 40th-anniversary celebration, the Public Art Fund has brought Anish Kapoor back to New York City. Eleven years ago, the artist's *Sky Mirror* became something of a tourist destination when the Public Art Fund installed it at Rockefeller Center. This time around, his work *Descension*, a continually spiraling whirlpool, has been sunk into the ground at Pier 1 of Brooklyn Bridge Park. It is sited in a green space near the bridge and adjacent to the new DUMBO Ferry terminal, so it, too, will likely be one of this summer's most popular attractions.

Even though it is surrounded by a safety rail, *Descension* is a genuinely unnerving piece. Stand on its perimeter and the vibration runs through your whole body. *Descension* is

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perfectly in keeping with a recurrent theme in Kapoor's work, a fascination with a void opening up in a physical object or location, whether an indoor space or a natural outdoor setting. Carved stones with deep dark interior spaces, holes excavated into walls or floors, and even the *Sky Mirrors* themselves have all resulted from this same fascination.

In our recent conversation in Brooklyn Bridge Park on the day of *Descension's* public opening Kapoor talked about that fascination, how the effect of the void relates to scale, his works' relationship with the public, and—most intriguing of all—about how art can carry meaning.

ARTnews: *Descension* clearly provides an experience, but what kind of experience, and does it qualify as a sculpture in your mind?

Anish Kapoor: Of course, it's a sculpture. I admit it doesn't look like a sculpture: it's a downward sculpture rather than an upward sculpture, but it is a sculpture. One thing that makes it a sculpture is that there's obviously artifice to it. It is artifice posing as a natural phenomenon. It's obviously been made, but the fiction is that it hasn't been made. That tension is an important part of the work.

If it's a sculpture, what is it made of? Is it the void at the center of the whirlpool, or is it the water that surrounds the void?

It's made of water. Water is a very, very strange material to work with. It can behave in curious plastic ways. I'm interested in its everyday-ness and the fact that it doesn't always have to be.

Okay, so it's an outdoor sculpture. You've called the outdoors "a bloody difficult place."

It is a bloody difficult place because you have to deal with the sky, you've got to deal with the earth, and you've got to deal with scale. And to make a work outdoors, you have to deal with the idea of public space. I think re-identifying how one can participate in public space is a really important problem. Is there such a thing as real participation? In this respect, there's something about *Descension* which is interesting. The railings around it are there for protection, of course, but it also makes it like a round table. We all stand with our arms on the top of the railing and take part in something together.



Anish Kapoor.
JILLIAN EDELSTEIN

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A relationship with the public is a recurrent aspect of your work, and although you're dealing with very sophisticated ideas, you keep being drawn into public debate.

Because I'm an idiot! [Laughs.]



Anish Kapoor, *Descension*, 2014, installation view at Brooklyn Bridge Park, New York, 2017.

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Pieces like *Orbit* in London's Olympic Park, or *Cloud Gate* in Chicago are works that ordinary people feel they have some kind of stake in, and have strong opinions about.

Yeah. I know what you're asking me, but it is complicated. When I first did *Cloud Gate* in Chicago, I saw those pictures of hundreds of people around the piece and I thought, "Oh God, what have I done? Is this Disneyland?" So I decided to go to Chicago to try to understand what's really going on there. It didn't take me long to understand that actually there is something mysterious about that object, and its mystery is to do with its scale. And that comes down to just one simple fact: it has no joints. There's nothing to read scale by. With a building you can measure the scale of the doors, for example, so there's

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a human proportion. *Cloud Gate* has no human reference in terms of its scale. So it does this weird thing of being a big thing and a small thing at the same time. I think that scale is truly a poetic entity, and shifting scale leaves one wondering what's really going on. I'm interested in that. With *Descension* there's a similar thing happening with scale. How deep is it? Does it go to the center of the earth? What is it? What's making it? We want a measure of what we're looking at and when the thing refuses to measure, I think something else happens.

There's more to it than that, though. On the one hand, you are uncomfortable with your pieces being popular. You've said, "Popular is crass."

Yeah. I did say that.

... But you also want them to have meaning for the people who see them.

I think that, as an audience, we want to participate. To put it simply, we want to give up something of ourselves to get some sort of return. And I think works that really invite give-and-take are important. In my case I think it has to do with getting myself out of the way. I've got nothing to say. Nothing at all. I try to deposit a phenomenon, not to tell you about it.

I think the delivery of meaning is really a problem. For me the best work sits on the edge between meaning and no meaning. Or where meaning comes about through participation rather than being delivered as a fully formed entity.

In the past you've cited Marcel Duchamp as an artist whose works achieve this.

Correct. I mean there are very, very few objects in the world that are truly, profoundly mysterious, and Duchamp made two or three of them. They remain mysterious forever. What else can you aspire to? To make something mysterious that just remains mysterious. Isn't that the best? It's truly, truly the best.

However you think about it, whichever way you go around it, it won't reveal itself. I think that is deep and true poetry. That's wonderful—truly wonderful.