powder power
ANISH KAPOOR *in* NEW DELHI

Anish Kapoor, *To Reflect an Intimate Part of the Red*, 1981. Mixed media and pigment
Image © Andrew Penketh, London Courtesy the artist

On the back of its recent hosting of the Commonwealth Games, Delhi – joint venue for the first exhibition of British-based Anish Kapoor's work in the artist's native India – is marketing itself as 'A Dream Destination' for art enthusiasts. Indeed, the number of galleries in the Indian capital has grown apace in recent years.

However, Kapoor (a past Biennale exhibitor and now one of the world's most famous artists) is on record as finding the spaces for the Delhi portion of the exhibition 'horrid', much preferring the former film lots of the Mehboob Studios in Mumbai (the other venue). One can see what he means for the opening section of the show, which is housed in the former residence of the Maharajah of Jaipur, an impressive but dowdy confection conforming to Edwin Lutyens' vast, Beaux-Arts New Delhi masterplan from 1914. Now part of India's National Gallery of Modern Art, these narrow, poorly-lit spaces resemble the corridors of a minor technical school. However, this does seem partly appropriate as these rooms are home to a display of Kapoor's bravura architectural and landscape interventions. The effect of so many small-scale models and computer mock-ups is of an unexpectedly spectacular end-of-year show at a provincial architecture school.

By contrast the main space, hosting Kapoor's 'actual' works, is housed in the spacious, recent gallery extension. Here the setting is more White Cube than E. M. Forster, and Kapoor's brilliantly coloured powder works and mirror pieces are shown to much greater effect. There is nothing here to compare with the jaw-dropping 'flayed-skin' trumpet of *Marsyas*, shoehorned into Tate Modern's vast turbine hall in the summer of 2002, but some pieces are given a new twist by the not-quite-pure 'box' space. The bulky, messy thrown-wax hemisphere of *Past, Present, Future* looks more edgy and threatening than in previous incarnations for being positioned here on an internal corner within the gallery.

Mirror pieces, such as *Iris* and *S-Curve* distort the very space around them in a strictly contemporary way. Inevitably the 3-dimesional pigment works, the production of which followed Kapoor's 1979 return trip to the subcontinent, seem the most

Anish Kapoor, *Untitled*, 1992. Sandstone & pigment, Image © Attilio Maranzano
Courtesy the artist

'Indian', with their pungent acid-yellow and red pigments encasing seemingly partially submerged forms and spilling onto the gallery floor. However, it is the later single-object works that carry an Indian connotation most strongly. A piece like *Untitled* of 1992 – with its crisp, minimal, human-height slot cut into a stelae of rich, rugged sandstone – is redolent of the dark, mysterious doorways into the inner sanctums of medieval Hindu temples. The fact that the sides and rear of the slot are coated with a deep blue pigment only intensifies the darkness and makes this tiny space (in the context of the light, bright gallery room) positively hum with contained power – an effect, again, not unlike a Hindu temple in full use at a time of festival or large-scale *puja* (worship). By contrast, the impenetrable tumulus of *Past, Present, Future* is reminiscent of the solid domed Buddhist *stupas* of central India's Madhya Pradesh and the ancient cities of Sri Lanka.

Although Kapoor has downplayed descriptions of the brightly coloured pigments employed in these works as quintessentially 'Indian', it is difficult not to make this mental leap in the context of the subcontinent, where the use of such pungent colours – often in raw powder form – is such an integral part of the visual culture. The ubiquitous forehead mark, the *bindi* or *tilak* – worn by devout women and men respectively – is formed of coloured powder. All over India, women daily decorate the thresholds of their houses with elaborate patterns traced in coloured rice paste which are known as *rangoli,* or *kolam* in the Tamil southeast.

Warli painting using coal & earth pigments
Image © Maria Jones

Powders also form a component of more 'conscious' Indian art: the paintings of the tribal Warli people from the western state of Maharashtra are enjoying a recent popularity rather like that of Aboriginal art in Australia. Warli canvases incorporate a variety of earthy backgrounds; some, from the coal-producing regions of the state, even use the Black Stuff as a background for their designs. Despite references to this vital substance in an often politicised context, Welsh art has rarely embraced coal in such a vital and literal way.

Dyeing kite strings, Ahmedabad
Images © Maria Jones

In northwestern India's other cultural metropolis, the Gujarati city of Ahmedabad, preparations were under way in early New Year for the annual *Uttarayan* kite festival. The city's narrow streets teemed with men dyeing long stretches of kite string with brilliant powders: chiefly blue and the ubiquitous Indian pink.

The use of bold, semi-mythical forms and heady colouring is everywhere in Indian art and culture, and finds a fertile contemporary expression in that country's most famous artistic 'export': the world-renowned work of Anish Kapoor.