Now you see it, now you don’t

William Packer on the extraordinary, disorienting effects of Anish Kapoor’s sculpture

Kapoor’s concern has always been with the saturated retinal effect. He admits as much, if somewhat opaquely, in his personal epigraph in the catalogue: “it think it’s my role as an artist to bring to expression, it’s not my role to be expressive. I’ve got nothing particular to say...” which is to say, see it, feel it, take it or leave it. This is fair enough, though he does spoil it rather, hinting no less categorically at having it both ways. “But it is my role... to define means that allow phenomenological and other perceptions which one might use, one might work with, and them move towards a poetic existence.” Take it as you find it, in other words, but please use your imagination, and do try to be poetic with it.

What he found, very early on, was that the pure, powdery dry, intense pigment with which he invested his ambiguously symbolic abstracted forms, has the curious effect not so much of annihilating the form as, being non-reflective and light absorbing, becoming the form itself. What is more natural, then, than to turn the idea inside out, taking away the form to leave only the colour, disembodied, yet in a most curious way giving sensual, even erotic possibilities, all those “aphenomenological and other perceptions”.

The effects are indeed extraordinary. So abrupt, so extreme, can be the shift from white wall to deepest void that the eye can barely comprehend the absence of an actual surface, reading even as a slight washback, bulge in defiance of common sense. And Kapoor has gone on to exploit other comparably and no less disconcerting, disorienting effects.

Here is the highly-polished, distorting mirror of stainless steel to stick us into the bulge in the immaculate white wall and, as we move past it, to our astonishment, it disappears. Most spectacular of all is the recent “At the Edge of the World”, more architectural installation than sculpture, a huge magenta dome suspended some 10 feet off the ground at the rim, 30 feet across and rising as high within. The weight of impenetrable colour bears down on us like a cloud spreading away to an indeterminate edge, always just out of reach. It is a stunningly engaging, absorbing piece.

And yet, is there more to sculpture than the immaterial presentation of a particular effect, be it the jelly distorting mirror of the fumoir, or the purer sensory insub- stance of diving in the imagination into the deepest, darkest velvet bag? Is effect of itself significant, profound? Or is it the portentiousness of sheer size and presentation that makes us feel it should be so, and to that extent realizable?

The exquisite abstract glass sculpture of Bernard Dejenghe, now at Galerie Blouin, tells us at once that site is not the point. Here are domestic heart-like lamps of solid glass, that with their delicately wrinkled surfaces and interior adornment, seem ineffably fragile. More