An awe-inspiring riot for the senses

Anish Kapoor’s retrospective is making a mess of the RA’s galleries, but it’s an exhilarating experience, says Richard Dorment.
Almost the opposite sensory experiences occur in Kapoor's new series of sculptures, where concrete shapes that look like slugs, turds or phalluses, are piled up to make dozens of mounds of different shapes and sizes. Some look organic, like worm casts or piles of dung, while others feel architectural, like the crumbling ruins of a forgotten civilization. Whereas in the first galleries Kapoor seduced with light, colour and sleek, inviting shapes, here he repels by using a material that absorbs the light and evokes things that either disgust us or feel ancient, damaged, decayed.

So far, you could say that for all his innovation, Kapoor is at least working with the materials and techniques of traditional sculpture. But in two other works in the show, he moves decisively into the realms of performance art. Not since the days when JMW Turner arrived at the Royal Academy on varnishing days to work in public with brush and palette knife on pictures he had submitted as mere dabs of colour, has Burlington House seen anything remotely like what will go on in those galleries this autumn.

Kapoor is using a powerful cannon to shoot heavy pellets of crimson wax from one gallery onto the wall of another. By the end of the show's run, 20 tons of wax will have built up on the gallery floor and splattered the walls.

But the essence of the art work is not on the walls, but in the performance. Every 20 minutes, an attendant in black enacts a carefully choreographed ritual, and I defy you not to feel a shiver of fear and excitement when he loads the cannon and the gallery explodes with the sound of the shot. Shooting into the Corner has been discussed in terms of its Freudian symbolism, but I think it is closer to Kapoor's intention to see it as following on from the famous sculpture Richard Serra made in 1968 by flinging molten lead against a gallery wall.

The other never-to-be-forgotten performance Kapoor is staging for this show takes the form of a 40-ton block of red wax, paint and Vaseline that moves on tracks through five galleries at the RA. So high and so broad that it only just fits through each archway, the huge object leaves a splattered residue of crimson guge on the walls and...