Anish Kapoor: Bringing beauty and beast into the drawing room

Anish Kapoor, seen here with one of his sculptures in the courtyard of the Royal Academy, has an enthralling new exhibition in London.

His monumental public sculptures have been seen by tens of millions of people from Chicago to Tel Aviv. In London alone, the 4m or so who visited Tate Modern in 2002 could not have missed his dark red, 500-foot-long (52-metre) PVC-covered “Mansyas” which soared across the Turbine Hall. That piece worked so well, the space might have been created especially for it, rather than the other way around. “I like the idea a lot that you go somewhere to see something that has a particular relevance to a particular place,” said Anish Kapoor. But he quickly added “A good work of art should be able to stand on its own.”

In the exhibition that has just opened at London’s Royal Academy and runs until December 4th, about half the works, many of them huge, were created with its gracefully proportioned rooms in mind. Are they, in the event, relevant to their setting? Not often. But some, such as the fine mirror sculptures, are certainly enhanced by it: seeing the gallery’s gilding and skylight reflected upside-down in these pieces adds to their enjoyment. Others are splendidly positioned—and one of them, “Hive”, is so powerful that it would be worth the price of admission even if the rest of the gallery were bare.

The first sculpture on view, “Tall Tree and the Eye”, stands in the academy’s courtyard. As our picture shows, this tower, made of 76 highly polished, stainless steel balls, each a metre across, is like a cloud of silver bubbles racing towards bubble heaven. Walking inside the sculpture at its base, the viewer looks up to see an endless multiplication of reflections—of himself, the handsome buildings framing the courtyard, the bubble-balls and the sky. This fine work of art, or giant-sized perceptual toy, lights up, and lightens up, its venerable surroundings. One small quibble: bigger would have been even better. In December it may be mistaken for an artsy Christmas tree. Of course, the sculptor might not mind.

The glass doors of the academy’s entrance hall allow a sneak preview of “Hive”, a huge rusted-steel sculpture on public view for the first time and actually the last work in the exhibition. Looking through the doors, one sees two colossal shapes like open thighs exposing a dark oval. Even innocents will see a vagina. Approached from the interior, however, “Hive” looks more like a magical tuber. The sculpture, taller than every entrance to the room, elicits the anxious feeling that it will grow even bigger, pushing through walls and ceiling. It is exciting and beautiful. The show couldn’t end on a higher note.

“Small”, another exhibit, has a fat, coiling fiberglass body which opens out into a luxuriously vermilion mouth. It is terrific. But other installations were considerably less appealing to this reviewer. A cannon blasts gob of lurid red wax-plugs Vaseline; a wagon-sized contraption made up of similar stuff deposits bits of itself on floors and doors as it slowly trundles through four rooms. Both these works seem unfortunate departures from Mr Kapoor’s admired elegance and refinement (though with talk of “ejaculation”, “swarm” and “penetration”, appreciation of these sculptures may divide along gender lines).

This is not a retrospective. Most of the sculpture is recent. However, the first room displays work from 1999, six years after Mr Kapoor, who was born in India, arrived in London. These pieces include “1000 Names”, a series of small objects of various shapes—geometric, flower-like, imaginary—coated with intensely coloured pigments. Whether perceived as religious or as evocations of spice markets, their freshness appealed even to people allergic to conceptual art, and his reputation was launched. Honours followed, including representing Britain at the 1990 Venice Biennale. Now 35, Mr Kapoor is the first living artist to be offered the entire main floor of the Royal Academy, another landmark in an ever more successful career.

His record price at auction is £3.8m; some private sales are rumoured to be far higher. He employs more than 20 skilled staff and can afford to create immense, costly works just for the adventure of it. One of these, “Greyman Cries, Shaman Dies, Bellowing Smoke, Beauty Evoked”, is on view. This single work, made up of 53 low-hanging pieces, was fashioned by a computer-directed machine extruding coils of cement. Its earlier working title, “Shift and Architecture”, gives an idea of the overall effect. It is one of the pieces in this uneven but enthralling exhibition that seems out of place with its elegant surroundings.