

Europe Holidays

Postcard from . . . Tilburg

A new Anish Kapoor sculpture is unveiled in a small Dutch city that punches above its weight in the world of contemporary art



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When Anish Kapoor's infinitely reflective bean-shaped sculpture "Cloud Gate" was installed in Chicago's Millennium Park in 2004, the Chicago Tribune called it "a new wonder". It quickly became an emblem of the city and one of its most-visited attractions. Earlier this month, the former queen of the Netherlands, Princess Beatrix, unveiled a new reality-distorting mirror-finished public work by Kapoor, this time in a rather less well-known setting, the Dutch city of Tilburg.

All but ignored by tourists, Tilburg is best known for its annual funfair, and as the former capital of Holland's wool trade. It lies 60 miles south of Amsterdam, an 80-minute train journey through a pastoral landscape of trees, cows and canals scarcely changed since the likes of van Ruisdael and Hobbema painted it in the 17th century. It is very much worth the trip.

“Sky Mirror (for Hendrik)”, as it is named, is a compelling piece: a twisted sheet of shining steel — its rectilinear shape and proportions (6m by 2m) inspired by a windmill sail — that rises out of a round pond at a precarious-looking tilt. “It reflects the sky behind you, not the sky you can see,” says the artist, “so it plays this kind of game with you, showing you something that’s both real and unreal.” You expect to be able to see yourself in it, but you don’t. Rather it renders you invisible in the great blue yonder. Children, he tells me, assume it’s an LED screen, playing digitised images of clouds.

It stands outside the De Pont Museum, a privately funded gallery of contemporary art, and is — unusually — a gift from the City of Tilburg to mark the 25th anniversary of the gallery’s opening. The council raised the money to pay for it in gratitude for all the good the museum has done for the city, galvanising the transformation of this once dilapidated neighbourhood.

Towards the end of his life, a local lawyer and businessman, Jan de Pont, whose fortune was founded in importing Mercedes-Benz cars, decided his hometown needed an art gallery: a place the city could be proud of and, in the words of its director, Hendrik Driessen, who has run it since the start, “to stimulate contemporary art”.

What sets it apart from other such galleries bequeathed by wealthy citizens is that De Pont was not a collector so left no inventory of works to exhibit. Rather he provided a building — a no-longer-viable 1930s brick-built wool mill he had rescued from bankruptcy in the 1960s and whose remaining employees were hired by the foundation — along with an endowment with which to build a collection and allow it to operate independently.

The fund was generous, but not infinite (it has a staff of just 18, including guards), yet Driessen has amassed a holding of astonishing quality: more than 800 works by 80 artists, among them Ai Weiwei, Christian Boltanski, Tacita Dean, Marlene Dumas, Anton Henning (who also designed the café), Howard Hodgkin and many more.

Much of Driessen’s success both in the shows he curates and in acquiring work is attributable to his rapport with artists, and his relationship with Kapoor is a case in

point. “Hendrik, bless him, has collected my work over a number of years, which is great, and I’ve had two exhibitions here,” Kapoor tells me as we walk around “Sky Mirror” at the opening. “He’s allowed me to show my practice as it really is,” he continues. “Which for an artist is not just a question of displaying your work. Great museums allow artists to use their work to explore new ideas, to experiment.” This, for example, is the first time Kapoor has collaborated with his wife, the garden designer Sophie Walker, who conceived the surrounding landscape, a series of interconnected concave ponds, convex hummocks and curving paths all built from the same brick as the original mill, around which has been planted a garden of rare specimens collected from seeds from all over the temperate world that will change radically with the seasons. All the plants are deciduous, notably several species of sorbus, which were a riot of russets and yellows.

Kapoor’s first show at the gallery was in 1995, and there are now 10 of his pieces in the De Pont’s collection. Of course as his reputation has grown, so has the value of his work. “When I called the gallery about ‘Vertigo’,” Driessen recalls another reflective work of Kapoor’s now in the collection, “the price was horrendous. It was only when I went to visit Anish that it became affordable”. He gave them quite a discount on “Sky Mirror”, too: the total budget was €500,000, a steal when you consider the fabrication and that the admittedly much larger “Cloud Gate” cost a reported \$23m.

“But then an institution like this is wonderful,” says Kapoor, “because it makes a commitment to living artists, and it supports them throughout their careers. And that makes for quite a surprising collection. The other day I was walking around, thinking: ‘Hendrik is much more catholic in his tastes than I am.’ And that’s a good thing. If one has too rigid, too tight a view of what it means to be contemporary, you stop being contemporary. What this museum says is that the contemporary matters.”

Details

Claire Wrathall was a guest of the [De Pont Museum](#). It is open from Tuesday to Sunday 11am to 5pm; admission €10

Illustration by Matthew Cook