

VULTURE
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Taking in Jeff Koons, Creator and Destroyer of Worlds

By Jerry Saltz



Koons's *Play-Doh* (1994–2014), at the Whitney.

It's all helixed into this: something fantastic, something disastrous. "Jeff Koons: A Retrospective" is upon us. One can't think of the last 30 years in art without thinking of Koons, a lot. I've witnessed this career from very close range. I have seen him transform himself into the Koons hologram we know now; him polishing sculptures late at night in galleries before and during his shows; not selling his work; almost going broke; charging less for a sculpture than it cost to produce. In a Madrid club in 1986, I watched him confront a skeptical critic while smashing himself in the face, repeating, "You don't get it, man. I'm a fucking genius." The fit passed when another critic who was also watching this, the brilliant Gary Indiana, said, "You are, Jeff." I agreed.

No, Koons is not "our Warhol," as so many claim. Warhol's complex aura changed everything, whereas Koons is cheery, centerless, more of a bland Mitt Romney Teletubby than a mysterious force of nature. But once upon a time, it was thrilling to live through the undeniable challenging newness and strangeness of his art, the novelty and luxury of watching money pour into the art world and focus on him, seeing Koons twist all this for art's purposes while providing respite from older, much more doctrinaire, appropriation artists and conceptualists. It's hard to see it now, but he did break some ice. Watching Koons between 1985 and 1992 was like being on a roller coaster, beholding the readymade crossed with greed, money, creepy beauty, and the ugliness of our culture. We witnessed this squirrely celebrity as he was born out of a small East Village gallery. Everything about him was played out in public: the hype, the high prices, the collector love, the critical cringing, his Twinkie-like quotes, like "It's like I have God on my side or something," and the almost-career-killing spectacle he put up in 1991, the show of enormous photographic paintings of himself with waxed chest and having anal sex with his porn-star ex-wife, Ilona Staller. In part owing to Koons, art in general regained the power to show us

what Wallace Stevens called “the possible nest in the invisible tree.” Koons helped art reenter public discourse while also opening up the art world. A generation of artists and gallerists who had similar aspirations took the stage to excellent effect in the 1990s. That’s when their world began to mutate into what it is today.

Which is what? The very environment he did so much to reengineer, followed by the mad amplification of the luxury economy, has meant that Koons’s art now seems to celebrate the ugliest parts of culture. The rich and greedy buy it because it lauds them for their greediness, their wealth, power, terrible taste, and bad values. Just as Koons was a positive emblem of an era when art was reengaging with the world beyond itself, he is now emblematic of one where only masters of the universe can play.

This isn’t shooting the messenger. Few artists have ever exercised such precision targeting of an audience. Koons’s ideas about his work — even if they have never made any sense to me (likening his art to a “sacred heart of Jesus”) — are always stated up front. His notion of how to behave as an artist is crystal clear. I love the weird, sick, fascist undertones of that pose he struck, naked and lifting weights, for an Annie Leibovitz picture in this month’s *Vanity Fair*. It’s impossible to imagine any other artist doing this. Especially a male one.

Can we look at Koons at all with the ever-present knowledge of how the feeding-frenzied art market enables him? He and other superstars are able to employ huge teams of assistants to make high-production art that sells like crystal meth for obscene prices to megacollectors and museums with atria that need filling. Moreover, his retrospective arrives at a moment when museums themselves are at a tipping point, getting ever bigger and more obsessed with newness — often at the expense of their permanent collections. Most curatorial decisions today come off as predictable. Even a massive earnest undertaking like this will strike many as simply the ratification of the inevitable — or worse, an afterthought.

Which leaves one to wonder if there’s any way a Koons show can enlighten or surprise, let alone shock. Before even seeing “A Retrospective,” I knew that there are whole bodies of Koons’s work I have never related to. I’ve loved a handful of paintings for looking like they’ve never been touched by living beings but have been made by scores, maybe hundreds, of hands, almost transcending human touch, for their mutilating of ambiguities. Most of the others, though, strike me as hyper-anal-retentive Pop collages peppered with cartoon creatures and vulvas. I don’t like his work when it’s all about technical prowess, shininess, cuteness, or replication of an everyday object or children’s toy. Except for the giant *Balloon Dog* (oddly, only the red one) and a few of the other huge, shiny baubles for billionaires, I don’t like much that he made between 1994 and 2007. Nor does much of the work from the “Statuary” series, from 1986, transcend its buzz of fun: These nifty, simple casts of everyday objects or works of art have density and surface, but little more. And I don’t get much from the carved polychromed wood and porcelain sculptures of bears, Buster Keaton, and St. John the Baptist from the 1988 “Banality” series. They are all curio, empty idea, obviousness, control, and kitsch. The big exception from this series is the large porcelain Michael Jackson cradling his beloved pet monkey, Bubbles, in which both figures have painted white faces — a sculpture that should remain uncanny as long as the memory of this pop star lasts. Otherwise, though, this work never changes or displaces thought. (*String of Puppies* is riveting, too, even though it got Koons in trouble for supposedly stealing the image from a postcard. He lost the case, even though his work has no resemblance to the so-called stolen one. Absurd.)

The Whitney’s show shocked me — by catching me completely off guard. Ingeniously organized by Scott Rothkopf to entirely bypass hysteria and spectacle, “A Retrospective” is as near to a great show of this colossally controlling artist as will be possible as long as Koons is alive. For one thing, it’s well installed. Koons installs his shows like crowded showrooms, but the roughly 150 objects in “A Retrospective” all have space, pacing, placement. The show looks great. In Rothkopf, Koons has met his almost-equal obsessive, but without the artist’s showboating. Haters will hate, but “A Retrospective” will allow anyone with an open mind to grasp why Koons is such a complicated,

bizarre, thrilling, alien, annoying artist.

Koons has always worked in very distinct series, and the show is installed thus. This allows viewers to track his development, concerns, material hunger, peaks, plateaus, and valleys. Start your tour on the museum's second floor, and you'll instantly be confronted by two rows of vacuum cleaners stacked in acrylic vitrines, internally lit by exposed fluorescent lights. These are from "The New," made beginning in 1980. The installation discourages walking around these aberrant things, but that doesn't diminish the work's undeniable optical power. It's hard to overstate how different this work was from everything else being made at the time. Anywhere. The works weren't — aren't — the snazzy cross-breeds of Donald Judd, Dan Flavin, Duchamp, and Warhol, or only about commodity culture or post-Pop. You're seeing Koons's ability to tease anthropomorphic meaning from everyday objects. These works have a totemic quality, like high-tech Neolithic stones or temple sentinels. The vitrines are space-age Egyptian sarcophagi and canopic jars for preserving these industrial-age machines for the afterlife. Breath, breathing, making things vividly visible, placing objects in suspended physical states, visual theatrics executed with meticulousness: These are ongoing concerns for this artist. The objects are visual anomalies, exuding hollowness. You look in, and nothing happens. Here is Koons's great creepy beauty.

Before you continue, I'd advise making a quick detour into the small gallery on your right, which contains work from the late 1970s and 1980. Almost every idea Koons has ever investigated is already here, played out in primitive inflatable flowers and bunnies set on plastic or mirrors, or toasters and teapots mounted on fluorescent lights. Then turn around and proceed through the vacuum cleaners to one of my favorite Koons works, *One Ball Total Equilibrium Tank (Spalding Dr. J 241 Series)*, from 1985. A single orange basketball hovers miraculously in a vitrine filled with clear liquid. The thing looks less like art than a high-school science experiment or something from a magic museum. Here are Koons's obsessions with balance, entropy, and drop-dead honesty. Forget the trick — chemicals in the ball and water create this almos- impossible stasis — and consider instead Damien Hirst's enormous shark in a tank of formaldehyde. Unlike Koons, the Englishman employs clearly visible monofilament line to hang the shark in this state. That isn't "art" — it's a stage-prop device that produces gee-whiz. Whereas Koons is interested in the polycentric mysteries of inside-ness, of objects in space, not surface effects. The ball is like some alien zygote hovering in a dormant state in embryonic fluid.

Rothkopf opens the third floor with a bang, a gallery with the 1986 "Statuary" series that centers on Koons's summa, *Rabbit*. The manifest presence of this oscillating object, originally exhibited in a 1986 four-person show at Sonnabend Gallery in Soho, took Koons into the very heart of hollowness — and made him. A highly polished stainless cast of an inflatable bunny with crinkly phallic ears holds a carrot, giving off the mien of a golden calf, an idol of the id, an icon for something not yet made, a kaleidoscopic looking-glass that creates cracks in meaning. We're psychically aware how Koons has captured his breath inside this and made it last forever. In all his attempts to end entropy, *Rabbit* comes closest — even if it's doomed, like all things, to become Shelley's Ozymandias. The cacophony of clarity that is *Rabbit*'s reflective, undulating surface turns the world into parabolas of distortion. Rabbit is simultaneously a camera seeing you as you see yourself in its twisted topography. It's like an anamorphic mirror placed in the center of space that organizes the world around itself. It's a family tree of one, a shadow of doubt.

In this part of his career, Koons was ruling the roost. Then everything fell apart on November 23, 1991, when "Made in Heaven" opened at Sonnabend Gallery. I remember that day, in front of the painting of Staller straddling and being penetrated by Koons, when I saw Jeff with the legendary gallerist Leo Castelli and noted the look of horror and awe on the dealer's face. Koons looked at me and said, "Jerry, don't you think that Ilona's asshole is the center of the universe?" The paintings appeared among marble self-portrait busts, polychrome sculptures of dogs and cherubs, small glass works depicting Koons getting a blow job or performing cunnilingus. The gallery was packed every day for a month. Few male artists in the history of art have shown themselves with

an erection, let alone having sex. Koons had found a point in taste lower than pornography. Then the axe dropped. The village turned on him.

In an art world that said it wanted people to be free, at the exact moment everyone rallied to defend artists like Robert Mapplethorpe and Karen Finley for their forays into sexuality, Koons had gone too far. He became the pariah that many see him as today, a sort of American Taliban. Rosalind Krauss called him “repulsive”; Yve-Alain Bois went with “crude”; Benjamin Buchloh wrote that Koons is among the “neurasthenic victims of opportunistic assimilation” (whatever that means). The local art writer John Yau later sniffed that he boycotted a Koons public sculpture because “some things you shouldn’t do.” So pure; so tenured. Whatever. I still say it’s thrilling to see this work in a museum — even if the objects are better than the paintings.

Since then, Koons has never been in a Whitney Biennial or Documenta. He’s continually accused of cynicism. I think that only a cynic could see cynicism in this cosmically, freakishly sincere true believer: The 40-foot-high topiary sculpture of a West Highland terrier that Koons created the following year in Arolsen, Germany, isn’t here, but another equally great topiary work, *Split Rocker*, now stands in front of Rockefeller Center. I’m still ruminating on this work, but I appreciate its disruption of scale, standing as it does like a squat monument to schizophrenia, the mysteries of childhood, and inner rites of passage.

I was certain the fourth floor would just be silliness, shininess, filled with flops and fatuous paintings. They’re all here, yes. A big bronze Liberty Bell, a life-size granite gorilla, polychrome aluminum casts of lobsters and inflatable pool toys, and other similar works come off as glitzy doodads and gewgaws. Yet, and most shocking of all, the fourth floor of this show took my breath away. Off the elevator is a complete unknown, a work that took him 20 years to complete. *Play-Doh* (1994–2014) is a ten-foot-high multicolored polychromed aluminum hill. It makes its debut here. I don’t know what to make of this imploded rainbow, except that I flashed on Koons as a modern mound builder, making sculpture that is instantly archaeological, mystical, able to mark a future burial of contemporary culture. (That the most recent piece in an artist’s retrospective might be one of his/her best is beyond remarkable.) Then, in the last gallery on this floor, are three mirror-polished high-chromium-stainless-steel giant figures: the so-so sapphire *Metallic Venus* (2010–2012); the gigantic canary-colored remake of Bernini’s *Pluto and Proserpina*; and my favorite, the tangerine *Balloon Venus (Orange)* — Koons’s super-strange-sexy version of the Venus of Willendorf. All exist in a state of absolute-zero frozen liquidity. They are monstrosities brought to beautiful Frankenstein life.

Even the three plaster-and-glass-gazing-ball sculptures in the lobby gallery took on a new presence as I left the show. But it may all come to naught. We live in an art world of excess, hubris, turbocharged markets, overexposed artists, and the eventocracy, where art fairs are the new biennials. Shows like this cost millions of dollars to mount; once they’re up, mass audiences will gawk at the “one of the world’s most expensive living artists.” It becomes a giant ad, and the spectacle of more of Koons’s work up at auction awaits.

Today, he’s the most reviled artist alive. A few days ago, I posted a photo of one of his paintings on Facebook, and hundreds of artists expressed strong antipathy towards him. It was akin to what de Kooning reportedly said to Warhol: “You’re a killer of art, you’re a killer of beauty ... you’re even a killer of laughter.” We live in a starker, harder art world than we did before Koons. As perfectly executed as “A Retrospective” is, it’s also a culmination, a last hurrah of this era — even as the era keeps going. It is the perfect final show for the Whitney’s building. Artists in Koons’s category no longer even belong to the art world. In fact, “A Retrospective” confirms that the art world doesn’t belong to the art world anymore.

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