



ART & DESIGN | ART REVIEW

## Shapes of an Extroverted Life

‘Jeff Koons: A Retrospective’ Opens at the Whitney

By ROBERTA SMITH JUNE 26, 2014

There are so many strange, disconcerting aspects to Jeff Koons, his art and his career that it is hard to quite know how to approach his first New York retrospective, the Whitney Museum of American Art’s largest survey devoted to a single artist.

First there are the notorious sex pictures from his “Made in Heaven” series of 1989-91, big paintings printed in oil inks on canvas that depict the artist in stagy foreplay, and beyond, with his wife then, the angelic Ilona Staller, known in her porn-star days as La Cicciolina. There is the automaton-like presence of the artist himself, as freakish as Andy Warhol, but far wordier, seemingly more extroverted and given to a slightly nonsensical Koonsspeak that casts him as the truest believer in a cult of his own invention. Like his art, he is completely sincere.

Then there are all the big, often shiny sculptures, framed posters and glossy paintings, all tending toward an almost brain-freezing hyper-realism that isolates and fastidiously transforms objects from all corners of contemporary life: household appliances, gift store tchotchkes, advertising posters, children’s toys. And, finally, there is the way that these works — which are often exorbitantly expensive to make and frequently break auction records — can unavoidably reek of Gilded Age excess, art star hubris and the ever-widening inequality gap that threatens this country.

So it seems fitting that you may actually recoil when you step off the elevator into the first gallery of “Jeff Koons: A Retrospective,” the lucid, challenging, brilliantly installed exhibition organized by Scott Rothkopf, the Whitney’s associate director of programs. The show is a farewell blowout before the Whitney cedes its Marcel Breuer building to its new tenant, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and heads for new digs downtown.

Its opening salvo is a stunning allée of bizarre Pharaonic splendor: six pieces consisting of gleaming vacuum cleaners encased in plexiglass and suffused with an insistent glow: Every appliance, or pair of them, rests on a raft of fluorescent lights that almost deflect your gaze.

Odes to domesticity, hygiene and American assembly lines that also evoke levitating mummies in see-through sarcophagi, these works date from the early 1980s and are part of a series called “The New.” The name signals Mr. Koons’s obsession with their virginal purity, and his interest in isolating an essential pleasure of consumerism: newness itself. Conflating Minimalism, Pop and Conceptual Art in a gift-wrapped version of Duchamp’s ready-made, they were the first of several shocks — “Is it art?” “Is it any good?” “Do I love it or hate it?” — that Mr. Koons has regularly delivered to his expanding audience over the last four decades.

Impersonal yet deeply familiar, the vacuum cleaner pieces introduce the essential seduction-repulsion dynamic that is basic to most of Mr. Koons’s art. Further along in the show, you may be taken by a vase of outsize flowers, carved in wood by skillful German artisans. It is gorgeously colorful, deliciously magnified and a respite from the sex paintings surrounding it. But look more closely: Many of the flowers’ centers are brown bumpy discs that broadcast a creepy fecundity suggestive of erupting skin, simmering mud or sewage.

The erotic and, to some extent, the scatological are never far beneath the surface in Mr. Koons’s art. Exhibit A is “Play-Doh,” a new, almost certain masterpiece whose sculptural enlargement of a rainbow pile of radiant chunks captures exactly the matte textures of the real thing, but also evokes paint, dessert and psychedelic poop.

The most cogent account of Mr. Koons’s career in over two decades, this show benefits from a meeting of like sensibilities. Mr. Koons is a famous perfectionist who takes many years (“Play-Doh” is dated 1994-2014), spends much money and often ends up inventing new techniques to get exactly what he wants in both his sculptures and his paintings, which are made by scores of highly skilled artists whom he closely supervises.

Mr. Rothkopf is equally meticulous, as suggested by the installations of his previous Whitney surveys of the work of Glenn Ligon and Wade Guyton. He’s also been fascinated by Mr. Koons’s work for nearly 20 years, since, as a teenager, coming across an exhibition catalog of his art. The depth of his fascination is apparent in his accomplished, jargon-free catalog essay, an

elaborate account of Mr. Koons's art that underscores the way it entwines with his life, beginning with his father's home décor store, where "he witnessed firsthand the power of merchandise to tell stories and seduce."

Mr. Rothkopf also marshals an elaborate if somewhat defensive argument for the way Mr. Koons self-consciously exposes the mechanisms of money and publicity in his art, in essence having his cake and eating it, too.

Mr. Rothkopf has imposed a classical installation on Mr. Koons's restless exploration of objects. Symmetry and perpendicularity reign, with fewer than five sculptures placed diagonally.

Arranged chronologically, mostly one series to a gallery, the show fills five of the museum's six floors. It charts Mr. Koons's progress from visually enhanced ready-mades, like the vacuum cleaners; to existing objects transformed in appearance and value by being cast in bronze or stainless steel; through various kinds of remade objects, like his famous balloon sculptures, flimsy little nothings monumentalized in mirror-polished stainless steel.

Equally clear is his habit of circling back to expand on ideas. For example, in the small gallery devoted to the earliest works, we see that Mr. Koons first glamorized dime store items — mostly inflatable plastic flowers — by displaying them on tilelike mirrors. In other instances, what's glammed up are piles of colorful kitchen sponges, unmistakable seeds for the giant "Play-Doh."

Certain themes recur: the abiding interest in flotation, inflation and hollow forms as states of grace; the human desire for things, for other people and for joy; the inherent energy of objects; the human life cycle. There is also a progression from functional objects to nonessentials and knickknacks, then to children's toys — among our first sources of visual pleasure — and other art. "The New" gives way to the "Equilibrium" series of 1985, starring immaculate incubating basketballs afloat in fish tanks and including framed posters of professional basketball stars swamped in new basketballs, alongside pieces of sea diving equipment cast perversely in bronze — and most sexily in "Lifeboat." (There's nothing quite like smooth inflated bronze.)

In the ice-cold "Luxury and Degradation" series, function takes a holiday. Here the accouterments of alcohol consumption are cast in stainless steel, which Mr. Koons called "proletarian platinum," while the walls display framed liquor ads, with their amber fluids, printed on canvas.

If you are drawn to the "Baccarat Crystal Set" and disdain the jokey "Fisherman Golfer" caddy of drink-mixing utensils, shake hands with your own

snobbery and class comfort. This conflict steps up as the show proceeds, in the mash-ups of inflatable pool toys and cheap lawn furniture of the “Popeye” series (although stuttering intersections of chairs and seals can bring to mind Duchamp’s “Nude Descending a Staircase” paintings).

As for the new 10-foot-tall, shiny, yellow stainless version of Bernini’s tumultuous sculpture of the abduction of Proserpina by Pluto — actually based on a small 18th-century porcelain copy — Mr. Koons converts it into a fancy flower box by adding planters with white petunias. This seems *déclassé* (but there I go again). Maybe Mr. Koons wanted to anchor the work’s rippling surfaces and reflections, which give body to the golden liquids of the “Luxury and Degradation” liquor ads.

Throughout, jolting shifts in color, scale or subject matter encourage the heightened visual awareness that Mr. Koons’s work demands, and rewards. There are surprises around every corner. On the third floor, a row of 10 figures in polychrome wood or porcelain from Mr. Koons’s “Banality” series of 1988 form a single confrontational row in a narrow gallery. Including an amorous Pink Panther; a pig flanked by angels; a London bobby befriending a goofy bear; and, best of all, an ostentatious yet poignant rendition of Michael Jackson and his pet monkey, Bubbles, each of these works is a different collision of art with religion, sex or kitsch.

This series cost Mr. Koons some of his fan base, but laid the foundation for most of his subsequent work. He opened his art directly to art history, waded deep into popular culture and replaced ready-mades with figures based on either objects or images that he combined, tweaked and enlarged as he pleased. A piglet and a penguin in the arms of an imposing porcelain statue of St. John the Baptist are certainly not in the Leonardo da Vinci painting on which it is based. Hereafter, careful manipulations of scale become central to his expression.

Other shifts are quieter but no less edifying. One occurs when you exit the gallery of the fraught and busy sex paintings and find yourself surrounded by the big, serenely blank tinted mirrors of the “Easy Fun” series, each cut in the implicitly friendly shape of a cartoon animal. It is a bit of innocence regained.

Children’s toys and antiquities — forms retrieved from deep in our personal or cultural pasts — inspire many works on the fourth floor. Here you will find “Play Doh,” “Balloon Dog (Yellow)” and “Balloon Venus (Orange),” an extraordinary study in voluptuous geometry inspired by the Venus of Willendorf. There are also less felicitous efforts like “Hulk (Organ),” “Dogpool (Panties)” and the stupefying “Liberty Bell,” an exact copy (dated 2006-14), apparently indistinguishable from the one in Philadelphia that Mr. Koons visited as a child. A fake ready-made?

Despite some ups and downs, this is a gripping show. It chronicles a sculptural career that is singular for its profusion of color, crafts and materials; its opening up of historical avenues closed by Minimalism; and its faith in both accessibility and advanced art, that other New. And it’s a great way for the Whitney to decamp, tossing the Met the keys, knowing that we won’t soon forget that it still owns the place.

“Jeff Koons: A Retrospective” is on view through Oct. 19 at the Whitney Museum of American Art, 945 Madison Avenue, at 75th Street; 212-570-3600, [whitney.org](http://whitney.org).

A version of this review appears in print on June 27, 2014, on page C19 of the New York edition with the headline: *Shapes of an Extroverted Life*.