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This page, left: **View of "Jeff Koons," 2008,** Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago. From left: *New Hoover Deluxe Shampoo Polishers, New Shelton Wet/Dry 10-Gallon Displaced Tripledecker*, 1981–87; *Balloon Dog (Orange)*, 1994–2000; *Pink Panther*, 1988; *Caterpillar Ladder*, 2003; *Elephant*, 2003; *Buster Keaton*, 1988; and *Triple Hulk Elvis I*, 2007. Photo: Nathan Keay. Right: **Jeff Koons, *Bear and Policeman*, 1988,** polychromed wood, 85 x 43 x 37". From the series "Banality," 1988. Opposite page, from left: **Jeff Koons, *Three Ball Total Equilibrium Tank (Dr. J Silver Series)*, 1985,** glass, steel, sodium chloride reagent, distilled water, and basketballs, 60½ x 48¾ x 13¼". From the series "Equilibrium," 1983–93. **Jeff Koons, *Ilona's Asshole*, 1991,** oil inks silk-screened on canvas, 90 x 60". From the series "Made in Heaven," 1989–91. **Jeff Koons, *Caterpillar Ladder*, 2003,** polychromed aluminum, aluminum, and plastic, 84 x 44 x 76". From the series "Popeye," 2002–.

Jeff Koons

MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART, CHICAGO

Graham Bader

IN APRIL 2004, the *New York Times Magazine* published an excerpt from the then forthcoming book by David Brooks, the newspaper's main op-ed purveyor of commonsense banalities. Titled "Our Sprawling, Supersize Utopia," the essay argued that exurbia—that land of megachurches, McMansions, and endless fields of perfectly groomed grass—was a uniquely American heaven on earth. This paved idyll, Brooks contended, is driven by what he termed "the Paradise Spell":

> [The Spell] is . . . the tendency to see the present from the vantage point of the future. It starts with imagination—the ability to fantasize about what some imminent happiness will look like. Then the future-minded person leaps rashly toward that gauzy image. He or she is subtly more attached to the glorious future than to the temporary and unsatisfactory present.

Brooks may have a fondness for smiling proletarians on tractors, for the spell he describes is none other than the guiding aesthetic premise of socialist realism—which, according to Stalin's cultural commissar Andrei Zhdanov, aimed to look beyond the unredeemed reality of the present to "catch a glimpse of our tomorrow" and thus capture the imminent happiness of "reality in its revolutionary development."

Brooks and Zhdanov are in the air at the Chicago Museum of Contemporary Art's current Jeff Koons retrospective. The exhibition's gallery guide touts Koons's aspiration to create work that functions as "a powerful vehicle for self-acceptance and a democratic tool to transform the world"; its catalogue praises his celebration of "comfort as the ultimate way to achieve salvation"; and the artist himself, in a foyer video, discusses art's ability "to let people know that everything about them is perfect"—the MCA, in short, presents Koons's work as an embodiment of Zhdanovian-Brooksian aesthetic utopianism, full of transformative promise and hopes of a better tomorrow. The docent tours follow right along: The twinned basketballs of *Two Ball 50/50 Tank (Spalding Dr. J Silver Series, Spalding Dr. J 241 Series)*, 1985, I learned, exemplify the ideal of a balanced life, as does the work's neighbor in the Chicago installation, *Michael Jackson and Bubbles*, 1988 (this I was less clear on).

Such rhetoric is old hat for Koons, of course. And if the degree to which the MCA aligns its exhibition with such pronouncements is jarring, I suppose there is little for a museum to do. Koons repeatedly stresses that a taking leave of judgment is central to his practice, and so the MCA, working closely with the artist, presents his work accordingly. The installation, filling the museum's two main temporary-exhibition galleries, further excludes any critical narrative: Forgoing overt historical or thematic organization in favor of an open display-floor model, it presents Koons's entire career as one vast, timeless spread. And while a small companion exhibition upstairs, "Everything's Here: Jeff Koons and His Experience of Chicago," acts as a kind of counter to this shiny-smorgasbord effect—presenting local artists such as Ed Paschke and Jim Nutt, whom Koons knew while a student at the Art Institute, it makes a provincial plea to see Koons's universalized kitsch through the particular lens of 1970s Chicago—this effort seems futile. For all the historical specificity we may throw at him, Koons's practice still seems the product of its own planet, some strange and distant inversion of our own.

Glistening and playful, the Chicago show looks great. But faced with such a broad and tantalizing spread, just what are we to make of the frequently overwhelming aesthetic appeal of Koons's work? He tells us, for instance, that his goal in the giant polychrome wood and porcelain works of the 1988 "Banality" series was to capture the feeling "of lying in the grass and taking a deep breath" that he associates with the simple colors and sentimental charms of Hummel figurines, the German ur-kitsch objects on which the series is based. Fair enough: The "Banality" works—encompassing Michael and Bubbles as well as *Pink Panther* and my personal favorite, the seven-foot-high *Bear and Policeman*—certainly match and surpass both the sentimentality and craftsmanship of their models. But our sensation upon looking at these works is not so much of lazy afternoons in the grass or of a release from hierarchies of taste (as the artist and exhibition catalogue discuss them) as of a kind of magnetic attraction, almost against our will, toward their kitsch intensity. As Arthur Danto has written, the works are "unnatural wonders."

Koons clearly aspires to such visual delectation and allure; he *is* a master of composition, particularly sculptural, and the "Banality" works are his greatest achievement. He is also—and this claim comes less readily—a master dialectician. For all his speaking out *against* critical judgment—his stated desire to just make us happy—it is the simultaneous pull of repulsion and attraction, and our awareness of this mutually opposed response, that structures our attention to his work. Hummel figurines, notably, originated in mid-'30s Germany, where they became an instant hit for a nation eager to withdraw from the complexities of modernity. But Nazi cultural censors were in fact none too pleased with their popularity—the frequently tattered clothes and cherubic

infantilism of Hummel characters were seen as a faulty model for straight-and-narrow Aryan youth. If these cultural specifics are likely unknown to Koons, I doubt they would surprise him. For the motivating concern of his work is less the relationship of high and low than that of prohibition and desire—and, specifically, their determinative force in our responses to aesthetic and commodity objects alike. The kitsch intensity of *Bear and Policeman* does not so much provide an escape from aesthetic judgment, that is, as make judgment itself, always already ideological, the very focus of attention. Why do you both love *and* hate me, it asks—a question intensified by the fact that, at seven feet high, the work addresses us not as some windowsill collectible but as a subject on equal footing.

Whatever Koons's ideas on history and aesthetics, the intricacy of his *art*-historical thinking resonates throughout the Chicago show. One of the benefits of the exhibition's open structure and comprehensive reach is the emergence of new connective strands across both his individual oeuvre and the history of art as a whole, revealing

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Koons to be an unusually intrepid scavenger. The legacies of the readymade and Surrealist object are, unsurprisingly, evident throughout the MCA's galleries. More specifically, Koons echoes Duchamp's "Large Glass" in the suspended forms and transparent vertical planes of his "Equilibrium" tanks, 1985; Dan Flavin's and Donald Judd's Minimalism in the merging of fluorescent tubes and (specific) commodity objects in his early "Pre-New," 1979–80, and "The New" pieces, 1980–87; Craig Kauffman's Plexiglas bubbles in the wall protuberance of *Moon (Violet)*, 1995–2000; Roy Lichtenstein's jewels and mirrors in *Diamond (Yellow)*, 1994–2005, and the "Easyfun" series, 1999–2000; and of course Andy Warhol is nearly everywhere, most evidently in the repeated frontal figures of the "Hulk Elvis" series, 2005–, and the shimmering metallic balloons of the "Celebration" works, 1994–. But for me the show's most compelling art-historical reference was of a distinctly riper vintage. Lurking behind its lone partition wall, the MCA's clandestine installation of the "Made in Heaven" works, 1989–91, immediately recalls the Metropolitan Museum's own discreetly sequestered display, in its recent Courbet retrospective, of *The Origin of the World*—as whose pendant the similarly cropped *Ilona's Asshole*, 1991, thus emerges.

While Courbet's 1866 painting reveals the source of all human life, Koons's later silk-screen-on-canvas piece presents the origin of all human . . . well, you get the point. So, I think, does Koons. For not only is shit, within psychoanalytic discourse, understood to be lurking behind just the kind of obsessive perfectionism and fascination with jewel-like splendor for which Koons is legendary (the work becomes a sublimated form of anal eroticism), but it is also, for Freud, the child's "first gift." Jean-Joseph Goux extrapolated this notion six decades later, writing that "what excrement represents above all, in general, is a value of affective giving and exchange . . . *in order to give pleasure* to someone or for one's own pleasure." Goux sees the primary cultural isomorph of excrement-as-affective-exchange to be *money*—as opposed to *currency*, an organizing system of equivalence, which is homologous to the phallus (that other star of *Ilona's Asshole*).

Goux's language of gifts and pleasure could just as well be Koons's or the MCA's own. But more significantly, his contrast between the affective value of money and the organizing structure of currency points to the essential opposition of Koons's production itself. For what are the simultaneous pulls of attraction and repulsion generated by his work but a conflict between overwhelming affect and structuring system? As much as we may know we should despise his works—that they are properly understood to be "valueless" as aesthetic objects—we are nevertheless mesmerized by the sheer power of their gift-giving drive, their obscene desire to tell us that everything, just everything, is perfect. Hence also the immeasurable sums of money, stretching infamously to the point of insolvency, necessary to produce and buy them: This is the stuff of pure affective exchange, beyond and against any rational economic logic.

Here is where Koons's aesthetic idealism fundamentally differs from that of Brooks and Zhdanov. For both of the latter, gauzy utopianism exists beyond judgment, serving instead as an engine for the gloriously functional systems of exurban development and Stalinist cultural planning—forging a path to the better tomorrow promised by both. How this turned out in Stalin's Russia we all know well enough; meanwhile, what Brooks once termed "Paradise Drive" is increasingly filled with foreclosure signs and the moldy stench of abandoned swimming pools. Koons's art, by contrast, is blissfully, aggressively antifunctional—and actively foregrounds, in its glistening perfection, both the precarious ideological stakes and intensely affective nature of aesthetic judgment (that bear and policeman again) as well as the delicacy of its own dance with degradation and decay. Its balloons, just as our own recent bubbles, seem ready to burst; its mammoth porcelain figures are one fall away from shattering; and its painted bodies are most often dismembered or simply vacant. These works stand, like the subject of Brooks's Paradise Spell, between the present and the future—but they betray less heaven's proximity than the obscene folly of its very idea. □

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