

GAGOSIAN GALLERY



How Jeff Koons Inspires Awe, Outrage, and Ultimately Makes Art You Will Remember

Casey Lesser



Jeff Koons, Split-Rocker, 2000, Public Art Fund

Say what you will about Jeff Koons, but the man makes accessible art. Since breaking out in the mid-'80s and launching a roller coaster of a career, Koons has rubbed the art world—and the world at large—the wrong way on countless occasions. Yet, for every bold strike against him, there is an engaging (albeit, at times, in a repulsive kind of way) body of work to back it up. Notable episodes include his 1989 “Made In Heaven” show—a series of hyperbolic glamor shots of sexual encounters with his pornstar wife—which made him an art world pariah; and his 2012 exhibition at the Palace of Versailles, where his inflatable pool toy sculptures were largely deemed disgraceful. While he has become synonymous with a public persona as polished and calculated as one of his giant balloon animals, a particularly exorbitant auction record, and a factory-like studio where 128 assistants and administrators take painstaking feats to task in order to realize their boss’s dreams, he is first a mainstay for producing captivating and genuinely entertaining art. Additionally while Koons ultimately crafts a singular brand of luxury, it’s peppered with human experience and hints of universal truths that have the power to allure an audience and cancel out the intimidation factor that so often construes art to be an upper-class commodity or conceptually incomprehensible. From “A Retrospective” at the Whitney Museum of American Art—the artist’s first major museum show in New York, and the Whitney’s last hurrah in its Brutalist Breuer building—to *Split-Rocker* in Rockefeller Center—a huge public sculpture made with living flowers, and presented by Public Art Fund and Gagosian Gallery—

Koons has taken a stake in New York this summer. Throngs of city natives and tourists will encounter these works, by word of mouth, on the way to work, or intentionally, drawn uptown to see what all the fuss is about (and document it via Instagram).

The fact that “A Retrospective” directly follows the 2014 Whitney Biennial—a tripartite riot of art driven in three different curatorial directions—is to its advantage. Curated chronologically, and extremely logically by Whitney curator Scott Rothkopf, the exhibition follows the compelling narrative of Koons’ personal life—from humble beginnings in York, Pennsylvania, to scandal with his Italian pornstar ex-wife, to various entanglements with financial distress—which, as the show demonstrates, is inextricable from his career. Each room takes on a new Koonsian series, often marked by a particular gallery show, each one with an approachable, enticing title like “The New,” “Equilibrium,” “Made in Heaven” and “Easyfun,” and is accompanied by extremely intelligible wall texts that elucidate any questions that the works themselves don’t already answer. From a pile of candy-colored sponges to a 10-foot-tall mound of cast-aluminum Play-Doh and kitschy inflatable flowers arranged on mirrors, to the incredibly crafted inflatable *Lobster*, the exhibition palpably manifests Koons’ full-circle career, demonstrating the artist’s evolution and undeniable ingenuity, from the readymade object to the perfect replica of that object, executed in a confounding material, demonstrating innovation and impeccable skill.

The true testament to accessibility, though, is *Split-Rocker*, which now thrives on the site where what might be the world’s most famous Christmas tree lights up each December. One of two topiary sculptures that Koons has shown all over the world—the other, *Puppy*, also sat in Rock Center in 2000, and now delights visitors to the Guggenheim in Bilbao—the artist explained that the 50,000 plants that went into the execution of *Split-Rocker* presented 50,000 creative decisions. Best seen weeks from now, when the giant half-rocking horse, half-dinosaur head—an iconic Koons motif—is in full bloom, the artist explained that a strategic patchwork of natural, vibrant color will emerge, achieved through a vast medley of flora and sustained through a custom irrigation system. Koons explained that while the work is a summation of fertility, childhood, and a mindspace free from judgement, *Split-Rocker* is a shelter, inspired by a house shaped like a shoe in his hometown, York, Pennsylvania. While visitors won’t physically enter its interior, the work is a welcome sign, inspiring comfort and encouraging a moment of respite. Larry Gagosian may have summed up the work best, referring to Voltaire’s famous dictum from *Candide*, “We must cultivate our garden.” While Koons *is* cultivating a garden in a major center in one of the greatest international art capitals, he also fulfills a greater duty, in the present art world, where exclusion and elitism rule. Despite the commercial label glued to his forehead, Koons is using his influence and resources to bring art to a wider audience, where prior knowledge, education, and networking is not necessary. By creating aesthetically pleasing, impeccably crafted works inflected with human emotion, Koons taps into a wider audience, expanding contemporary art’s reach; and whether we like his work or not, it triggers a reaction, and reminds us of why we love art.

Split-Rocker is on view at Rockefeller Center, New York, June 25th–Sept. 12th, 2014. It is presented by Public Art Fund and Gagosian Gallery.

“Jeff Koons: A Retrospective” is on view at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, June 27th–Oct. 19th, 2014.