

GAGOSIAN GALLERY



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SELLING POINTS

A Jeff Koons retrospective.

BY PETER SCHJELDAHL



The Jeff Koons retrospective at the Whitney Museum—the last show in the Madison Avenue building, before the museum relocates downtown—calls to account the most original, controversial, and expensive American artist of the past three and a half decades. At the age of fifty-nine, Koons has behind him a parade of scandalously sensational works that include a stainless-steel cast of an inflatable bunny; a porcelain statue of Michael Jackson and his pet chimpanzee; pictures and sculptures of the artist in flagrante with his short-term first wife, the Hungarian-Italian porn star Ilona Staller; a four-story-high West Highland terrier covered with growing flowers; and an orange-tinted stainless-steel balloon dog that sold at auction, last year, for more than fifty-eight million dollars, the record for a living artist. We might justly term the

present Mammon-driven era in contemporary art the Koons Age. No other artist so lends himself to a caricature of the indecently rich ravening after the vulgarly bright and shiny. But mockery comes harder when, approaching the work with eyes and mind open, you encounter Koons's formidable aesthetic intelligence.

The Whitney show makes a strong case for the rigor and, often, the beauty of Koons's art, justifying the avidity of the collectors for whom his works are coveted trophies. Though inseparable from the penchants of these oligarchic times, his success is no fluke. Certainly, it can't owe a lot to Koons's persona—as distinct from his personality, whatever that may be outside the public eye. His demeanor couldn't be less like the oracular blankness of Andy Warhol, his inevitably cited predecessor as a self-

publicist. Koons's smiley mien and a line of patter that is part huckster and part self-esteem guru—"Everybody's cultural history is perfect"—call to mind Degas's remark to Whistler: "You behave as though you had no talent." But Koons has no end of talent and, within his range, mastery, marked by an obsessive perfectionism, and wound tightly around some core emotion, perhaps rage, which impels and concentrates his ambition. It's really the quality of his work, interlocking with economic and social trends, that makes him the signal artist of today's world. If you don't like that, take it up with the world.

Koons made art from early childhood, in York, Pennsylvania. His father was a furniture dealer and an interior decorator, his mother a seamstress. He studied painting at the Maryland Institute College of Art and the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, where he was influenced by the antic populism of the Chicago Imagist painters, chiefly Ed Paschke. As a student, he made surrealist dream pictures—which are not in the show—partly inspired by his early hero Salvador Dali and hinting, with grisly imagery of severed limbs, at tumid depths that his mature work represses. In 1976, aged twenty-one, he moved to New York and plunged into the downtown art scene. He had not come to party. He worked a lobby desk at the Museum of Modern Art as a whizbang salesman of museum memberships.

By the early nineteen-eighties, he was a commodities broker on Wall Street, becoming educated in the ways and means of financial speculation. He has used that knowledge to constantly escalate deluxe materials and expert fabrication in his work, with a pattern of selling works in advance in order to secure the cash to execute them, usually in small editions. (Collectors have waited years for their purchases.) The more money he makes, the more he spends, maintaining a Chelsea workshop that employs a staff of a hundred and twenty-five. Compare the sincerely greedy Warhol, who produced art cheaply, in vast quantities. Warhol played the market. Koons surfs it, with bets that have occasioned more than one near wipe-out.

Koons's career has had two main phases: esoteric, in the eighties, as he absorbed and transformed modes of minimalism,

Koons's "Inflatable Flower and Bunny (Tall White, Pink Bunny)," 1979.

conceptualism, and Pop art; and, ever since, exoteric, bypassing the inner circles of the art world, abetted by top dealers, to woo just about everybody else. He began, in 1978, by presenting discount-store inflatable toys with mirrors, parodying the chaste rationality of minimalist sculptors, including Robert Smithson. Koons became one of a group of young artists who carried the image-appropriating logic of the Pictures Generation into three dimensions. In theory, they aimed to critique the manipulative wiles of consumerism. But Koons chose to amplify the seductiveness of commercial aesthetics to extremes, as with his sleek, factory-fresh vacuum cleaners in illuminated Plexiglas cases: dirt-collecting machines kept perpetually spotless. "The New," he titled that series, which includes reproduced billboards for a car and for a line of canned cocktails.

He followed with "Equilibrium" (1985), the centerpiece of which was a series of basketballs mysteriously suspended at different depths in water-filled glass tanks. (The trick is an invisible separation, toilsome to maintain, between distilled water above and salt water below.) The works amount to sculptures at one with their pedestals. He augmented them with ready-made Nike posters featuring African-American basketball players—an upbeat sociological allusion typical of his drive to elevate all manner of cultural and subcultural expression. He proceeded to exalt what, in a deft formulation, the Whitney show's curator, Scott Rothkopf, calls "things that seem like art but aren't." (Rothkopf's clear and coolly measured catalogue introduction must be read by any serious critic of Koons, pro or con.) Koons made casts in gleaming stainless steel ("poor people's platinum," he called it) of liquor paraphernalia—including a "Jim Beam Train," filled with bourbon and tax-stamped at the distiller's factory—and of sculptures and figurines of Louis XIV, Bob Hope, a mermaid, and, rocketing him to public notice, the steel bunny, mirroring its surroundings.

In 1988, Koons announced his breakthrough—or, really, breakout—show, "Banality," with magazine ads in which he posed with bikini babes, schoolchildren, and pigs. The works, shown in editions of three, at galleries in as many cities, are large painted porcelain casts and

wood carvings, executed by expert artisans, of tchotchkes that include the Michael Jackson piece, a simpering Cabbage Patch doll, and a saccharine John the Baptist clutching a cross, a pig, and a penguin. Mounted in a mighty phalanx at the Whitney, the "Banality" suite has lost none of its power to blow art-loving minds with its collisions—"concussive," Rothkopf calls them—of visual glory and intellectual squalor.

Subsequent ventures that aimed beyond the usual art audience include the supremely resistible sex pictures and sculptures with Staller, from 1989-91, and Koons's masterpiece, the behemoth "Puppy" (1992), which has been re-created at sites around the world. Almost the peer of "Puppy," and now on display at Rockefeller Center, is a version of the floral-topiary "Split-Rocker" (2000), which conjoins the half heads of a rocking horse and a rocking dinosaur. The piece laces its crowd appeal with evocations of classical Cubism and Surrealism. It takes real effort not to enjoy the charm of "Puppy" and "Split-Rocker"—artifice embracing nature, monumentally. In my observation, Koons's most ardent detractors skip aesthetic judgment of his art to assert a wish that it not exist.

Oh, but does it ever. At the Whitney, work from the past fifteen years, following a fallow spell in the nineties, uncorks numerous marvels, along with a curious variety of duds. Both the better, such as the rapturous balloon dogs, and the worse—notably, the fool-the-eye painted casts of the Liberty Bell and of inflatable swim toys—entail a mania for material verisimilitude that is far in excess of what human perception needs to credit an illusion. Not being able to tell a painted aluminum lobster from its blow-up-toy original affords a pretty weak frisson, in any case. (Meanwhile, why Koons insistently produces immense paintings of montaged images beggars comprehension. They're boring.) But behold "Play-Doh" (1994-2014), a ten-foot-high, painted-aluminum reproduction of a multicolored lump that one of the artist's sons made as a toddler. A knockout to the eye—nailing Play-Doh's eerily super-bright but dead hues—and a goad to the mind, it might stand as an imperishable symbol of art's present worldly estate: child's play in a game with no-limit stakes. ♦