

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

ARTNEWS

‘These are Works That I Enjoy’: Jeff Koons On His Amazing Blue Balls

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Jeff Koons, detail of “Gazing Ball (Turner Ancient Rome),” 2015.
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On Monday morning, the artist Jeff Koons stood in Gagosian Gallery’s West 21st Street location in Chelsea, discussing his new show at the space with a small gathering of reporters. The exhibition features work from his “Gazing Ball” series. For the show, Koons has placed blue reflective spheres on small shelves in front of very faithful reproductions of classic works from art history. (A random excerpt from my notebook regarding the morning’s proceedings: “There’s the *Mona Lisa*! With a blue ball!”) Koons wore a dark blue suit with a lighter blue shirt and blue shoes.

“I really enjoy this work very much,” he told the group. He spoke softly and had both the appearance and demeanor of what I can only describe as a friendly elementary-school art teacher mixed with a quirky and idealistic political candidate dropping by to casually meet with his staff at campaign headquarters on a weekend. He punctuated his speech by dramatically stressing certain words every few seconds. “I have to say that I have been able to work and *participate* in art in my *community*,” Koons continued, “and I’m really fortunate to say I have the *freedom* to make what I would like to make. And that’s what I’ve done here. That’s what I try to at least practice. But I really wanted to contribute to the dialogue—the *metaphysical* dialogue about objective and subjective.” He said he wanted to make something that was both “Duchampian” and “quite intellectual.”

“And at the same time,” Koons said, “so much of the freedom I have as an artist really comes from intuitive thought and the *subjective* place of following my own emotions. My own response to things. So with this series, I really wanted to have the dialogue—the *dialogue* of humanity. Really, kind of the DNA of, at least, *my* cultural experience. This is not the canon of art history,

but these are works that I enjoy. They're my cultural DNA. But what's so beautiful is that the way art functions is similar to our genes. It parallels that. All these different connections, it's like a double helix. And it parallels the inorganic with the organic. Everybody here is referencing each other."

Koons walked over to a canvas depicting Peter Paul Rubens's *The Tiger Hunt* with a blue gazing ball in front of it. Koons explained that Rubens was referencing Leonardo da Vinci, and that Manet was referencing Titian, and Picasso was referencing Manet and Titian. "Everybody's in this dialogue of connecting with each other," Koons said. "The objective world is the *acceptance* of others. It's the *removal* of judgment. It's enjoying people. It's enjoying your community, and that's the dialogue that's taking place."

"The ball," he said, "the gazing ball, is the most simple, pure gesture that I can do. You know, in ancient times, the greatest power that art had—the way it could present itself—was putting the 3-D and the 2-D together. If you go into the caves at Lascaux," he said, in reference to the Paleolithic cave paintings in the south of France, "and you carry your torch," and here Koons walked into the group of reporters slightly, pantomiming carrying a torch, "you know, it's 3-D. The drawings are against the ceiling that are amplifying the line that's there. It's always the highest strength of art when the 2-D and the 3-D are together. The gazing ball is functioning in the same way, where I had the purest form, which is just—*balls*."

He said that the gazing ball "represents everything" and is the "apex of the objective readymade dialogue." He paused, and then added, somewhat meekly, "So, if you want to walk around we can look at some different pieces."

We walked over to a canvas depicting the *Mona Lisa*, once again with a blue gazing ball in front of it. "Everything that we're looking at," Koons said, "these are all *handmade* paintings. Everything has been painted by hand. There is nothing *printed*. Every mark on here has been applied by a brush. These are as exact as the originals. Replicas." He added, however, that they differed in size from the originals. "They're just the *idea* of the painting. This is just the *idea* of the *Mona Lisa*. This is the *idea* of Leonardo da Vinci." The work, he said, was also the idea of Duchamp and the idea of Warhol. "It's not about being a copy. It's not art that's about copies. This is about this union of being together, this dialogue. It's the concept of the avant-garde, of being together in a group and participating." He looked around briefly at the room.

"These paintings are stronger being together with the gazing ball," he said. "If you take away the gazing ball, they don't have the same power. They don't have the same *phenomenology* taking place. These paintings are masterpieces in their own time, but in *this* time, *this* moment, they're most powerful in this state, with this gazing ball."

He paused. "The shelves," he said. "They're aluminum."

Next we were standing in front of a reproduction of Manet's *Surprised Nymph* with—yes—a blue gazing ball in front of it.

"I'm a different human being since I saw Manet's paintings," Koons said. "My genes have changed. And it's a fact that through ideas you can morph your genes. Now they don't know how long you can do that, but Eric Kandel, the Nobel Prize-winner neuroscientist, told me that they *do* morph, they change." Kandel won the Nobel in 2000 for his work in "the molecular

biology of memory storage.” “Now whether you can pass that on,” Koons continued, referring back—I think—to a person’s morphed genes, “that’s another story. I believe you can. I think that you can. I think that you become a completely different human being and that’s what this is about—that through ideas you can become who you would like to be. You can connect in a dialogue with history, and *penetrate* history, and realize the depth and meaning of humanity through ideas and that you can also change your future, and put your foot *into* the future through your ideas. And this type of connecting parallels, kind of, the reality that we’re in.”

He gestured to a re-creation of Gustave Courbet’s *Dead Fox in the Snow*, with—you guessed it—a blue gazing ball in front of it. “You know, as an artist,” Koons said, “whenever you really focus on your idea, when you really focus on your interests and you really dive into it, you start to experience a form of time travel. You know, time and space bend. You start to realize that everything’s around you.” Turning now to the painting: “You think about foxes and everywhere you look you just see foxes! They’re everywhere! *Connections* to foxes. But when you really focus on things these kind of parallel realities become very apparent, where time and space bend. And so, these kinds of connections are really dealing with that. It’s *metaphysics*, and it’s a *phenomenology*. These balls really go from something so pure and accessible—they affirm *you*, the viewer. The first thing that you’re experiencing is your affirmation that it’s about you. This experience is about you. It’s about your interests, your participation, your relationship to this image.”

Then he summed everything up, saying, “I was just trying to give a little bit of an oversight of my interest in these pieces. I see them as devices of connecting. I always just wanted to be involved in the dialogue with the avant-garde. These are the artists I have an interest in—that I enjoy. They’ve enriched my life. I enjoy participating in the dialogue and I can bring something to the table, too.”

Koons asked if there were any questions. A British reporter asked how the balls stay on the shelves.

“I *engineered* this,” Koons said, proudly, pointing to one of his shelves, which he reiterated was made of aluminum. He said there was a metal rod coming up through the center of each ball, and a person would have to lift the ball up for it to go anywhere. “They’re hand-blown balls,” he said. “I make them in Pennsylvania.”

“Are they hollow?” the reporter asked.

“They’re hollow glass,” Koons said. “I love the concept of the gaze. People put gazing balls in their yard. It’s such a generous thing to do! It’s informing you, it’s bright, it’s informing you of where you are. It’s a GPS system. Because it reflects almost 360 degrees and it tells you everything it can about where you are in the universe. Your brain is always secreting chemicals because it wants to know where you are in the universe.” The brain “responds really well” to the gazing balls, he said.