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Jeff Koons: The latest work from the pop art master



Artist Jeff Koons stands with his Gazing Ball sculptures. BEN GABBE/GETTY IMAGES.

The artist Jeff Koons is known for playful pop art sculptures made from stainless steel that's polished to a mirror-like sheen.

His work has challenged traditional ideas of art and commerce, and Koons has received lots of attention from fans and critics alike.

The Broad Museum has an extensive collection of his work, including the seminal sculpture, "Rabbit" (1986), which looks like a balloon toy.

Gagosian Gallery in Beverly Hills currently has an exhibit of new and recent works from Koons' "Gazing Ball," "Antiquity" and "Celebration" series.

And it's in that gallery where The Frame's John Horn recently met Koons a day after the show's opening. There are no paint splatters on his clothes or hands — in fact, the 62-year-old Koons looks more like a well-groomed venture capitalist than a controversial pop artist.

Interview highlights:

On the importance of reflection in his works:

What is really important that's reflected is you, the viewer. That's really what I'm interested in being affirmed in the reflection, because the art happens inside the viewer. I mean, we love

objects, but these objects — these images — are only transponders. Art —that's the essence of your own potential. That's where the art is. It's inside you. It's never in an inanimate object.

On the history of the gazing ball and its influences on his work:

I personally became familiar with the gazing balls growing up in York, Pennsylvania. People would put them in their yards [as] lawn ornaments. They would put them on a bird bath stand. For me, it was always a symbol of generosity. The neighbor would put that there for everyone else to look at. But they actually are working like a GPS system. They're telling you everything about where you are in the universe at that moment. They're reflecting in almost 360 degrees. So if you think back to my shiny stainless steel bunny, its head is referencing the gazing ball. They're lawn ornaments — something very, very accessible. They were originally created in Venice in the 1500s. They became re-popularized by King Ludwig II of Bavaria and that's why they're in Pennsylvania, because of German ancestry in the area.

On the theme that runs through his exhibit at the Gagosian Gallery:

All the pieces have an aspect of reflectivity, whether it's a gazing ball sculpture or a gazing ball painting or, you know, the "Celebration" works, the sacred heart, or the pieces I have from antiquity. All of them enjoy the aspect of reflectivity and they all embrace the metaphysical. I'm defining metaphysics as the right here/right now, and tied to the eternal. So if we take an example of a gazing ball painting, you see yourself in the gazing ball, you see the painting itself reflected in the gazing ball, and you're able to go from this moment in time into the painting and into the history of the painting. Then you can go into the connectivity of the artist themselves. You can go into Titian and making reference to Giorgione, and Giorgione making reference to Ovid or different poetries. And all this type of cultural connectivity, that's running parallel outside our body where our genes and our DNA are interconnected in the same way. And your cultural life can morph your genes. Ideas change your genes. And it changes who you are.

On his reaction to critics of his work:

I'm involved with craft and technology, but I'm involved with it always as a form of trust so that the viewer understands what really is being cared about is not perfection. I don't believe in perfection. I never would want somebody to look at an object and say, That area's not finished. Why was that left like that? It's not that the care isn't being given to the object, it's not being given to the viewer. That's my only involvement with craft, is to be able to show that respect to the viewer and to maintain the abstraction for as long as possible.

On the importance of the relationship between artists and supporters outside of the museum:

It's important, and you know it's important from when you're young and you have your friends. And you know you have a sense that you're involved with some avant-garde and you're showing in alternative spaces, you have a dialogue with your friends. But then eventually, you know, you always are seeking to have a larger platform for your work so more people can interact with it. And it can actually have political effect within the world. These relationships that develop and what people bring to them, I mean, [Eli and Edythe Broad] are fantastic collectors. I think that the Broad Museum is really the epitome of the museum for my generation. That's also influenced

Los Angeles in a much broader way. Young artists are coming, they're living here, they foresee that they can have a complete artistic life here.

On where he found inspiration early in his career:

My parents were always extremely supportive. My father was an interior decorator, so I learned aesthetics from my father. My mother really taught me a sense of politics. [She was] very engaged in the world. My grandfather was a politician in York, Pennsylvania. So my mother helped reinforce a sense of belonging within a larger community. But my teachers [were] very important to me. I had a mentor, Ed Paschke, in Chicago. Ed really taught me that everything is already here, you just have to open yourself up to it. My first art history teacher, [Bowdoin] Davis, at the Maryland Institute College of Art, showed me Manet's "Olympia" and started to talk about how different images within the paintings were symbols: The black cat over in the lower right corner — what that would have meant in 19th Century France. All of the sudden, when I saw this work and my teacher started to talk about the connectivity of that piece with psychology and philosophy and sociology and aesthetics and physics — all the human disciplines — I realized that art was this vehicle that so effortlessly connects you to everything.