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Jeff Koons: ‘I don’t believe in perfection’

The US artist talks about the power of the everyday image ahead of a provocative new show at Oxford’s Ashmolean

Peter Aspden



Jeff Koons at his studio in New York © The New York Times/Redux/Eyevine

Oxford loves to celebrate its incongruous visitors. In the 1938 film *A Yank at Oxford*, it was a cocksure American athlete who disturbed the calm of university life. A year later, it was Laurel and Hardy, “chumps” at Oxford, who received the finest of university educations as a reward for inadvertently catching a bank robber with the aid of — what else? — a banana peel.

A similar sense of playful provocation lies behind *Jeff Koons at the Ashmolean*, an encounter between the always-controversial American contemporary artist and the university’s august museum, opening in February. The Ashmolean’s mighty collection stretches back to prehistory; Koons celebrates the everyday artefacts of the here and now. The artist says he cannot “think of a

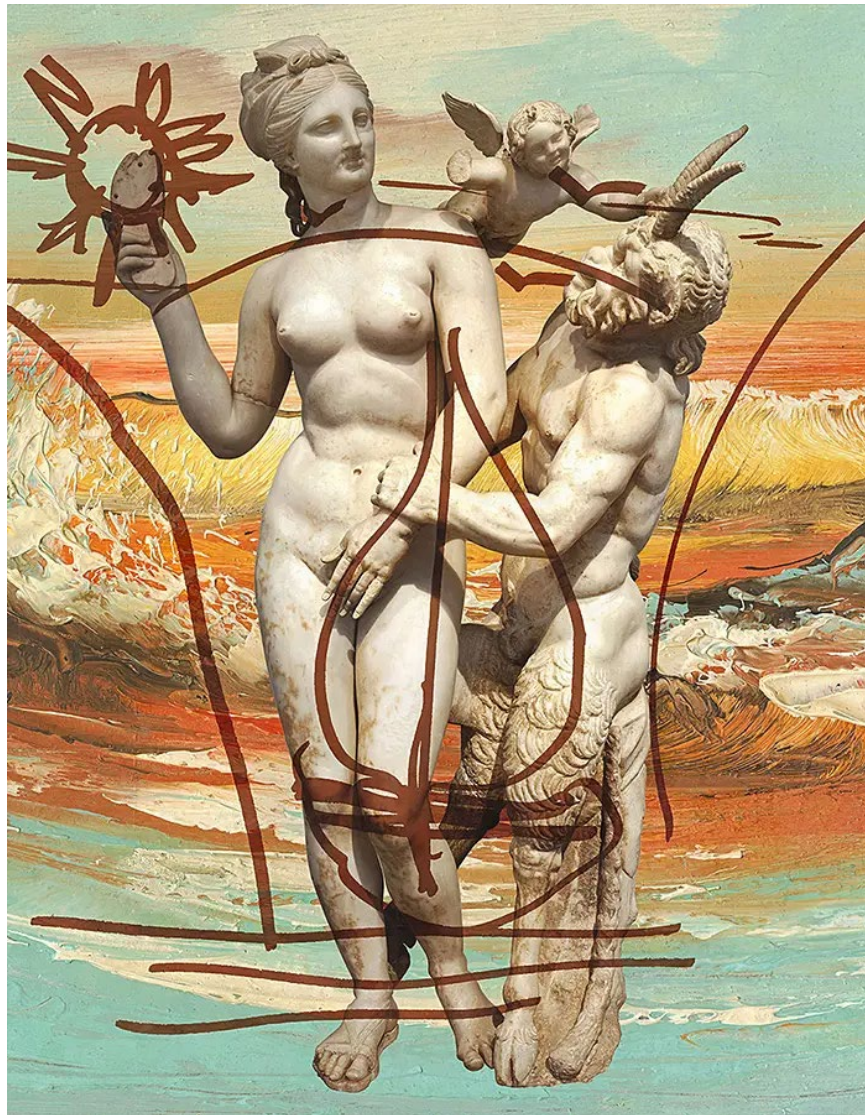
better place” to have a dialogue about art today, while Xa Sturgis, the Ashmolean’s director, is confident the show will “provoke conversations”.

The exhibition offers an opportunity for a philosophical reappraisal of Koons’s career. It will introduce visitors to some of its notorious highlights: expect floating basketballs, inflatable rabbits, delicately poised ballerinas. None of these is as it seems: stainless steel is polished and manipulated to resemble pliable plastic; sculptures that look like pottery plaster copies of marble are in fact made from a material that is tougher than both. The iconography of Koons’s work may be banal, but his intentions, and working methods, are deadly serious.

Never is this more apparent than when he talks about his art. On a recent tour of his studio in New York, he explains his work to a small group of visitors in terms that are shamelessly grandiloquent. At one point he stands in front of a small, highly polished sculpture of a ballet dancer adjusting her shoe, and suddenly proclaims something that sounds like a mission statement: “What I want is for the work to direct the viewer towards a celebration of themselves. To bring them into contact with the essence of their own potential.”

Koons’s message is that there is a transcendent power in the images of everyday things, provided they are recreated with care and beauty; and that only our abolition of hierarchies of taste can give us access to art’s transformative capabilities. The insight, combined with the faultless execution of his work, has made him one of the most successful artists in the world.

“If people were able to remove anxiety, then they would have access to a higher state of consciousness,” he tells me casually as we sit down after the tour. We are surrounded by copies of famous artistic masterpieces, each of which is accompanied by a giant blue bauble, from his “Gazing Ball” series.



'Antiquity I' (2009-12) © Jeff Koons

“The way to remove anxiety is to accept everything,” he says, as if reading my mind. “If you make judgments about things, you are limiting your vocabulary.” Koons’s puppies and inflatables are tools of therapy: take them seriously, and they will reward you with self-knowledge and contentment. This is an easily satirised view, but, in fairness, I have rarely seen a viewer in front of a Koons art work who does not have something like a smile on his or her face.

I ask him how he feels about retrospectives of his work. Does he discern any sense of progression, as he looks back? Throughout his artistic life, he says, “I have been trying to work with material and images and ideas, to communicate to people a sense of heightened experience. The Ashmolean show is another dialogue with the work. People talk about political art, and they are thinking of a particular slogan or movement. But I think my work has been political, in that I’m trying to let people embrace the power that they have within themselves. I believe in becoming.”



'Seated Ballerina' (2010-15) © Fredrik Nilsen

Koons talks in a soft, persuasive monotone that some critics compare to the mellifluous seductions of a travelling salesman. But his inflections are almost comically earnest. There is none of the enigmatic laconicism of his most obvious art-historical antecedent, Andy Warhol, coincidentally being celebrated in a beautifully conceived retrospective at the nearby Whitney Museum.

But the brash appeal of Koons's pop transcendentalism has had a similarly galvanising effect on the art market. The \$58.4m paid for "Balloon Dog (Orange)" at Christie's in 2013 was, until the day after our conversation, the world record price for a work by a living artist, supplanted by the \$90.3m paid for David Hockney's "Portrait of an Artist (Pool with Two Figures)".

Koons is quietly accepting of his commercial pulling power, grateful, he says, that his work will be well looked after, but his high profile brings its share of problems, too: last month he was found guilty by a Parisian court of plagiarism for a 1988 sculpture, "Fait d'Hiver", which too

closely resembled an advertisement for the French clothing brand Naf Naf. (Koons was ordered to pay €135,000 in compensation to Franck Davidovici, the company's advertising creative director.)



'Gazing Ball (Belvedere Torso)' (2013) © Jeff Koons

The “Gazing Balls” series, examples of which will be on show at the Ashmolean, is an archetypal Koonsian concept. The works bring together copies of masterpieces of painting and sculpture, and the reflective, highly polished balls that are used to adorn US gardens. The encounters are classic confrontations between high art and “vulgar” decoration; but Koons

chooses to find synergy instead, talking of the “affirmation” of the original piece in the ball’s 360-degree reflection of it.

He says the balls are created to the highest specification possible: only one in 350 made for him are deemed to have a “perfect” enough finish to be used in the completed art work. “I don’t believe in perfection,” he replies when I ask him to explain the finish-fetish in his work. “It is unattainable. But I do always feel a moral commitment to the viewer, to allow them to participate in abstraction for as long as possible. I don’t want them to be distracted by something irrelevant, like a flaw.”

Wasn’t he cheating with the “Gazing Ball” series, I ask. The transcendence surely comes from the evocation of the masterpiece — an image of the Madonna and Child, a statue of Hercules — while the ball is nothing more than a glitzy advertisement for Koons’s anything-goes philosophy of aesthetic value. Doesn’t it dilute, rather than add to, the power of the original works?

“It makes it accessible. There is no ultimate masterpiece, no ultimate performance, no ultimate individual work of art. There is no one, definitive, all-encompassing, great experience or definition of something. These experiences become super-charged from the reflectivity of the gazing ball. The ball is always blue, and that colour for me represents the universe. If you look on the edge of the ball, you see some darkness. And that is like the depths of the universe.”

But, as those Old Masters knew, lurking in the depths of the universe is tragedy: his work is all about affirmation and joyousness. Does he not ever feel compelled to address the tragic?

“There is a lot of tragedy and darkness in life. But we have opportunities. I find it more exciting that we have so much potential. The idea of becoming something greater, of moving forward. To not take advantage of those opportunities, that is what I would find tragic.”

Talking of tragedy, how does he feel about the current state of his home country? I am not expecting a diatribe, and I don’t get one. Koons asks that “each individual takes on more responsibility to communicate, within the communities that they live in, the values and ideas that they really hold meaningful.”

Banana skin avoided, Oxford awaits.

February 7-June 9, ashmolean.org