Artnews: ‘Some People Think What I’ve Done Is Almost Sacrilege’: A Talk with Jeff Koons', by Bill Powers, 7th March 2016

Jeff Koons photographed in his New York City studio on January 13, 2016.
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Bill Powers: How do you see the “Gazing Ball” paintings as being on a continuum with the “Gazing Ball” sculptures?

Jeff Koons: With the sculpture, you feel a constant polarity between the biological and Plato-nism. The sculpture also places an emphasis on form. With the paintings, you have a more ancient dialogue. You think of going through the Lascaux caves, where a bison painted on the contour of a rock formation emphasizes the three-dimensional quality of the drawing. Or if you think about antique sculpture—everything was painted, so the two-dimensional and the three-dimensional were brought together. The “Gazing Ball” paintings have that same confrontation. There’s a dialogue taking place about the humanism of art and how important connectivity is in our lives. I wanted to make work that would add to the dialogue of the ready-made and the concept of objective art.

BP: What do you mean by “objective art”?

JK: Things that are externalized. The idea of the readymade is an outside object, outside the body. Everything is like a Klein bottle, where the inside becomes the outside and vice versa. Picasso’s work is completely objective. It goes full circle, the objective becomes the subjec-tive.

BP: Whitney Museum curator Scott Rothkopf had an interesting theory about your influences. He suggested that Duchamp proved a better role model for you earlier in life, but that for Jeff Koons at age 60, Picasso becomes more attractive because he's seen as being so active in his studio and even sexually as an older man, whereas Duchamp was viewed as receding from society.

JK: Duchamp has been a huge role model since the late 1970s, but there was a certain point, maybe 15 years ago, where I felt like I was losing freedom. The idea of objective art, of gestalt, got lost in verbal dialogue. I started to look more at Picasso's work. It brought me closer to an intuitive process.

BP: So there's no hierarchy of influences? Picasso and Duchamp hold equal ground in your mind?

JK: The more references one is making, the more connectivity, the higher the level of consciousness.

BP: You almost sound like you're talking about the path to enlightenment.

JK: Absolutely. For me, I'm always trying to seek a higher level of consciousness. I would like to experience the ultimate freedom of gesture, to exercise that freedom.

BP: The positioning of different "Gazing Ball" paintings within the rooms at Gagosian, was that an evolving conversation?

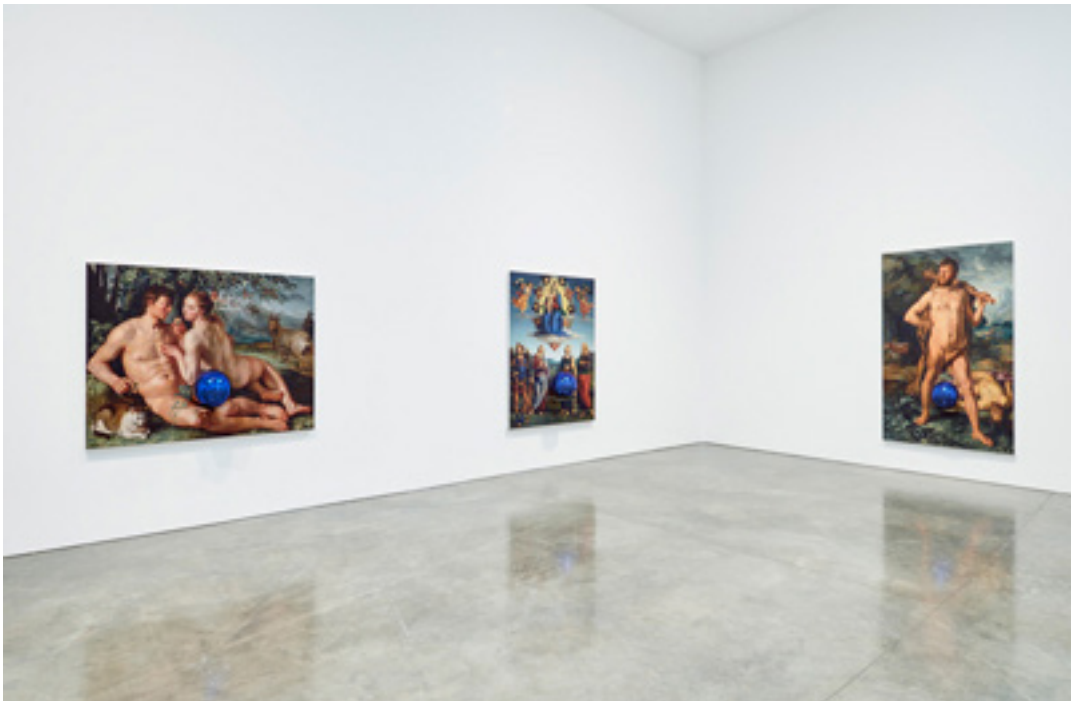
JK: I started by making various models of the gallery. I laid out the show in the most aesthetic way, not wanting to have, say, two couple paintings side by side, or two landscapes across from each other. Each of these paintings is its own individual unit and they're all equal. They're about the idea of metaphysics, the right-here-right-now, the eternal. In science, we know that in a short time period you can change your genes, your DNA, through ideas. I know my genes are different since coming across Manet. I'm head-to-toe a different person.

BP: There's obviously a lot of art history in this series. For instance, by including El Greco you make an indirect nod to the dawn of Cubism centuries later.

JK: I actually wanted to have a Giotto painting in that room with the Picasso, but I wasn't able to get it finished in time. Yes, I knew I was positioning Picasso near El Greco and had Titian nearby. The Picasso painting is actually one from my own collection. Picasso was 88 years of age when he painted that couple, and experiencing perhaps the highest state of consciousness he ever achieved. I love the late work.

BP: I couldn't help but draw some parallels between your "Equilibrium" series and the new paintings, where the gazing balls operate similarly to the basketballs floating in tanks, and the Nike basketball posters are replaced by Old Master paintings.

JK: The basketball was always a very simple form, and in "Equilibrium" it represented social equilibrium, but it was also the cell and the womb, the beginning of life, the embryo. If you deal with antique concepts of beauty, it's always about equilibrium. It's about bringing together polarities: the masculine and the feminine. And the more polarities you bring together, the higher state of beauty you have.



Installation view of 'Jeff Koons: Gazing Ball Paintings,' which was on view at Gagosian from November 9 to December 23, 2015.
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BP: Do you think that by having gazing balls placed in front of them the paintings become landscapes, in a way? you know, by being given a foreground?
JK: I think about how they connect to Poussin. If you look at a Poussin painting, especially from his Bacchanal period, there might be a tambourine on the floor, or a wine vase. You'll see very three-dimensional elements, because he learned about antique times not from painting but mostly through sculpture.

BP: What specifically about the Picasso picture in the show resonated with you?

JK: In this couple painting, it almost looks like she's sucking his brains out. At this time of his life, Picasso was reflecting on his artistic and sexual conquests. You can see a Marie-Thérèse-type body on this woman, even though it's Jacqueline. He has the hair up in a bun almost like a beret. It's my belief that he's actually going back to 1906, when he and Fernande adopted a child.

BP: Then with Rembrandt's Lucretia hanging across from the Picasso, we see a young woman ready to die in defense of her virtue. Is there a connection?

JK: Actually, the Turner painting in the show is making reference to Lucretia, to the fall of Ancient Rome, which occurs because of her suicide.

BP: Standing at a certain angle, you can see Lucretia and Manet's The Surprised Nymph together, which is such a crazy juxtaposition of mood.

JK: The sight lines are like arrows going through walls.
BP: I've never seen the original, but the drapery in Spranger's Hercules, Deianira and the Centaur Nessus looks more expressive in your painting. Was that a conscious decision to punch up the red?

JK: I really tried to be faithful to the original as much as possible. I took some liberties because of how the paintings might have aged or patinaed over time.

BP: Was it a hard decision to include the “Mona Lisa,” given that it’s such a loaded image?

JK: At first I thought, “No, I don’t want to do that.” Then I decided, “Well, at least let’s try blowing it up.” I always had to take into account the size of the gazing ball in terms of scale.

BP: Were you surprised by anything about the “Mona Lisa”?

JK: The background is almost like a Chinese painting.

BP: Overall, the “Gazing Ball” paintings are uniformly Western. Did you consider including some Eastern art? I know you love Japanese woodcuts, and obviously you referenced the Kama Sutra for your “Made in Heaven” works.

JK: Yes, when I started this series I looked at some Japanese wave paintings, among other things.

BP: When I saw the Rembrandt self-portrait with the gazing ball, I thought about the mirror he would have used to paint it, about how he’s painting from his own reflection.

JK: When you read philosophy, one of the words you’ll come across the most is “reflection.” And looking at this Rembrandt now, you also think of Rothko, the darkness of the painting.

BP: Van Gogh’s Wheatfield with Crows [1890] was painted in the last year of the artist’s life. Can we separate the biography from the image itself? Or must we imagine that anyone who sees this painting will know where it falls chronologically?

JK: These things are loaded, and that’s what’s interesting about this series, because you think about your relationship with van Gogh.

BP: When I saw your Raft of the Medusa painting, I thought about your cancelled Louvre show, which was supposed to have your balloon-animal sculptures in the same 19th-century galleries as Gericault’s original, so in some way you still capture that lost experience for the viewer.

JK: I love 19th-century art because our whole understanding of the avant-garde is born from that time period. And I feel like I’m at the tail end of that, not just me, but my community, my generation.

BP: Did you ever think to include a Roy Lichtenstein or an Ed Paschke or a Dalí in the “Gazing Ball” painting show?

JK: I have Duchamp and Picasso here, and of course Andy [Warhol] is here in the “Mona Lisa.”

BP: Is there any relationship to trompe l’oeil?

JK: I don’t think so. It’s purer than trompe l’oeil. It’s not a substitute. This isn’t about Richard Pettibon or making a copy of something.

BP: You don’t think this series is ushering in a new banality, so to speak?

JK: Not at all. I think they’re knockouts. The “Banality” series was about opening oneself up to the world, not to exclude things, not to make judgments, not to segregate.

Jeff Koons photographed in his New York City studio on January 13, 2016.
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BP: As a child, you made reproductions of Old Master paintings, which your father hung in the window of his furniture store. Can we scroll back to that time of your life as the initial impetus for the "Gazing Ball" paintings?
JK: But even if you look at my Rabbit [1986], it's a gazing ball; the head is a round gazing ball. You're always carrying information with you. It's about exercising that freedom.

BP: Is there a Kubrickesque aspect to this work? Like a monolith buried on the moon, only now it's discovered on the face of a Boucher?

JK: The gazing ball is like Duchamp's urinal in that it's a confrontational object, but it's also very retinal.

BP: When we look at Manet's Olympia [1863], most viewers will remember that this painting is a reference to Titian's Venus of Urbino [1538]. Is that part of your interest in the picture?

JK: There's a lot of different social and psychological information here. People speculate that the flowers are from a lover who has just walked in to surprise her.

BP: Or that the black cat in the bottom right corner is a symbol for prostitution.

JK: A painting like Olympia changed my life. I remember in an art history class learning about Manet's work I was taught that all the humanities are really being dealt with in this painting. That was such an eye-opening moment for me.

BP: Tell me about Rubens's The Tiger Hunt [ca. 1616].

JK: Rubens is making reference to Leonardo's lost painting The Battle of Anghiari [ca. 1505]. It's kind of a confrontation between East and West.
BP: Do you think people, in his day, thought Rubens was arrogant to tackle the same composition as Leonardo?

JK: No, everyone is constantly making reference to what came before.

BP: It can be baffling at times, the range of reactions to new work. I'm sure some people would like to see your Klimt painting at Neue Galerie, while others will be horrified by its very existence.

JK: Some people think what I've done is almost sacrilege, but it's the complete opposite. It's not copying Rubens's The Tiger Hunt, it's the idea of Rubens, and it becomes something else. When I was installing this show, if a painting didn't have a gazing ball on it yet, you could feel it crying out for the ball.

BP: I really thought you would make a "Gazing Ball" painting of Masaccio's Expulsion from the Garden of Eden [1426–28], knowing how much you love that piece.

JK: But it is here in the pudica pose of Manet's The Surprised Nymph.

BP: El Greco said that color reigned supreme over form. Do you share his perspective?

JK: No, I think they're equal.

BP: Out of all the Hercules paintings you could have chosen, I would have imagined you'd select Cornelis van Haarlem's, over Goltzius's version.

JK: I really like the Goltzius painting. I think it's a self-portrait of him.

BP: How do you decide where to place the gazing ball?

JK: With all of these paintings, it's never at the same location. They're always below the centerline. I think the highest I come up is with Monet's water lilies. I like a little sense of gravity.

BP: What was your impetus to include Perugino's Madonna and Child?

JK: I wanted to be able to convey the history of feminine form and spirituality, and how we shift from male gods to female gods, and how the tensions in the world affect our imagery.

BP: When I saw Courbet's The Dead Fox I immediately thought of Titian's The Flaying of Marsyas (ca. 1575).

JK: I love The Dead Fox. It was in the [Courbet] retrospective at the Grand Palais in Paris, which was the first time I'd seen it in real life. It was just a knockout. This is such an existential painting because you feel empathy for the fox. It's dead, with its genitals exposed, strung up, humiliated. Then you realize: it doesn't matter anymore, because the fox is dead.