

American Idol

THOMAS CROW ON "JEFF KOONS: A RETROSPECTIVE"

ARTISTS ON THE WORK OF JEFF KOONS:
JOSIAH McELHENY, CAROL BOVE, RACHEL HARRISON,
MARGARET LEE, LAURA OWENS, CORY ARCANGEL

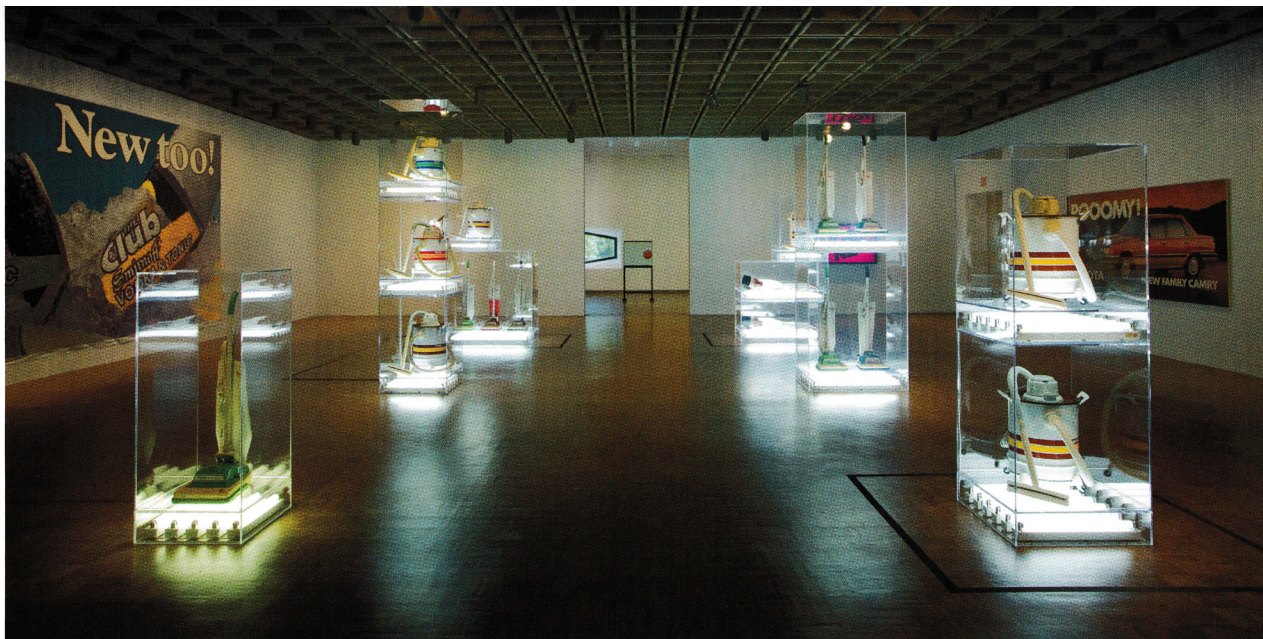
WHAT COULD BE MORE ICONIC than Michael and Bubbles, or Cicciolina's white garter, or that raptor-like stainless-steel bunny and that engorged balloon dog? In reality, everything and nothing: The creator of these entities never simply adopts the generic symbols of our time but produces ciphers and substances that seem perpetually new and forever foreign, despite the hyperbolic fame they may acquire. Perhaps the most influential—and controversial—artist of our time, **JEFF KOONS** makes things that stay strange.

On the occasion of the Whitney Museum of American Art's major survey of his work, the first that Koons has enjoyed in his adopted hometown, *Artforum* asked art historian and critic **THOMAS CROW** to assess the exhibition's synoptic view, while six artists, each from a generation after Koons's, reflect on his outsize impact—an effect that is strikingly polemical and everywhere felt but difficult to pin down.





Jeff Koons, *Inflatable Flowers (Short Pink, Tall Purple)*, 1979, vinyl, mirror, acrylic, 16 x 25 x 18". From the series "Inflatables," 1978–79.



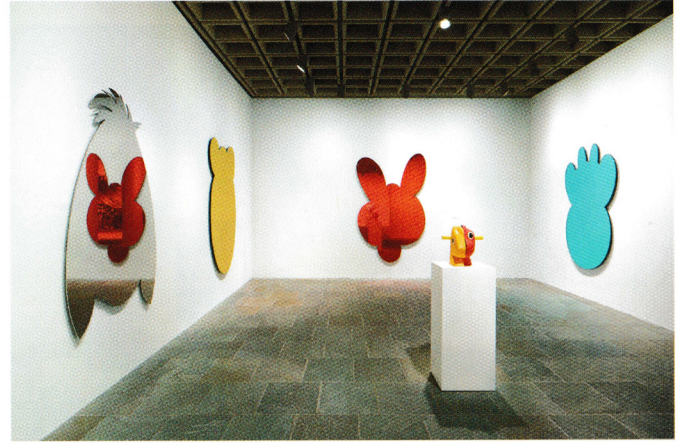
View of "Jeff Koons: A Retrospective," 2014, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York. Foreground, from left: *New! New Tool*, 1983; *New Hoover Convertible*, 1980; *New Shelton Wet/Drys Tripledecker*, 1981; *New Hoover Convertibles Green, Red, Brown, New Shelton Wet/Dry 10 Gallon Displaced Doubledecker*, 1981–87; *New Hoover Deluxe Shampoo Polishers, New Shelton Wet/Dry 10 Gallon Displaced Tripledecker*, 1981–87; *New Hoover Convertibles Green, Blue, New Hoover Convertibles Green, Blue Doubledecker*, 1981–87; *New Shelton Wet/Drys 10 Gallon Doubledecker*, 1981; *New Roomy Toyota Family Camry*, 1983. All from the series "The New," 1980–87. Background: *One Ball Total Equilibrium Tank* (Spalding Dr. J 241 Series), 1985. From the series "Equilibrium," 1983–93. Photo: Chandra Glick.

IN ITS FINAL MONTHS on Madison Avenue, the Whitney Museum of American Art has signed off with two exhibitions of distinctly contrasting character. For the last Biennial in the Marcel Breuer edifice, the museum dispersed and outsourced its organization to three curators, each of whom mounted a crowded show on one of three floors. Reviewing the exhibition in these pages, Helen Molesworth found that this multiplication of personnel seemed to reduce rather than augment the curatorial acumen in evidence: Where, she wondered, have all the sight lines gone?

No such doubts attend the succeeding show, the

much-anticipated Jeff Koons retrospective, a signature statement that the premier museum of American art must offer the definitive account of the most visible contemporary American artist. To embark on the exhibition's itinerary is immediately to be gripped by a sight line as spare and locked down as Alberti's model of linear perspective. A stately corridor of stacked and illuminated Plexiglas boxes on either side converges on a vanishing point through an opening in the middle distance, one unequivocally marked by a single basketball perfectly suspended in the center of its fluid-filled tank.

The formal symmetry of this statement by curator Scott Rothkopf resonates with the theme Koons bestowed on the objects so contained. Under the rubric of a series, "The New," 1980–87, the transparent containers simultaneously showcase and entomb never-used vacuum cleaners and floor polishers, most memorable among them a squat cylinder with a protuberant hose then marketed as the Shelton Wet/Dry. As the function of these devices resonates with the idea of the immaculate, it has been widely assumed that their presence inaugurates Koons's preoccupation (read: complicity) with



From top: View of "Jeff Koons: A Retrospective," 2014, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York. Foreground, from left: Five Double-Sided Floor Mirrors with Inflatable Flowers (Short Blue, Short Orange, Short Pink, Short Purple, Short Yellow), 1978 (partially refabricated 2014); Sponges with Single Double-Sided Floor Mirror, 1978 (partially refabricated 2014). Background, from left: Inflatable Flowers (Four Tall Purple with Plastic Figures), 1978 (partially refabricated 2014); Inflatable Flowers (Tall Purple, Tall Orange), 1979; Inflatable Flower and Bunny (Tall White, Pink Bunny), 1979 (partially refabricated 2014). All from the series "Inflatables," 1978–79. Photo: Chandra Glick. View of "Jeff Koons: A Retrospective," 2014, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York. From left: String of Puppies, 1988; Pink Panther, 1988; Bear and Policeman, 1988. All from the series "Banality," 1988. Photo: Chandra Glick.

From top: View of "Jeff Koons: A Retrospective," 2014, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York. From left: Self-Portrait, 1991; Large Vase of Flowers, 1991; Ilona on Top (Rosa Background), 1990. All from the series "Made in Heaven," 1989–91. Photo: Ronald Amstutz. View of "Jeff Koons: A Retrospective," 2014, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York. Wall, from left: Donkey, 1999; Bear (Gold), 1999; Kangaroo (Red), 1999; Cow (Light Blue), 1999. Center: Split-Rocker (Orange/Red), 1999. All from the series "Easyfun," 1999–2000. Photo: Ronald Amstutz.

To embark on the exhibition's itinerary is immediately to be gripped by a sight line as spare and locked down as Alberti's model of linear perspective.

the specious allure of mass-produced consumer goods.

The rigor of Rothkopf's arrangements seems likely to push visitors in one of two directions. The forward propulsion of the main sight line could impel one quickly to the 1983–93 "Equilibrium" tanks, with their attendant appropriated graphics, on the other side of the opening, leaving the aura of "The New" resplendent and uncompromised, transfigured retroactively by the prestidigitation of the uncannily hovering balls. Conversely, the generous space of the initial room might equally encourage wandering and turning back to more closely examine

these domestic relics, perhaps prompting a skeptical reappraisal of the commodity-fetish thesis, at least as applied to this moment in Koons's career.

The artist's choice of cleaning instruments in fact leaves much to be desired in terms of seductive appeal or pride of possession: Their principal associations are with disagreeable, and never-ending, work; their homely designs, even in 1980, had stayed unchanged for decades; the canisters of the wet-dry shop machines in particular were so utilitarian that their implicit message to the purchaser promised little more than workmanlike efficiency and durabil-

Koons's work of the 1980s was always good enough; since the mid-'90s, almost nothing has ever been quite good enough, and patrons are willing to pay and pay again for all the destroyed B-stock in order to gain one impeccable example.

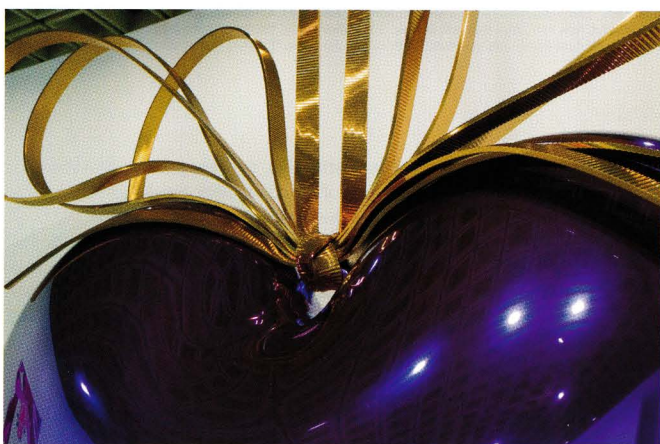
ity. A single day of normal use would leave them scratched and battered, their innards besmirched with dirt, lint, and random debris.

As Koons's claim to visual distinction for these implements lies in their appearing untouched, forever newly minted, and thereby somehow magically removed from all such exigencies, their actual humdrum and charmless character prompts a certain pathos to enter the picture. Circling back around the gallery, moreover, one comes to a smaller side room that provides a flashback to the years just prior to the breakout achieved by "The New" and clinched by "Equilibrium." There, Rothkopf has brought to light the immediate, little-seen prehistory of Koons's familiar phases and stages.

Sometime after his 1976 arrival in New York from studies at the populist-friendly School of the

Art Institute of Chicago, Koons began inviting new contacts to his apartment to see small sculptures composed of inflatable flowers and bunnies in brightly colored plastic, set singly or in groups against ready-made mirrored tiles. These were the same sort of garish props and accessories he used, after he began working at the Museum of Modern Art's membership desk in 1977, to amuse and entice prospective customers. His first New York works thus bear witness to the pathos of the young artist—his lack of resources, his eagerness to please, his baggy-pants comedic style—as well as to the undoubted success he enjoyed in his immediate aims.

To the extent that Rothkopf has organized, with directorial flair, his principal floors as a three-act biopic, that early side room functions as the production's Rosebud—even if *Citizen Kane* transcends the



Clockwise, from top left: View of "Jeff Koons: A Retrospective," 2014, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York. From left: *Metallic Venus*, 2010–12; *Antiquity 3*, 2009–11; *Antiquity (Manet)*, 2011–14; *Pluto and Proserpina*, 2010–13. All from the series "Antiquity," 2008–. Photo: Ronald Amstutz. Jeff Koons, *Louis XIV*, 1986, stainless steel, 46 × 27 × 15". From the series "Statuary," 1986. Jeff Koons, *Hanging Heart (Violet/Gold)* (detail), 1994–2006, mirror-polished stainless steel with transparent color coating. From the series "Celebration," 1994–. Installation view, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, 2014. Photo: Chandra Glick.



Jeff Koons, *Inflatables Flowers (Four Tall Purple with Plastic Figures)* (detail), 1978 (partially refabricated 2014), vinyl, mirror, plastic, 16 × 51 × 9". From the series "Inflatables," 1978–79. Photo: Chandra Glick.



View of "Jeff Koons: A Retrospective," 2014, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York. From left: *Cat on a Clothesline (Aqua)*, 1994–2001; *Balloon Dog (Yellow)*, 1994–2000; *Boy with Pony*, 1995–2008. All from the series "Celebration," 1994–. Photo: Ronald Amstutz.

Hollywood formula. As the installation unfolds—each sequence accorded the requisite dignity and scope to stand or fall on its own merits—there is little that does not seem prefigured in that small, flashback gallery. Then, as in any effective life saga, there follows an early pinnacle of achievement: Here, the outsize pastiches of dime-store novelties in the 1988 "Banality" series. (Lined up in soldierly rank along a lateral aisle of the middle floor, these highly exposed sculptures are freshly visible again: Why does Bubbles have no lower body? To what malevolent end has the colossal carnival bear mesmerized the London bobby?)

Such pinnacles must be followed by some catastrophe that lays the hero low: So it is here with "Made in Heaven," 1989–91. Then begins the painstaking recovery, aided by a return to domestic verities. On his last floor, Rothkopf commendably moves through the latter ascent at a brisk pace. There is enough of the gleaming, gigantic "Celebration" series, 1994–, but no more than necessary, as can be said of the various Popeye and Hulk paraphernalia. For a symbolic repertoire that barely changes, compression of the narrative is entirely in order: It is enough that *Balloon Dog (Yellow)*, 1994–2000, stands for the rest of his pneumatic menagerie; *Hanging Heart (Violet/Gold)*, 1994–2006, for the larger family of candy-box trinkets. Looking back to the 1978–79 mirror arrangements, there is one that features two

small plastic figurines, one of Michelangelo's muscular David and the other of a Venus or nymph extending a dainty toe. From "Statuary" in 1986 through "Made in Heaven" to the latest round of molded classical types, those modest found objects anchor a long and constant trajectory.

But stasis in one register will exacerbate changes in others. What has changed over the past two decades is the relative importance accorded flawlessness of finish. The early plastic toys, pieced and joined according to a pattern, conform to one predetermined shape and size: A balloon, short of bursting, can expand along a continuum; the more gas inside, the tauter and shinier the surface becomes. In Koons's gargantuan replicas of balloon toys, the great expanses of their apparent membranes—gleaming in candy colors—must exhibit a preternatural membrane that appears to remove them from the realm of human manufacture. An imperative peculiar to these particular items has since come to govern the entirety of the Koons output. The work of the 1980s was always good enough; since the mid-'90s, almost nothing has ever been quite good enough, and patrons are willing to pay and pay again for all the destroyed B-stock in order to gain one impeccable example.

In this pursuit, Koons's studio has lately been pushing technological innovation in mapping and fabrication to levels often exceeding the capabilities

of the most advanced design and manufacturing in any other sector. As cogently detailed in the catalogue by Michelle Kuo, the marshaling of such expertise surely represents an unprecedented achievement by an artist, so much so that technique has assumed the primary mimetic function in his art.

It is frequently and justifiably remarked that Koons's works hold up a mirror to contemporary American society, though too often with little more than a weak wave toward their reflective surfaces. In Rothkopf's lively formulation: "They take as much as they can from the world in which we live and offer in return a powerful picture of it." One could expand on that to observe that their channel of taking appears to run largely on the side of technological prowess, that dimension of our world in which human mastery and progress remain impressively undiminished. The complementary dimension of symbols and ideas, however, appears starved of commensurate innovation and energy, if not gripped by regression and atavism. In his holding these two poles together, each at full strength, Koons truly returns a powerful picture of simultaneous enrichment and impoverishment. □

"Jeff Koons: A Retrospective" is on view at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, through Oct. 19; travels to the Centre Pompidou, Paris, Nov. 26, 2014–Apr. 27, 2015; Guggenheim Bilbao, June 5–Sept. 27, 2015.

THOMAS CROW IS A CONTRIBUTING EDITOR OF ARTFORUM.

JOSIAH McELHENY

LIFEBOAT

JEFF KOONS is like Alfred Hitchcock. Deeply invested in entertaining us with their personal obsessions, both the filmmaker and the artist have gone to great lengths to produce visual gratification. But underneath such diversions lies an unconscious desire for control—and an ocean of fear, the real subject of their art. Koonsian dread often arrives in sculptures depicting objects in uncanny likeness, transforming recognizably cheap, everyday things into metaphors about anxiety and death. Stuff that *should* disintegrate, or at least deflate, becomes fixed in time, not unlike the faces of movie stars, crystallized on film.

Koons's earliest works, from the late 1970s, include industrially produced inflatable toys made of vinyl and other perishables, and so some of their components have had to be carefully remade for his current retrospective. But transience becomes permanence in *Lifeboat*, 1985, where an inflatable dinghy is turned to bronze: A symbol of safety becomes an image of "sunk." (For more maritime scares, see Koons's *Aqualung*, 1985, and of course Hitchcock's *Lifeboat* [1944].) The sculpture sits "heavily" on the floor; we *sense* the weight of the material. While it preserves every small seam of the original, the casting, with its fleshy brown patina, is not realistic so much as sensually faithful.

In Koons's world of material special effects, perfectionism and distortion are used to produce mirrors that are seemingly more flawless than the world they double. Taken at face value, his titles, such as "Easyfun" and "Celebration," are a form of misdirection: We don't notice that what attracts us is sometimes synonymous with what terrifies. □

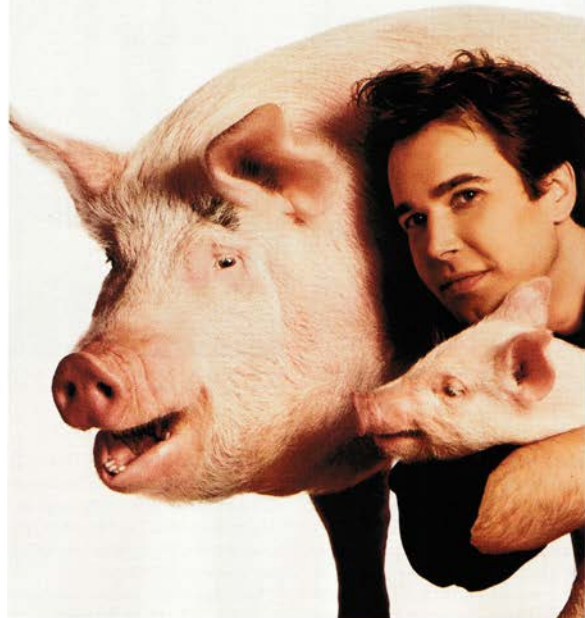
JOSIAH McELHENY IS AN ARTIST BASED IN NEW YORK.

Jeff Koons, *Lifeboat*, 1985, bronze, 12 × 80 × 60".
From the series "Equilibrium," 1983–93.



J E F F K O O N S

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Advertisement by Jeff Koons from *Flash Art*, no. 143 (November/December 1988).

CAROL BOVE

THE FIRST TIME I encountered Jeff Koons was through the hype. I was a teenager living in Oakland or Berkeley, going to the California College of Arts and Crafts, and my friends were talking about how this artist had hired a PR consultant and was mounting a big ad campaign to promote himself. I didn't know what to think of the ads; they were both genuinely seductive and a little scary. They were not as heavy-handed as the other things I might have grouped them with stylistically (i.e., imagery perversely recuperating clean-cut 1950s styles, like that of Church of the SubGenius or *Twin Peaks*), but they were too self-aware to not be ironic at all. Or were they? Since then, I've come to understand

his work as nondualistic, since it contains opposing mutually exclusive positions without ambivalence. But in my teens I simply knew that what he was doing was important.

The ads caused a paradigm shift in my thinking. That an artist had recognized persona, mass media, and commerce as conditions of sculpture and that he had co-opted their tools and techniques as a part of his artmaking made me believe art was capable of expressing my historical moment, of being relevant. And he was not merely cooperating with the commercial system and embracing it—he was using cooperation as a form of aggression. His consciousness of the total context of an art object in that time and place made me abandon my program of willful ignorance about contemporary art and start making plans to move to New York. □

CAROL BOVE IS AN ARTIST BASED IN NEW YORK.

RACHEL HARRISON

THANKS FOR THE MEMORIES

I DON'T LIKE BOB HOPE but I might like *Bob Hope*, or at least I did when I saw him at the Whitney's Koons retrospective. His head is so big, like a bobblehead, but fixed in a creepy stainless-steel grin. He has a lot of presence for a little guy, and I wondered about the tabletop scale in the oeuvre of an artist where size really does matter. Maybe he's meant to mimic the real Oscar that Bob joked about never getting. Although I knew he entertained our troops, Bob Hope wasn't quite on my radar, so I thought I'd look into it, see what he's really an icon of. In 1986 (the

year *Bob Hope* was made), the comedian told a joke at the centennial celebration for the Statue of Liberty: "I just heard Lady Liberty has AIDS. Nobody knows if she got it from the mouth of the Hudson or the Staten Island Ferry." Ronald and Nancy Reagan, who were present, laughed. How funny is that? By the end of that year, 38,401 AIDS cases had been reported; 16,301 people had died; and Reagan had yet to even mention the name of the disease publicly.

I'd like to think that Jeff Koons was interested in just a little bit more than formal issues when he cast the guy who loved to play wingman to Reagan, and who was a practical toady to Texaco and the oil companies. Maybe it caught his eye that you could be a big-time entertainer by carrying water for the politically odious—this was in the old days, before the way to get ahead was by flattering the financially

obscene. At least that's one reason I think I like *Bob Hope*, and he looks pretty sharp in the same room with *Louis XIV*. Was there ever a critical edge locked inside the breath of the bunny? And if so, when did the air go out of the room? □

RACHEL HARRISON IS AN ARTIST BASED IN NEW YORK.



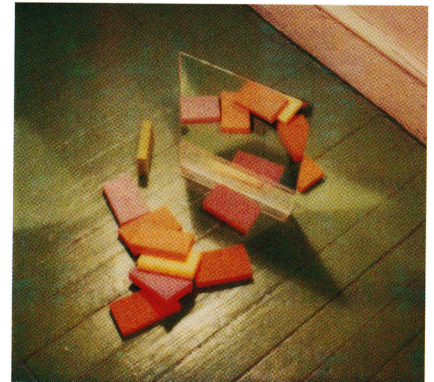
Clockwise, from top right: Jeff Koons, *Bob Hope*, 1986, stainless steel, 17 x 5 1/2 x 5 1/2". From the series "Statuary." 1986. Jeff Koons, *The New Jeff Koons*, 1980, Duratrans, fluorescent light box, 42 x 32 x 8". Jeff Koons, Gagosian Gallery, London, June 18, 2007. Photo: Dave M. Benett/Getty Images. Jeff Koons, *Bob Hope*, 1986, stainless steel, 17 x 5 1/2 x 5 1/2". From the series "Statuary." 1986.

MARGARET LEE

I ONLY FALL FOR ART that has that against-all-odds feeling, art that is somehow here despite itself. This feeling is not just about fabrication wizardry or the erasure of the artist's hand: It means moving past the desire to simply make art. Some artists get off on the act of making, and why shouldn't they? The desire to make art is not unlike having an interminable itch, but also the ideal scratching stick. That being said, I prefer artists who feel the itch but

know better than to scratch. More than any other artist, Jeff Koons gets this restraint. There's no doubt that, with nearly forty years between the pile of generic colored scrubbers that make up *Sponges with Single Double-Sided Floor Mirror*, 1978, and the stacked pastel aluminum globs of *Play-Doh*, 1994–2014, he knows all too well that transcendence is found in deferred gratification. □

MARGARET LEE IS AN ARTIST BASED IN NEW YORK.



Below: View of "Jeff Koons: A Retrospective," 2014, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York. From left: *Moon (Light Pink)*, 1995–2000; *Play-Doh*, 1994–2014; *Cake*, 1995–97. All from the series "Celebration," 1994–. Right: Jeff Koons, *Sponges with Single Double-Sided Floor Mirror*, 1978, sponges, mirror, acrylic, approx. 14½ × 17 × 20". From the series "Inflatables," 1978–79.



LAURA OWENS

I HAVE ALWAYS been stunned by the way my eyes move across the surface of a work by Jeff Koons without ever finding a point to stop. I once met a beyond-good-looking, possibly reworked (it was that good), hypersymmetrical male model, and the experience was similar. There was nothing for your eye to hang on to, no mole or misaligned tooth. It was like passing through a visual cloud of perfume. I kept thinking about how hard it is to erase all the details, for no one part of the whole to be odd or noticed. Maybe it is the precision detailing, the thousand hours of labor and scrutiny that go into each pixel of a Koons piece, guaranteeing that the process will never fail. He will make a compelling object . . . whether we like it or not.

Walking into the Whitney retrospective, I didn't expect to find myself caught, at times, on the surface of things—but I did. I fell into the texture of a poodle's curls, and the handcrafted valves intended to mimic transparency and reflect the exterior of a perfect lobster pool toy, and the very real-world tax stamps adhered to the bourbon-filled stainless-steel train. These moments shouted with the same manic intensity as the unrelenting perfection of

the fabrication, and they pushed Koonsian realism to a higher level. Awkward or mesmerizing, they teased out our appetite for infinite attention to the smallest consideration.

In the paintings, this seemingly infallible system becomes claustrophobic. Painting, meaning simply the physical stretcher and the canvas, is the malevolent ghost of the readymade. It is art already, always, and it will patiently wait for you to make it more art than it already is. Predetermining one's system for completion is like trying to take a well-worn path to traverse the plains of Mordor unnoticed by the Eye of Sauron.

This nanoscale of decision making reminds me of Cézanne: the specificity and quality in his deliberation, the movement of his thoughts mirroring the eye focusing and refocusing, allowing many different paintings to exist within one painting. The heterogeneous space that results unfolds when we pay attention as closely and for as long as Cézanne did. There is a slowness to these paintings that allows us to see the intentionality in each brushstroke, the attentiveness to each decision.

Unlike Cézanne, though, Koons brings an unrelenting sameness to his decisions. His fine-brush fanaticism hits me like certain works of outsider art—as a whole without parts. Surfaces are combed over with a microscopic eye, *continued on page 398*

Jeff Koons, *Lobster* (detail), 2003, polychromed aluminum, steel chain, 57 1/4 x 37 x 17 1/4". From the series "Popeye," 2002-.



CORY ARCANGEL

THE BEST LINE—by far—in Aaron Sorkin's *The Social Network* is when Sean Parker (played by Justin Timberlake) chides Mark Zuckerberg (played by Jesse Eisenberg) for thinking the financial glass ceiling of a start-up is a million dollars. "A million dollars isn't cool. You know what's cool?" asks Timberlake. "A billion dollars, now that's cool!"

A billion! I agree, a billion dollars is cool. As we all know from IRL, Zuckerberg did get his billion. And for what? By improving on existing social networks—a tiny bit. But that little bit went a long way—it got the aunts, uncles, moms, and dads of the world on a computer. And consider how few people saw the possibility of something like a Facebook in the first place. If you had tried to get me excited about a social-network start-up in 2005, I would have said you were crazy. What was wrong with MySpace and Friendster? SMH. I like to think of Jeff Koons's work as leveraging a similar dynamic. What was wrong with the Brillo boxes and shovels? Nothing. While not improving, exactly—one can't improve on masterworks—the *ish* of Koons's Icarus-style journey is that he has found space, invisible to most others, to work among these forms, tightening the screws. Why not digitize the practice of sculpture? Why not make public art that is blindingly fun? Why not OCD the nonreversible readymade? In fact, why not OCD the entire process of being an artist from top to bottom? Koons's work points to the—now seemingly infinite—space hiding in plain sight among certain art-historical dead ends. And, LOL, turns out, like Zuckerberg's, Koons's "future obvious" is also worth about a billion dollars. Now that is cool! □

CORY ARCANGEL IS AN ARTIST BASED IN BROOKLYN, NY.

Jeff Koons, *Lobster*, 2003, polychromed aluminum, steel chain, 57 1/4 x 37 x 17 1/4". From the series "Popeye," 2002-.