

## Jeff Koons A Retrospective

Whitney Museum of American Art, New York 27 June – 19 October

The Whitney Museum's *Jeff Koons: A Retrospective* does a pretty good job of humanising a figure equated almost entirely with exaggerated male machismo and art market inflation. Yet it's hard to dissociate Koons the man from Koons the smarmy art-star millionaire, fabricating slick, populist works for quick consumption and handy profits. One can't help imagining Jeff Koons living it up in some magical Jeff Koons castle, probably somewhere near Palm Beach, where he holds court over a fantastic balloon-land of inflatable dogs and blow-up flowers, balls-deep in some porn star's inhumanly smooth pussy. But such is history.

Curator Scott Rothkopf's wall text does point out that, regarding *Ilona's Asshole* (1991), the adjoining property is in fact covered in pimples. It is an apt image for the retrospective as a whole, which pokes holes in Koons's own off-putting, hyper-hetero self-mythologising – however subtly.

While his penis is symbolically everywhere – most of the works, even the most childish, are blatantly sexual – Koons's projections of straight masculinity are not as clear-cut as one might think. The *Made in Heaven* series (1989–91), arguably the most famous work on display, is a case in point. The works were made when he hired pornstar and Italian parliamentarian Ilona Staller to make a film with him. After deciding against the film, he fell in love with her, got married and made a series of sexually explicit photographs and sculptures.

With *Made in Heaven*, Koons's masturbatory self-affection is writ large everywhere, sometimes literally, as in *Exaltation* (1991), a closeup of Ilona holding Koons's boner to her lips, which are slickened with his cum. Or in the aforementioned *Ilona's Asshole*, a no-holds-barred view of the artist penetrating the adult film star, hands placed firmly on her ass cheeks, his dick like some sort of raunchy exclamation point. This stuff reads like porn because it is, in many ways, porn, despite Koons's objections in the wall text that it's about 'the shame of masturbation' and a 'metaphor for cultural guilt'. He's fucking a pornstar, after all.

What does partly elude the charge of pornography is the series' over-the-top campiness. Most pornography is cheaply made, shot in humdrum if not depressing settings. *Made in Heaven* is anything but. The couple is posed in front of colourful fairytale backdrops of swooping waves, as in *Jeff in the Position of Adam* (1990), or surrounded by animated butterflies, as depicted in *Ilona on Top (Rosa Background)* (1990). Koons is particularly caked with makeup, a fact seized on by Rothkopf, who claims it's an interesting gender play, as if Koons was adopting a queer persona. While it certainly feminises the artist, who looks, well, kinda gay, makeup doesn't go far enough to offset the clearly misogynistic porno tropes that Koons depicts. He's the straight man in charge here, and she the damsel in distress. Witness their unmade movie billboard *Made in Heaven* (1989). It looks like the cover of some pulpy romance novel.

Muster the fortitude to look past Staller's crotch in *Silver Shoes* (1990) and you might notice a ladder to the left and a crappy tiled floor, both nods to the image's setup and to the artifice of pornography itself, which Koons readily plies. Key is whether Koons is doing this with knowing irony or not. Maybe it's both. The ambiguity is one of the reasons the series works so well. Look around the gallery and you'll also notice big, fluffy dog statues, like blown-up porcelain figurines, and *Violet – Ice (Kama Sutra)* (1991), in which Koons has immortalised his sexual play with Staller – her legs sprawled high into the air – in a miniature glass landscape, like a tchotchke on sale at a roadside gas station.

Here *Made in Heaven* is connected to Koons's longstanding interest in lowbrow Duchampian readymades. The retrospective begins with Koons's iconic vacuum cleaners, ensconced in acrylic cases and lit by fluorescent lights. If you needed convincing that the works weren't nodding to Dan Flavin, go back a few years to 1979 and you'll see Koons affixing a cheap toaster to a row of vertical, wall-mounted fluorescent tubes (*Toaster*, 1979). The teapot of *Teapot* (1979) even has its barcode sticker attached.

On the evidence, for someone so identified with his mature works, in which tricks of complicated fabrication play a pivotal role, Koons once played the nitty-gritty unassisted readymade game vis-à-vis Minimalism. As hard as it is to imagine, Koons was once a young, nearly impoverished Canal Street urchin trolling downtown novelty shops. His wall-mounted fluorescent works were initially displayed at the New Museum, suggesting that Koons did earn his stripes as an avant-garde East Village savant who had real money problems like the rest of us – regular folks with feelings and insecurities!

The point is brought home with the *Celebration* series, begun in 1994, in which Koons comes off as a touching, sensitive father figure – a far cry from the machismo dominating his earlier works. This is where, for better or worse, personal biography plays an important role in the reception. The museum hides nothing in detailing Koons's bitter breakup with Staller, and the subsequent kidnapping of his son is played to great heart-tugging effect, lending the otherwise technically impressive sculptures a large degree of pathos.

Perhaps the most crowd-pleasing, selfie-ready work is the big hanging-heart pendant *Hanging Heart (Violet/Gold)* (1994–2006). Or perhaps it's *Play-Doh* (1994–2014), which contrary to many press reports really doesn't look like a pile of shit but rather quite like the real children's plaything, albeit at a jaw-dropping scale. Most affecting, though, at least to this cat-lady critic, was *Cat on a Clothesline (Aqua)* (1994–2001), a sad, wide-eyed kitten hanging in a sock, surrounded by flowers. It was fabricated, like the other works, in part as a reminder to his abducted son that he was never far from Koons's thoughts. The work brought me to tears. There I was, like a sad sap, crying at the Whitney on a crowded Friday night. Who knew Koons's work contained such melodrama? As commercial as his work may be, there's more to Koons than dollar signs and straight swagger.

David Everitt Howe

facing page, top *Made in Heaven*, 1989,  
lithograph on paper on canvas, 318 × 691 cm. Collection Artist Rooms,  
Tate and the National Galleries of Scotland. © the artist

facing page, bottom *New Hoover Convertibles Green, Blue,  
New Hoover Convertibles, Green, Blue Doubledecker*, 1981–7,  
four vacuum cleaners, acrylic, fluorescent lights, 295 × 104 × 71 cm.  
Collection Whitney Museum of American Art. © the artist

