

April 23, 2004

ART REVIEW; The Meaning, Beauty and Humor of Ordinary Things

By KEN JOHNSON

"Jeff Koons: Highlights of 25 Years" at C&M Arts has tremendous visual and material punch. It is funny. It is so intellectually provocative that it will make your head spin. And contrary to the view of Mr. Koons as a cold-blooded cynic, it is full of emotion.

A better occasion to assess one of the most influential and controversial art careers of the last quarter-century is unlikely to come along soon. The 27 works are so well selected and are installed on two floors with such a finely tuned sense of space that it feels like a much bigger show. Major pieces from all phases of Mr. Koons's career are here, from the four vacuum cleaners sealed in an illuminated Plexiglas box from the early 1980's to a 10-foot-high stainless steel "Balloon Dog" that took most of the 90's to finish.

Those who think of Mr. Koons as Andy Warhol's evil son are not going to change their minds. In his lavishly produced transformations of kitsch into fine art, they will still see just another higher-end order of kitsch. The Pop Art label is not wrong for Mr. Koons. He does use industrial methods of fabrication to make objects that are hard to distinguish from commercial products. If you saw the stainless-steel, model-train souvenir bourbon container in a liquor store, you would not recognize it as art. A recent sculpture of an inflated plastic lobster swimming pool toy looks so much like the real thing that you fight the urge to tap on it to verify that it is really painted aluminum.

Mr. Koons's work can be read, as Pop Art often is, as a satiric commentary on capitalism, the commodification of art and life, and the erosion of the real by the artificial. But the beauty of his best work is in its surplus of meaning and feeling.

Consider, for example, the basketball hanging motionless in a water-filled aquarium, neither sinking nor rising. (The secret: it's partly filled with mercury.) This canny intersection of Minimalism and Pop might be a comment on the institutionalization of sports as a national religion and the deification of athletes like Dr. J, whose signature graces this ball. There is also the critique of what Marxist theorists like to call consumer fetishism: the erotic love of products like aquariums and shiny vacuum cleaners and souvenir liquor containers.

Yet the sculpture casts a mystical spell. The orange sphere hovering miraculously in the middle of the square tank becomes a kind of three-dimensional mandala, a symbol of spiritual unity and equanimity. It has a stillness that is weirdly soothing to stand before.

That sense of something at once utterly obvious and mysteriously fraught with meaning animates the pivotal work in Mr. Koons's career: "Rabbit," from 1986. Cast in mirror-bright stainless steel, an inflated cartoon bunny becomes a gleaming wedding of high and low. The futurist, utopian aspirations of modernism invoked by the polished Brancusian forms merge with the crass commercialism of the cheap toy, whose seams, wrinkles and inflation nozzle remain evident.

But Mr. Koons's bunny also has a touching personal intimacy. In its childlike vulnerability, innocence and eagerness to please, it exudes a feeling of new possibility and elicits a nurturing response. That the rabbit is a symbol of birth and resurrection is not incidental.

The bunny's promise came to fruition in the works that made up an unforgettable 1988 exhibition that unleashed a perfect storm of publicity, critical debate and audience excitement and consternation. Here the eight hilarious, oversize tchotchkes may still be viewed as subversive mock commodities, satirizing the infantilism and banality of contemporary imagination. But the sensuous fabrication in ceramic or wood by Italian artisans gives them a powerful psychological impact, making them more than just conceptual stunts.

The sexy, topless blonde embracing the sad-eyed Pink Panther is an erotic image of Oedipal yearning; Michael Jackson, bigger than life in his gold suit, holding his chimp Bubbles, also in a gold suit, radiates a numinous aura. He is a young god -- a troubled young god, we know now.

It has been said that Mr. Koons lost his way after the 1988 show, and the current show does not dispell that suspicion. The early 1990's foray into explicit, participatory pornography still looks like bad judgment, as in the oversize ink-jet-printed photograph of the artist and his wife at that time, a porn star and member of the Italian parliament, both smeared with mud, making love. But the snowy, Renaissance-style marble sculpture of the couple tenderly embracing is a delightful fusion of the sacred and the profane.

As for the large Photo Realist montage paintings, made by assistants since 1995, there are four here and they remain overly indebted to James Rosenquist and David Salle. Food, female pinups and other commercial images are rendered with disappointing flatness and dryness. Mr. Koons is just not as good in two dimensions; missing is the material richness and enigmatic interiority of his sculptures.

But the "Balloon Dog," an elephantine stainless steel copy of a balloon twisted into the form of a big-eared creature, is unequivocally wonderful. With its bulbous volumes, like giant sausage links, coated in translucent, coppery orange lacquer, it has a breathtaking physical presence.

Note the beautifully realized knot that serves as its nose and its perky, phallic tail. Like its much smaller ancestor, "Rabbit," it evokes the euphoric, childlike optimism of modernity while adding a certain priapic excitement.

But as Mr. Koons's work always does, the "Balloon Dog" has its dark side. Balloons are inherently unstable: they are impressive for a brief, shining moment, but then they must either burst or slowly die. Is it too much of a stretch to see the "Balloon Dog" in relation to the bipolar swings of inflation and recession that characterize contemporary economic life? Is it mere coincidence that the dog was born at the same time as the great stockmarket bubble of the 90's? (Nonsympathizers may say it's a good symbol for Mr. Koons's career.)

Many people live these days with an anxious feeling that the world they know could suddenly burst. "Balloon Dog" embodies the joy and terror of such a moment with exhilarating panache.

"Jeff Koons: Highlights of 25 Years" is at C&M Arts, 45 East 78th Street, Manhattan, (212) 861-0020, through June 5.