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Installation view of "Skin Fruit" at the New Museum



Entrance to "Size Does Matter" at Flag Art Foundation



Charles Ray's *Fall '91* (1992), in "Skin Fruit"

IT'S NOT THE SIZE. . . by Ben Davis

Two high-profile exhibitions.

Two celebrity curators.

One great curatorial premise.

I speak, of course, of "Skin Fruit," the New Museum's tour of the Dakis Joannou art collection, curated by superstar artist **Jeff Koons**, and "Size Does Matter" at Chelsea's Flag Art Foundation, curated by NBA juggernaut Shaquille O'Neal. "Skin Fruit," we are told, is "conceived by Koons as a kind of panorama, with frequent shifts in scale and unconventional juxtapositions." "Size Does Matter," according to its press release, explores "the myriad ways that scale affects the perception of contemporary art." Great minds think alike, I suppose. And, oh yeah: On top of this common obsession with *size*, both shows' titles also contain a reference to *dicks*.

Let us, then, take these two men at their word, and see how their two exhibitions, you know, measure up against each other.

ROUND 1: ARTISTS SELECTED

The two spectacles, indeed, have a remarkably similar feel. In both cases, ironic post-conceptual sculpture is front and center, along with a fair amount of painting and photography of a slick, media-smart type. Partly this just reflects the taste represented by the respective collections that Shaq and Koons are working from -- interesting to note that today's most visible art collectors prefer to associate themselves with this kind of in-your-face stuff, rather than the sobriety of Old Masters or the lonely spiritual aspirations of modernism.

The similarities go beyond just kindred "feels," though. Both shows feature works by **Charles Ray**. In "Skin Fruit," there's *Revolution Counter-Revolution* (1990/2010), a giant merry-go-round, and *Fall '91* (1992), an oversized, hyperreal sculpture of a businesswoman. "Size Does Matter," meanwhile, offers a Ray *Baby Bird*, a small, crumpled form laid on a plinth. Both curators also go in for the jokey interventions of **Maurizio Cattelan**. Shaq greets visitors with the Italian artist's tiny elevator doors, inset into the base of the wall in the opening hallway at Flag, winking open and shut with a microscopic "bing" every so often. Koons brings in Cattelan's *Now*, a ghoulish sculptural recreation of a made-up John F. Kennedy in a coffin, ready for burial. **Cindy Sherman** makes an appearance in both shows as well.

And let's not forget: Both shows feature works by the Koons-meister himself. Shaq offers one of Koons' large, **James Rosenquist**-esque paintings, featuring gleaming cleavage overlaid with images of furniture, cartoons and free-floating items of clothing. At the New Museum, curator Koons demurely includes just one of his own works, the minimal *One Ball Total Equilibrium Tank* (1985), a single basketball suspended in water -- a prop which, come to think of it, Shaq might appreciate!



Maurizio Cattelan's *Untitled* (2001), in "Size Does Matter"



Jeff Koons' *Beach House* (2003), in "Size Does Matter"



Jeff Koons' *One Ball Total Equilibrium Tank* (1985), in "Skin Fruit"

Beyond this, which of the two curators delivers a more interesting mix of artists? Both shows, it should be said, offer some surprises. In "Skin Fruit," there's **Liza Lou's** *Super Sister* (1999), a spangled, life-sized sculpture of a shotgun-toting African-American superheroine; **Kiki Smith's** long, bronze cast of her intestine, pleasantly unpleasant to look at; Haris Epaminonda's hypnotic mirrored video in the lobby; and **Cady Noland's** large screenprint-on-aluminum depicting Lee Harvey Oswald pierced by giant bullet holes. In "Size Does Matter," there's an unexpected suite of framed collages of punk pin-ups by Mexican tattoo artist **Dr. Lakra**; a gawky **Tim Hawkinson** homunculus with enormous hands, made from taped-together cardboard; British sculptor **Cathy de Monchaux's** scrappy evocation of medieval tapestries, *Medium Battle with Unicorns and Dogs (Herded People)* (2007); and **Fred Wilson's** black blown glass tear drops, *Viscous Risk* (2002).

Overall, however, the artists Koons has put in "Skin Fruit" feel a bit. . . familiar for the New Museum, which might be the institution's overreliance on rich-guy art collections starting to show through. **Urs Fischer**, of course, has just been seen in these spaces, and his woman-as-wax-candle sculpture in the Dakis show is quite similar to a piece by Fischer featured in "Unmonumental" before that. **John Bock**, **Elliott Hundley** and **Nate Lowman** were all also in "Unmonumental." Cattelan, **Pawel Althamer**, Tino Sehgal and **Roberto Cuoghi** (who here contributes a profile homage to Dakis, as well as a giant, towering god statue) were all in New Museum curator Massimiliano Gioni's "After Nature," and their works looked better as chapters in Gioni's more personal, reflective "visual novel" than they do in "Skin Fruit."

It probably cannot be said that Shaq offers something that is fundamentally less trendy -- there is a life-size **Ugo Rondinone** sculpture of a knotty tree sited out on the Flag Foundation's deck, for instance, that would feel at home in "Skin Fruit." But the show boasts more satisfyingly strange inclusions, like **Evan Penny's** anamorphic sculpture of a stretched human head, eerie to look at up close, or **Tomoaki Suzuki's** deadpan carved wooden portrait figurines. The Shaq show is also, unexpectedly, anchored by the sobriety of a couple of older artists, **Chuck Close** and **Anselm Kiefer**, who make enough of an impression to prevent the whole thing from feeling like a collection of oddities.

Result: Shaq wins this match-up.

ROUND 2: ORGANIZATION

What about the actual experience of walking through the exhibitions? Perhaps Koons can't be blamed if his show is a bit cluttered. He's working with more artists. But then, he's also working with a bigger space.

Overall, the two curators relate the individual works in their shows differently to their designated theme of scale. Koons, true to the press release, curates all the individual works as "a kind of panorama," so that in each gallery the individual pieces get deliberately jumbled together; they are conceived as attractions within a larger experience, creating a kind of fun-house effect. Quieter and lower-key works lose in this context, like **Robert Gober's** vacant bed, placed off to the side. They become just beats to set off the more immense works.

The Shaq show does feature some ensembles. For instance, a small, saintly **Elizabeth Peyton** painting of Kurt Cobain is hung just over Ray's delicate steel cast of a bird embryo. But in general, Shaq has placed his works in a much more straightforward way, so that you can consider each work individually in relationship to the question of



Liza Lou's *Super Sister* (1999), in "Skin Fruit"



Kiki Smith's *Intestine* (1992), in "Skin Fruit"



Left to right: Tim Hawkinson's *Scout* (2006-2007) and Ivan Wittenstein's *The Kiss* (2005), in "Size Does Matter"



Urs Fischer's *What if the Phone Rings* (2003), in "Skin Fruit"

scale, rather than as moments in one big carnival. Set against the more chaotic "Skin Fruit," this comes across as a virtue.

Result: Shaq bests Koons again.

ROUND 3: EGO

Jeff Koons has made narcissism into fine art, of course, so it is no surprise if critics of the Dakis/New Museum initiative wondered what he could possibly bring besides his own celebrity. Despite -- or perhaps because of -- all this chatter, "Skin Fruit" offers very, very little in the way of his signature love of glossy surfaces and kitsch, homing in mainly on a disheveled, fragmented, "fuck you" kind of vibe. If you didn't know he curated it, I'd wager that you would not find the show particularly "Koonsian." Except for **Takashi Murakami** and **Richard Prince**, there is little in the way of neo-Pop -- and Murakami is represented by a slouchy freak rather than one of his cartoon femme-bots, while Prince appears via a joke painting that has a Neo-Expressionist flavor. As mentioned, Koons includes only one work by himself, the notably minimal *One Ball*.

Shaq, on the other hand, unabashedly embraces the premise that he is what is interesting about this show. A vinyl stencil greeting you at the elevators depicts his profile posed next to a kid. On top of this, there's Willard Wigan's micro-portrait of the basketball star, carved from a pin and viewable through a microscope, which happens to be presented just below a series of portraits of Shaq collaged out of money by **Mark Wagner** -- works which in context seem to make a statement of relatively unapologetic approach to art as bling and personal vanity prop. Self-love overwhelms good taste on the next floor, where a large **Peter Max** portrait of Shaq towers next to a James Rieck painting of a sexy cop. And if you thought that this show might crack open the stereotype of the B-ball hero as man of unencumbered libido, think again: The show has a significant sub-theme of luscious, sexually available females -- **Richard Phillips'** *Michelle Angelo* (2010), **Richard Patterson's** *Cheerleader* (2001), **Lisa Yuskavage's** *Brande* (2000), **Don Brown's** *Yoko VII* (2002) and **Inez Van Lamsweerde's** *My Little Darling Trish* (2003), this last being a black-and-white fashion shot of a female model, nude from the waist down, and having nothing whatsoever to do with the theme of "how scale affects perception in contemporary art."

Result: Playing defensive in the "icky self-promotion" category, Koons scores over Shaq.

ROUND 4: OVERALL IMPRESSION

What, at last, is the aftertaste? What makes the Koons and Shaq shows distinct? When Peter Schjeldahl **says** the Koons initiative represents "noblesse oblige, laced with a left-libertarian raciness," this could as well apply to the esthetic of either show.

Consider the **following** quote from Shaq about his curatorial method, from *New York* magazine: "Art is a process of delivering or arranging elements that appeal to the emotions of a person looking at it. It's what you feel. I picked those things because they were beautiful." Close your eyes and imagine these words in Koons' Evil Mr. Rogers voice and you will realize that it is precisely this approach that critics could easily have expected from Koons-the-curator, because it is basically the philosophy of Koons-the-artist. In sort, Shaq's "Size Does Matter" is pretty much what Koons' critics might have feared from "Skin Fruit": a collection of glossy trophies, cheerfully displayed as such.

In this light, "Skin Fruit" at least appears more adventurous than you'd expect. The busy installation conveys a slight sense of unease, something which would seem to be anathema to the sleekness and inscrutability of Koons' own works. The dominance of big, spectacular



Roberto Cuoghi's *Megas Dakis* (2007), in "Skin Fruit"

gestures speaks of an eagerness to please the masses, but the reliance on the grotesque projects a defensive punk attitude, as if deliberately assaulting the audience would neutralize any bad feelings they might have up front (indeed, Schjeldahl claims that the overall impression of Koons left by "Skin Fruit" is "anger, provoked by situations over which he has no control"). So, even if the New Museum show looks too familiar and somewhat cold around the heart, you can at least give its celebrity curator credit for failing in an interesting and unexpected way.

Result: Point to Koons.

Final tally: Draw.

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Roberto Cuoghi's *Pazuzu* (2008), in "Skin Fruit"



Ugo Rondinone's *Get up girl a sun is running the world* (2006), in "Size Does Matter"



Anselm Kiefer's *Untitled, Young Mao* (2000), in "Size Does Matter"



Robert Gober's *Corner Bed* (1987), in "Skin Fruit"



Takashi Murakami's *Inochi* (2004), with Richard Prince's *I'm in a Limosine (Following a Hearse)* (2005-2006), in "Skin Fruit"



Mark Wegner's *Shaq by Marq* (2010), in "Size Does Matter"