

Jeff Koons and the Crisis of the Sexual Object

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Jeff Koons, from "Made in Heaven" series

[Jeff Koons](#)'s infamous "Made in Heaven" series returned to New York this fall — its run at Luxembourg & Dayan ends on Friday — and [did what it does best](#): piss people off. The large-format photographic paintings (and one freakish crystal sculpture) of the artist in spectacular, explicit, fantasy-themed coitus with adult-film actress Cicciolina were famously poorly received when they first debuted. Writing of the new outing, Christian Viveros-Fauné titled [his scorching Village Voice review](#) "Return of the Dick."

I'm not going to write something so crazy as a defense of Koons. But I am going to speak up for the weirdo, tortured status of the works. If you check out Alyce Mahon's book "Eroticism & Art," a chronicle of the various ways that avant-garde art took up explicit sexuality in the 20th century, you'll see that "Made in Heaven" is the sole work mentioned after the 1970s that represents anything like a celebratory take on straight sex. Even then, the work serves mainly as a kind of ideal foil, the perfect cocktail of commodification and patriarchy to spur an artist like [Cindy Sherman](#) to make her abject "Sex Pictures" series.

Of course, there's a larger reason for this art-historical trajectory: the feminist and women's liberation movements of the 1960s and '70s, which brought with them a righteous critique of the objectification of women in art. It was in 1975 that film theorist Laura Mulvey published her landmark essay "Visual Pleasure in Narrative Cinema," which argued that mainstream cinema had been dominated by the male gaze and advocated for the "destruction of pleasure as a radical weapon." The essay gained tremendous cachet, partly because its argument seemed to imply that experimental film was an analogue in the visual arts to feminism.

Luxembourg & Dayan's revalidation of Koons' "Made in Heaven" certainly corresponds with the ascent of porno-chic market-oriented art (think Thomas Ruff's monster-sized photos of internet sex), and the increasing sidelining of the critical academic tradition that Mahon's book represents. But part of this political legacy remains with us in the form of a gut negative reaction to Koons' adoption of the most aggressive tropes of mainstream pornography in all its androcentric excess. Because after all, we're not finished with the need for a critique of the objectification of women. It was not 30 years [but three months ago](#) that a pack of Yale frat boys (from George W. Bush's old frat, no less) were terrorizing their campus by chanting "No Means Yes and Yes Means Anal!"

But is the correct reaction to such sexism really the "destruction of pleasure," as Mulvey had it? One of things that struck me about the new outing for Koons's "Made in Heaven" was that it coincided with another art installation at a commercial gallery, A.L. Steiner and A.K. Burns's "Community Action Center" at Taxter & Spengemann, a full-on, ultra-explicit lesbian sex film — and not of the kind that's targeted at straight dudes either. Like "Made in Heaven," it starred the artists themselves (along with a cadre of friends and lovers), and [explicitly aimed to appropriate conventions of porn](#), up to and including an erotic pizza delivery.

In "Community Action Center," pleasure is an affirmative force, its depictions something to be played with. The crucial difference from Koons, obviously, is the real social background. As the title indicates, Steiner & Burns's radical work is about community, validating sexual practices that are still considered to be at the margins (the gallery even hosted a "Casual Separatist Friday," which was a good time, or so I've heard). Of all the progressive purposes of art, one that I can definitely get behind

is the validation of alternative lifestyles. It's hard to argue that Koons's work has anything alternative about it, but that does leave a dilemma in how to approach his images.

Laura Mulvey's scorched-earth formulation about visual pleasure was always extreme, and other theorists have felt the need to walk it back ever since. Another academic drawing on psychoanalytic categories, Kaja Silverman, has [spent a lot of time](#) going off in an equally abstract opposite direction: the "look as gift," rather than the gaze as a tool of subjection. Going all the way back to the original feminist debates around pornography, there has always been the need to somehow open a space to differentiate a critique of pornographic imagery from garden-variety prudishness, so as not to cede the terrain of sex to its most regressive depictions. Gloria Steinem famously argued in 1977 that "erotica may be the word that can differentiate sex from violence and rescue sexual pleasure." But fantasies being the notoriously slippery things that they are, these days it's probably safe to say that criticism is for the most part better focused on the circumstances in which images are produced and consumed, rather than on trying to create some sort of formal scheme or list of prerequisites that defines what the correct content of sexual imagery is.

The contrasting auras thrown off by "Made in Heaven" and "Community Action Center" put me in mind of a line that amounts to an aside in Sherry Wolf's [excellent recent book](#), "Sexuality and Socialism: History, Politics, and Theory of LGBT Liberation": "Perhaps the virtual media blackout on LGBT sex has its upside since the images of straight sex on the screen are overwhelmingly dominated by conventionally good-looking and unimaginably toned young people who always appear to know exactly how to touch each other from the first moments and who invariably climax simultaneously, beating the statistical odds on such events," Wolf writes. "This constant bombardment of unreal sexual images and cosmetically altered or chiseled gym bodies not only promotes phony models of sex, but stokes feelings of sexual inadequacy and contributes to negative body images."

That quote sums up the web of contradictions everyone, artists and art critics included, navigate today, in times that are not so sexually liberated as we tend to think. You either identify as a sexual minority, in which case you have to deal with all the bullshit of discrimination, or you identify with the mainstream, which implies acceptability but also carries its own angst, given the power relationships sexuality is

bound up in, the toxic commodification of sex, the hetero loutishness promoted from on high. Instead of damning Koons for his porno appropriation, or doing the opposite — celebrating "Made in Heaven" as some kind of transgressive adventure in role-playing — it seems best to say that both these opposed viewpoints are potentially true. They illustrate a kind of antinomy that cannot be solved via neat critical formulas — only by the actual conditions of a much less alienated world.

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