Reflecting on Jeff Koons's Hollow Triumph in Chelsea

by Ben Davis

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A detail of Jeff Koons's "Gazing Ball (Ariadne)," 2013
(© Jeff Koons. Courtesy David Zwirner, New York/London)

When I walked into “Gazing Ball,” Jeff Koons’s new show at David Zwirner, my first reaction was… pleasant surprise.

The show, advertised as the opening shot in a Year of Koons leading up to his Whitney retrospective in 2014, consists of a number of creamy white plaster sculptures scattered around Zwirner’s beautifully lit 19th Street space, evidently intended as an extended riff on types of lawn decoration. Some are giant casts of familiar classical sculptures — pert, armless female nudes and brawny, writhing warriors — of the kind you might find lining the way to some godawful nouveau riche Beverly Hills palace; others are simulacra of elaborately decorated mailboxes; one is a jumbo-sized snowman. What binds the whole series together is a repeating element, a shiny blue sphere — here perched on the hip of a languishing figure, there balanced incongruously atop a row of mailboxes.

I've so come to associate Koons with mindless rich-guy spectacle that these new "Gazing Ball" works come off as unexpectedly daring. They offer the semblance of a fresh formula, though Koons's queasy interplay of the high and the low remains unmistakable. Here, that theme is refracted through a whole system of other polarities: calculated variation and knowing repetition, matte white and mirrored blue, and finally the turbo-charged production values of the statuary (check out the surface of that snowman) and the store-bought character of the "gazing balls" (on Amazon, you can buy a blue "Odyssey Glass Gazing Globe" for $29.97; maybe the goofy classical reference fired Koons's imagination).

As a viewer, you enter "Gazing Ball" and you are amused. Then you walk around these sculptures and you slowly realize that, after the initial intrigue, no further thoughts appear in your brain.

In that one-two step, the initial rush followed by the deeper emptiness, you have everything you need to know about Koons's merit as an artist. You have his real skill — and let's be honest, fellow Koons-sceptics, the man is talented. His eye for effects is one of his two great talents. It's just that a single jolt of mannered peculiarity is not quite enough to convince you that it all has much of a point. You can't help but think that the final destiny of these meta-lawn-ornaments is to end up as actual lawn ornaments for some multi-millionaire, as all the levels of irony collapse in on themselves. And ultimately the most appropriate word to describe the accomplishment of "Gazing Ball" would be "awesome" — delivered in as flat and affectless a tone of voice as possible.

2.

The Zwirner show opened opposite another at Koons's long-time gallery, Gagosian. The latter, unimaginatively titled "New Painting and Sculpture," is a more diverse but also less novel experience.

It contains three monumental polished stainless steel balloon animals, about which there is no more to say than there is about Koons's other monumental balloon animals, and a sculpture of a man-sized inflatable Incredible Hulk pushing a wheel-barrow. It also profers a set of works from the New York artist's newer "Antiquity" line, large photorealist collage paintings that mash together yet more images of classical nudes; "Balloon Venus (Magenta)," a large sculpture evoking the ancient, bulbous fertility totem known as the "Venus of Willendorf," only formed out of shiny metal balloons; and "Metallic Venus," a scale version of the so-called "Venus Callipyge" — the "Venus of the Beautiful Buttocks," an epithet that must have amused Koons — in polished blue steel, studded with live flowers.

"Antiquity" is new territory for Koons, perhaps — but in fact it fits a very old pattern: From Picasso's florid versions of "Las Meninas" to Warhol's icy riffs on "The Last Supper," late-period artists have often pivoted to apply their signature techniques to the classics. As they age, such celebrity artists find themselves forced to quote themselves; locked in the prison of their own trademark effects, they look for something to buttress their credibility. Quoting the masters thereby signifies the lasting relevance they feel is slipping away from them, while replicating the problem of being trapped within art at a higher level.

Which is to say: I can't see much of meaning in Koons's Koons-esque spins on antiquity, besides some kind of residual hunger to be taken seriously — though this almost makes them poignant in their own unintentional way.

3.

The opening of Koons's double whammy of shows last week came right on the heels of a lengthy New York Magazine cover story, which was, truth be told, short on fresh insight into the guy. The headline of the article asked, "What Does the Art World Have Against Jeff Koons?" This conceit produced a particular eye roll, evoking the mega-rich who go on and on about how they are a persecuted minority.

But the title does at least make visible the ideology being beamed at you from all those gleaming surfaces at Zwirner and Gagosian. I mentioned Koons's two talents before. One is his meticulous eye for a Baz Luhrmann-esque high-octane eye candy; the other, his ability to convince fans that the underlying lack of nuance is not a lack at all, but a carefully planned effect — in fact, a meaningful act of defiance against all those pointy-headed intellectuals who are always complaining about things. "He says if you're critical, you're already out of the game," David Zwirner explains in the New York mag article, articulating Koons's philosophy. This strikes me as a particularly One Percent kind of sentiment, a token of a world grown so unequal that a certain class of people is almost completely out of touch with the values of real humans. For most of us, after all, critical thought is important, because for most of us life is a struggle.

The new millennium, so far, has belonged to Koons, with the brief interregnum of the art crash that followed the 2008 financial crisis. Then, good critics wondered aloud whether the crisis might be positive for art, returning some critical spark to it — and Koons's brand of industrial-strength razzle-dazzle was exactly the kind of thing that was, for that crisis-wracked moment, exposed in all its social irrelevance.

Yet the promised aesthetic renewal did not arrive, mainly because passing through the crucible of the Great Recession, the powerful stabilized their fortunes. Inequality has surged, and Koons's status as Artist of His Time has surged back with it. But as in the general economy, where you get the sense that we have lived through a largely substance-free recovery, based on kicking the can down the road, Koons's new works give you the feeling that you are dealing with the same old schemes, though perhaps in slightly new forms.