

All Dogs Go to Heaven

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TIME AND AGAIN, Jeff Koons has said that his art is all about “transcendence,” that he wants it to help people feel good about themselves. Last Tuesday night, during an exclusive patrons’ preview of “Jeff Koons: A Retrospective” at the Whitney Museum, he achieved that goal a few hundred times over, while giving the Whitney the perfect kiss-off to its Marcel Breuer building on Madison Avenue. Whatever could the museum do to top it, except start over somewhere else?

“Have you been upstairs?” asked the Argentine real estate developer Eduardo Costantini—one of two collectors present who each paid a fortune, no doubt, for new Koonses that they were thrilled to see for the first time here. “It’s the yellow one on the fourth floor,” the kvelling Costantini said of *Pluto and Proserpina*, a stainless steel sculpture from Koons’s “Antiquity” phase. “It’s ten feet tall! And it’s beautiful!”

There didn’t seem to be a soul in the house who wasn’t spouting superlatives. Granted, the viewing audience mingling with Koons family members was restricted to other moneybag Koons collectors (Jerry Speyer, Steven Cohen, Eli Broad, Dakis Joannou), Koons dealers (Larry Gagolian, Almine Rech, David Zwirner), corporate sponsors (mainly H&M), artists whom the Whitney gave midcareer retrospectives long before Koons (John Currin, Cindy Sherman, Glenn Ligon, Terry Winters), other artists (Darren Bader, Urs Fischer, T.J. Wilcox, Louise Lawler), curators from hither and yon (Ann Temkin, Joachim Pissaro), the occasional media celebrity (Arianna Huffington, Tina Brown), and the directors of other museums like MoMA’s Glenn Lowry and Lisa Phillips, from the New Museum. In 1980, it gave Koons his first exposure to the public.

“It’s great,” said Guggenheim Foundation deputy director Ari Wiseman of the retrospective, curated within an inch of its life by the Whitney’s Scott Rothkopf. “Drop-dead amazing,” concluded Norman Rosenthal. Artist Josephine Meckseper, standing in the morbid light of Koons’s vacuum cleaners, was even more emphatic. “This is one of the most important shows we’re going to see in our lifetime,” she predicted. But the most frequent comment heard was, “Jeff Koons is the artist our society deserves.” That was a compliment.

Like or lump the 150 works on view—the perverse readymades, gleaming appliances, fecund flowers, pumped-up porcelains, over-shared paintings, exuberant porn pictures— it’s an entertaining and yes, intelligent, account of Koons’s Ahab-like obsession with perfection in a world that is anything but. It also puts the pathology driving all of the artist’s hoses, balls, sacs, shafts, tanks, crevices, orbs, and humps

on naked display. Has Koons ever made a sculpture that didn’t suggest hetero coitus? “It’s great, but so totally psycho,” observed one guest, rolling her eyes at the wide-eyed cat hanging from huge clothespins in its scrotum-like, turquoise sock.

The work was pinioned to a wall facing the show’s *deus ex machina*, *Play-Doh*, the mountainous miracle cast in painted aluminum that took Koons twenty years to make and looks as if a truck full of paintings, perhaps his own, had taken a giant poop. “I’m happy,” said Koons, shaking hands or hugging all who came near.

“This is like visiting you at home,” Richard Pandiscio told Joannou, who loaned the show more works than any other collector, including the big tulips painting in the museum’s street window, though the Whitney borrowed B.Z. and Michael Schwartz’s number two edition of the single basketball suspended in a fish tank. “Seeing it here,” Joannou said, “gave me the same feeling I had the first time I saw it, when Scott was probably eight years old. Extraordinary.”

Dinner for the artist, lenders, sponsors, and trustees took place under a tent in the most appropriate location for a balloon-animal specialist, the Central Park Zoo. Waiters standing along the black carpet at the entrance proffered flutes of Dom Pérignon, making sure we knew the vintage. (Dom Pérignon underwrote the dinner with Christie's, which has profited handsomely from Koons over the past several years.)

"This is the most ground-breaking, comprehensive show ever dedicated to Jeff Koons," Whitney board co-chair Brooke Garber Neidich told the two hundred guests in her welcome speech. There were several speeches, the most self-promotional from an almost giddy Donald Schneider, H&M's creative director. He had to keep reminding himself that the evening was about Koons, not his company, which collaborated with the artist on a limited-edition balloon-dog handbag to celebrate the July 17 opening of its Fifth Avenue flagship. "One of Jeff's balloon dogs cost a collector \$58 million," Schneider crowed. "Our handbag will sell for \$49.95."

When it was Whitney director Adam Weinberg's turn, he acknowledged the "challenges" of mounting the retrospective with a nod to Rothkopf. "We wanted to say goodbye to the Breuer building with a flourish, and thanks to Scott we can," he said, adding that Larry Gagosian "really came to the floor to make this happen." Singling out lenders—"Dakis, this show could not have happened without you"—as well as Jeffrey Deitch—"You came to us early on with this idea"—Weinberg also took the presence of other artists in the room as "a tribute to Jeff."

One of the artists watching Rothkopf walk to the podium was Cecily Brown. "Look at him," she said. "He's officially a rock star." So it seemed, only he quickly outed Koons's longtime studio manager, Gary McCraw, as "the great expert on Jeff's work." Calling the show "a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity," and noting that he and Koons were "still friends," he also thanked the collectors, extolling the patience of

William Bell, the person who waited twenty years for *Play-Doh*—and has waited nearly that long for the new house in Malibu where it will live to be completed as well. ("It's complicated," he said later.)

Finally, Koons stepped to the mic. "The show is wonderful," he said, "but what has real meaning is that all of us are here together." He then introduced his family, beginning with his wife and muse, Justine Wheeler. "'Celebration,' 'Popeye,' 'Hulk/Elvis,' and 'Antiquity' were inspired by our love and I am so grateful to her," and here, unexpectedly, he choked up. "Art has brought so much transcendence in my life," he said, as the motivational speaker in him came out. "It can lead people to be excited about their possibilities and be the best people that they can. And I want to be the best person I can."

Mera Rubell must have been feeling the possibilities when her dinner partner, Christie's president Douglas Woodham, confessed his fondness for collecting seventeenth-century painting. "That is unacceptable," she told him. "You have to see the light."

The next day, the sun was definitely shining on Koons when Gagosian hosted a lunch for the artist at the Sea Grill, under the nose of *Split-Rocker*, the monumental topiary now looming over the Prometheus statue at Rockefeller Center. Commissioned by the Public Art Fund, it is just as fabulous, if slightly less endearing, than his flowering *Puppy*, which stood in the same spot fourteen years ago. "It's a painting with flowers," Public Art Fund director Nicholas Baume said. "And the architecture inside it is really interesting."

For a little while, with Weinberg, Donna De Salvo, Agnes Gund, Eli and Edythe Broad, and Bill and Maria Bell in the room, it seemed as if the Whitney party had never ended. But fresh faces belonging to architect Annabelle Selldorf, Richard Prince, Dan Colen, Public Art Fund president Susan Freedman, collectors Jill and Peter Kraus, and Gagosian curator John Elderfield, also arrived to drink special "Split-Rocker" cocktails and sweeten their teeth with "Split-Rocker" desserts.

"Jeff lives in a frictionless universe," Rothkopf observed. But he also has to share it with other artists, who were chock-a-block on Thursday, the big kickoff for summer shows in Manhattan. There were openings at Marian Goodman, at several galleries on the Lower East Side, at Sean Kelly in Clinton, and all over Chelsea, where there was something for every taste.

Mickalene Thomas powered up at Lehmann Maupin in the lone solo show of the evening, while dealer Alexander Gray exhumed the watercolors of Vera Neumann, whose scarves adorned the heads and throats of countless women from the 1950s to the 1980s. The pungent odor of a stable—the kind for horses, not just artists—wafted through Paul Kasmin Gallery, where *Brooklyn Rail* editor Phong Bui took a turn as curator of the baffling, "Bloodflames Revisited," and Todd Levin totally kicked out the jams at both the Marianne Boesky and Marlborough galleries with the archaeological sweep he gave to the last 150 years of art from Detroit, not just the most beleaguered but possibly the most soulful city in the country.

Instead of bringing in a guest curator, Barbara Gladstone turned to Berlin dealers Thilo Wermke and Alexander Schröder for "Galerie Neu at Gladstone Gallery," hands-down the coolest show of the night. "They have a very clear aesthetic, and I like it," Gladstone said of her colleagues. "I can learn a lot from them."

The atmosphere contrasted sharply with the wild scene at Salon 94, which fashion designer Duro Olowu, in his yearly outing as curator, filled to the ceiling with paintings, ceramics, costume jewelry, photographs, and handmade clothing all focused on the female form—material culture at its most colorful, for sure.

Designer Cynthia Rowley, kitted out in an Olowu dress, was fascinated. “This may be the only time I wear someone else’s clothes,” she said. The enormous crowd at the opening included the collector Emily Pulitzer, fashion activist Bethann Hardison, Metropolitan Museum director Thomas Campbell—a decorative arts specialist, after all—and a man who told Olowu that he liked the clothes more than the art. “They’re not as expensive, right?” the man asked. Olowu gave him a helpless look. “They are,” he said. “I made them, and I know.”

Friday night brought platoons of art troops to Bard College, where Amy Sillman and Anne Collier had retrospective shows opening at the Hessel Museum, one stop on a tour for each. “I have to say it looks better here than it did at the ICA in Boston,” said Sillman, who has been teaching at Bard for years and was wearing a medal to prove it. Collier’s show of photographs, curated by Bard CCS director Tom Eccles, was given a super-elegant installation on blue-gray walls. “Is this the most beautiful show ever?” collector Marty Eisenberg asked. “And did you see the guest list? The best people are here.”

During a buffet dinner on the lawn of Eccles’s house in Red Hook, Sillman was ebullient while Collier, though glowing, seemed overwhelmed by the attention. “Excuse me,” she said. “I have to get a Diet Coke.”

The rest of us got an evening in the country, under a full blanket of stars—a fitting end to a celestial week shimmering with possibilities.

— *Linda Yablonsky*



Left: Neuberger Museum director Paola Morsiani. Right: Dealer Alexander Gray.