

Life & Times Exhibition

Jeff Koons at the Ashmolean

Ashmolean Museum, Oxford,
7 February 2019 to 9 June 2019

AN AMERICAN AT OXFORD

'How does the artist transform the ordinary into the extraordinary?' and 'How does the art work play tricks on your mind?' are two of the questions on the activity sheet for schoolchildren visiting the exhibition of Jeff Koons ('the most subversive artist alive today').

Brief answers would include the sheer scale and the finish of the exhibits. Small figurines are transformed to become life sized with perfect polished surfaces that stimulate and intrigue by being familiar and different at the same time.

What starts as kitsch (a term Koons dislikes as he feels it denigrates a popular, mass-appeal form of art) is reworked as sculpture of classical dimensions. A

Jeff Koons (b. 1955), *Balloon Venus (Magenta)*, 2008–2012. Mirror-polished stainless steel with transparent colour coating, 259.1 × 127 cm. One of five unique versions (Magenta, Red, Violet, Yellow, Orange). The Broad Art Foundation, Los Angeles. © Jeff Koons. Photo: Marc Dommage. Courtesy Almine Rech Gallery.



tiny prehistoric fertility figure is re-imagined in purple reflective polished steel and stands at 8 feet tall — *Balloon Venus (Magenta)* (see image below).

Still recognisable but transformed into something of arresting size and colour (and not, as one review put it, 'like a haemorrhoid').¹ In fact, haemorrhoids are not lobulated — if you wanted to be rude and anatomical you

would have to say like a molar pregnancy).

Koons is able to separate art from craft. Like many old masters he not only has a team of people working to his direction, but he is also not afraid to use CT scanners, lasers, and computer manipulation to achieve the finish and uncompromising detail his work must have to scale up. He even enlisted the help of a Nobel prize-winning physicist to achieve the perfect suspension of the basketball in a clear tank of liquid in the exhibition's opening piece: *One Ball Total Equilibrium Tank*.

This is art as mental exploration and not decoration. It aims to stimulate and not necessarily to soothe. No more so than in the *Antiquity* series where classical scenes are each defaced with the same crude line drawing. Koons is reportedly trying to connect the past with the present but I found it also made me look past the graffiti and more



Jeff Koons (b. 1955), *Gazing Ball (Rubens Tiger Hunt)*, 2015. Oil on canvas, glass and aluminium, 163.8 × 211.1 × 37.5 cm. Collection of the artist. © Jeff Koons. Photo: Tom Powel imaging. Courtesy Gagosian.

closely at the underlying work.

This was all the more so with the *Gazing Ball* series, where highly polished, reflective, blue metallic spheres were placed in front of copies of classic works. Gazing balls are common garden ornaments in the US (you can buy them here in the 'Garden and Outdoor' section of Amazon). Because such items are not commonly known in the UK, I wonder if this work travels well. Garden gnomes might be a British equivalent. Seeing past the shiny ball to *Gazing Ball (Rubens Tiger Hunt)* (see image above) revealed an unlikely depiction of lion, leopard, tiger, and Spanish conquistadores — a sort of baroque *Boy's Own* mash-up of exciting stuff. The gazing ball had to be seen past literally and figuratively. Makes you think.

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REFERENCE

1. Searle A. Jeff Koons review — haemorrhoid horrors from the artist who's too expensive to fail. *Guardian* 2019; 6 Feb: <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2019/feb/06/jeff-koons-review-ashmolean-museum-oxford> (accessed 19 Mar 2019).