

Replication, Reception, and Jeff Koons's *Gazing Ball* Series

The 2013 *Gazing Ball* series by artist Jeff Koons (b. 1955) comprises large white plaster sculptures that replicate ancient statues and everyday objects. Upon each statue balances a blue glass reflective ball, of the type displayed on American suburban lawns. The subjects include well-known Greek and Roman works such as the Farnese Hercules and Sleeping Ariadne, and objects familiar from domestic yards, including a birdbath and an inflatable snowman. The classical themes were new to his repertoire, while the other subjects belonged to his usual stock of cartoon characters, toys, and balloon animals. This paper argues that Koons's combination of "high" and "low" art, cast in plaster and linked by the glass globes, continues Koons's stated intention of creating accessible art while legitimizing his artistry by placing him within a millennia-spanning tradition of replication and reception.

When the *Gazing Ball* series opened, *New York Magazine*'s cover asked: "What's the Art World Got Against [Koons]?" Academe also disregards Koons. Pieces from the series have only been included in exhibition catalogues, popular magazines, and newspapers. Much of the negativity is likely a result of Koons's expressed preference for appealing to mass audiences (Koons 1993, Sischy 2014), while his patrons are plutocratic collectors and dealers. *Gazing Ball* sculptures cost \$2 million each; an earlier balloon dog sculpture was auctioned for \$58.4 million. Koons's banal subject matter and his art's production by over one hundred assistants have also inspired disapproval by the art world and academia.

Criticisms of Koons's subjects and workshop method are rooted in Enlightenment and later attitudes valuing original authorship that were part of the Western privileging of ancient Greek sculpture within the art-historical canon. His practice, however, reflects ancient Roman studios where sculpture was a group effort and copied, to various degrees, previous works of art

(van Voorhis 2012, Kousser 2008). Early scholars assumed the exactness of Roman copies and used them as tools to reconstruct the appearance of lost, presumed superior, Greek originals. Many of the sculptures Koons replicated are significant in classical reception's history; they were excavated in the Renaissance or Enlightenment and displayed in elite milieux such as royal collections, art academies, and museums, where early humanists lauded them and conservative Christians condemned their sensuality and paganism (Bentz 2015). They were featured in writings of the first art historians, including Vasari and Winckelmann, responsible for "high" art's canon. An instance of popular classicism occurred in the nineteenth century, when precise facsimiles of these ancient sculptures were cast in plaster to make classical art available to a broad audience. When museums began to prefer "originals," most antique plaster casts were deaccessioned or put in storage. Koons' casts, meticulously crafted whether depicting a Greek goddess or inflatable snowman, are intended for display, not storage. If he is elevating the snowmen or popularizing the classical statues may depend upon the viewer whose gaze they receive, as suggested by the series' title.

The *Gazing Ball* statues belong to a continuum of popular classicism and ancient art's reception. They were cast in plaster for broader viewership. Michelangelo and Picasso emulated them in sculpture and painting (Barkan 1999, Pettejohn 2012). Only Koons has combined them with representations of non-elite, "low" art. The glass spheres that evoke kitschy lawn décor force one to consider reception, as in their reflections the viewer becomes an integral—albeit temporary and distorted—part of the artwork. Through the juxtaposition of these versions of famous statues with his "low" art subjects, Koons marries classicism in order to compel us to reconsider the art historical canon and the audience's relationship to it.

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