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An answer to Roberta Smith's "Stop Hating Jeff Koons"

by Pat Lipsky

On May 17, Jeff Koons's sculpture *Rabbit* (1986) sold at Christies' Post-War & Contemporary sale for \$91.1 million, the largest ever price tag for a work by a living artist. In response to the considerable grumbling, Roberta Smith took to her usual spot in *The New York Times* to exhort her readers to, as her headline puts it, "Stop Hating Jeff Koons."

As if it would take as little as that to do so. What if the hatred were warranted? What if, like me, you think Koons and everything he stands for—everything he has "created" (in reality, his sculptures are factory-made and produced by legions of studio assistants)—is fancy rubbish? What then?

Ms. Smith spends three paragraphs of her defense discussing just the numbers connected to this insane sale. In the third paragraph she brings up *Balloon Dog (Orange)*, another innocuous party sculpture—as with the rabbit, a takeoff on the tied balloon animals at kid's parties which is where he must have gotten the idea. (I understand that Koons has been a prolific father—he has seven children—as well as a prolific proponent of shock-value art.) Smith then shifts back to *Rabbit*, saying that "Some of its most fervent admirers see it as a perfect work of art for its moment, the roaring mid-1980s. I don't disagree. I also think it continues to speak to us."

Shocking. As an art lover—a woman who has given over much of her life to art: looking at it, making it, teaching it, and writing about it—there has never been *one* moment when I saw anything, other than an insult to the standards of Western art going back to Giotto, in a Jeff Koons. That the co-chief art critic of the *New York Times* could make such a pronouncement is breathtaking.

In the fourth paragraph, Ms. Smith assures her readers that negative appraisals of Koons are "fashionable." She writes, "It is fashionable and easy to hate his work." How about "accurate?" Or maybe, "totally understandable?" And why accuse us of taking the "easy" way out? Whether it is fashionable or not to hate his work is, of course, irrelevant. My feeling comes from the fact that his art is, simply, *bad*. There is good art and bad art; Koons's falls into the latter category.

A few paragraphs down, Smith gives Koons this historical position: “He changed sculpture, bringing together Pop, Minimalism and Duchamp in a new way . . .” Sure, new—but worse. Compared to the work of real sculptors from the 1930s to the early 2000s—for example that of David Smith, Tony Smith, and Sir Anthony Caro, all of whom made beautiful sculptures that could be moved through, or around: art that elicited feeling and rewarded repeated viewing—a Koons object is thin and smug. Once you get over its initial shock value (“Oh, look—a balloon toy from little Nick’s party”), the work provides no visual pleasure.

Smith then goes on to compare one of these two inflatable toy mockups to a Brancusi and a Bernini. And there we have a “Wow, what chutzpah,” moment. Connecting Koons’s sculpture to the towering seventeenth-century sculptor and architect Bernini, or the elegant Romanian sculptor Brancusi, is risible. She writes: “[Koons’s] sculptures, which are either found-object ready-mades (like his works using Hoover vacuum cleaners) or remade ready-mades (like the Balloon Dogs), can conflate Brancusi with inflatable toys and camp up Bernini, as he did with the shiny chartreuse ‘Pluto and Proserpina,’ which also functions as a planter.” (I absolutely *love* the fact that Koons’s gaudy travesty on the actual Carrara marble Bernini sculpture *Pluto and Proserpina* “also functions as a planter.”) And I ask, about the notions that Bernini needs any “camping up,” or that the viewer “can conflate Brancusi with inflatable toys”: why?

The Brancusi reference is particularly striking since there is an exhibition of his work now on at the Museum of Modern Art. As a savvy student of mine, someone who seems to see *everything* in everything, said, “I looked at the Brancusis several times, but never once did I think of Jeff Koons.” (Brancusi must be turning in his grave.)

Smith finishes by linking David Hockney’s *Portrait of an Artist (Pool With Two Figures)* (1972) with the high-priced Koons. But there’s a huge difference between the two works. Hockney paints with his own hands, and his work connects to the art of the past and comes out of a long tradition of figures in a landscape. “With the stratospheric prices a Koons or Hockney commands,” Ms. Smith tells us, “Mr. Koons’s ‘Rabbit’ and the Balloon Dog sculptures are stubbornly resistant to such tarnish, laughing it off with their beauty, mystery and familiarity.” The only word I agree with in that sentence is “familiarity.” To my mind, calling a Jeff Koons “beautiful” demonstrates only a lack of understanding of the word’s meaning, which is of course primarily concerned with pleasure, aesthetic beauty, and excellence. A Jeff Koons sculpture, and specifically *Rabbit*, does not have qualities of beauty, nor does it excite aesthetic pleasure. It is a fad, an emblem of wealth. The price someone paid for this, or any other Koons, is mystifying. And, as in the past, it is the prevailing taste that permits a Koons to flourish that is ultimately at issue.

Pat Lipsky is a painter and writer based in New York. Her work is represented in twenty-eight public collections, including the Whitney Museum of American Art, the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Gardens, the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, and the Harvard Art Museum.