

Edinburgh
Festivals

Visual art 2001

Easyfun - Ethereal

Jeff Koons

John Hudson

Jeff Koons is back, as camp and as playful as ever with his brand of capitalist realism in this, his only British showing for this new commissioned work.

Koons has always courted controversy wherever his work is exhibited. His critics attack him whenever they can. But Koons is only following a long tradition of appropriating popular culture from Dada to Surrealism to Pop Art and beyond. It's nothing new: it's only the methods and use of technology that have changed, in pursuit of the improbable.

Jeff Koons came to prominence in the 80's with his transformation of souvenirs into sculptures and the appropriation of objects, such as his stainless-steel rabbit. Perhaps surprisingly, there are no pop Brancusi or cast stainless-steel objects typical of the Neo-Geo days (do people still use the term Neo-Geo?) nor are there examples of the neo-baroque of his polychrome porcelain sculptures of the late 80's and early 90's.

Instead Koons presents his audience with a series of seven oil paintings (yes, oil paintings), commissioned by the Guggenheim Museum in Berlin. These paintings blend his Warholian attitude to art and commerce and flare for publicity, with Daliesque antics into an aesthetic that draws on both influences. He could never be as deadpan as Warhol or as vulgar and crass as Dali.

This worthy successor to Warhol, a neo-pop pioneer, has turned his attention to the subject of food consumption and magazine advertising. Koons begins with collage - not an ordinary collage, but a digital one. Imagine James Rosenquest's billboard picture mixed with a scattering of Wesselmann's figures, a bit like Hannah Höch's post dada collages with its assortment of magazine cuttings. He then takes this collage and transforms it into an oil painting, guiding a team of highly-skilled assistants like some old

master. The result is a collage painting of the kind Max Ernst would have produced in the 1920's, but brighter.

I suppose it is in a way transforming something that is considered to be low art, throwaway and unacceptable in the gallery, in the form of a computer printout, into something more durable and with a high art feel, in the form of an oil painting. These highly polished, hyper-realistic images are bizarre digital liquid desires, Daliesque in form, where ice cream, hair, alpine landscapes, and donuts melt, blur and fragment into each other. He seems to explore a hyper-realised Europe in **Grotto** and **Mountains**, and again seems to see the world through supermarket shelves and advertising.

In **Sandwiches** we see a blend of landscape, Pringles logos and lashings of milk covering fruit and vegetables, whilst slices of meat are arranged with salad and numerous dressings to form smiley faces, as if for a child's birthday party. The painting **Lips** has the feeling of a Del Monte advert about it. Fruit, sweetcorn and fruit juice float about as if in zero gravity, and an eye and two mouths sit within a swirl of baby sweetcorn. The Man Ray-like lips are expressing ecstasy, an almost orgasmic response to the events around them.

It's not only the surreallists and the pop art generation that get quoted: Pollock is referred to in **Bluepoles**. This is of course a borrowed title from Pollock's 1952 painting. Perhaps Koons sees Pollock in terms of donut icing or - as I believe he once said - a Pollock reminded him of spaghetti in tomato sauce (Rosenquest again). I cannot help thinking that he saw Pollock in terms of that photograph of the baby covered in spaghetti that you often see in pizzerias. In **Bluepoles**, Koons has translated the abstract expressionist swirls of paint into a rollercoaster ride, while the blue poles of the original become the stands in which the ride is supported. The paint drips are transformed into melting butter and syrup on pancake-stack skies. Costumed figures stand in the foreground, sweet cereal Cheerios placed over their faces.

One has to ask how much of this plundering of art history is accidental and how much is deliberate. Do we see a reference to Bleckner in **Hair with Cheese**, in which we see snowflake patterns? There are so many sweet and childhood-related things that I start to wonder whether this is a modern day Grimm's fairy tale in which we play Hansel and Gretel.

As we see only fragments of people, we may argue that a dehumanisation takes place in Koons' art. His supporters argue that Koons lives in the real world of art and commerce, and makes money accordingly. Through his art he expresses the joy of capitalism and the consumer culture, but it has to be said that this is only one of many

worlds. He may at times create something that resembles the excesses of Walt Disney; but to be fair to Jeff Koons, he may be childlike, but he is never infantile.

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