

LAURA OWENS

I HAVE ALWAYS been stunned by the way my eyes move across the surface of a work by Jeff Koons without ever finding a point to stop. I once met a beyond-good-looking, possibly reworked (it was that good), hypersymmetrical male model, and the experience was similar. There was nothing for your eye to hang on to, no mole or misaligned tooth. It was like passing through a visual cloud of perfume. I kept thinking about how hard it is to erase all the details, for no one part of the whole to be odd or noticed. Maybe it is the precision detailing, the thousand hours of labor and scrutiny that go into each pixel of a Koons piece, guaranteeing that the process will never fail. He will make a compelling object . . . whether we like it or not.

Walking into the Whitney retrospective, I didn't expect to find myself caught, at times, on the surface of things—but I did. I fell into the texture of a poodle's curls, and the handcrafted valves intended to mimic transparency and reflect the exterior of a perfect lobster pool toy, and the very real-world tax stamps adhered to the bourbon-filled stainless-steel train. These moments shouted with the same manic intensity as the unrelenting perfection of

the fabrication, and they pushed Koonsian realism to a higher level. Awkward or mesmerizing, they teased out our appetite for infinite attention to the smallest consideration.

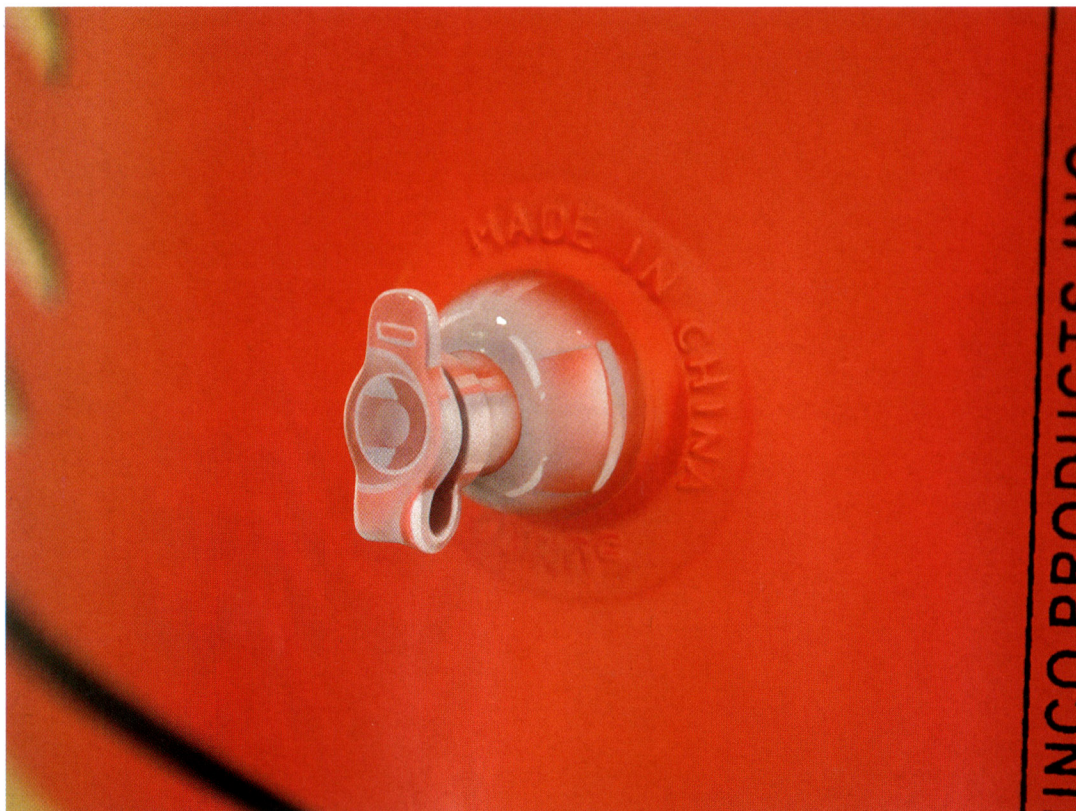
In the paintings, this seemingly infallible system becomes claustrophobic. Painting, meaning simply the physical stretcher and the canvas, is the malevolent ghost of the readymade. It is art already, always, and it will patiently wait for you to make it more art than it already is. Predetermining one's system for completion is like trying to take a well-worn path to traverse the plains of Mordor unnoticed by the Eye of Sauron.

This nanoscale of decision making reminds me of Cézanne: the specificity and quality in his deliberation, the movement of his thoughts mirroring the eye focusing and refocusing, allowing many different paintings to exist within one painting. The heterogeneous space that results unfolds when we pay attention as closely and for as long as Cézanne did. There is a slowness to these paintings that allows us to see the intentionality in each brushstroke, the attentiveness to each decision.

Unlike Cézanne, though, Koons brings an unrelenting sameness to his decisions. His fine-brush fanaticism hits me like certain works of outsider art—as a whole without parts. Surfaces are combed over with a microscopic eye,

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Jeff Koons, *Lobster* (detail), 2003, polychromed aluminum, steel chain, 57 1/4 × 37 × 17 1/4". From the series "Popeye," 2002–.



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and light is never implied; it is just always on . . . all over the canvas, on all pixels, on all the time. Koons speaks with the confidence of a Scientologist who has gone "Clear" when he talks about things like the "beholder's share" and his belief that the viewer's emotional involvement completes the artwork. His infinitesimal precision and abundance of labor will produce a commanding object with no trace, no doubt, no history, no path. Our relationship with the work feels as preordained as the work is undeniably finished. If we follow Koons's own logic, this is not about experience over time; it's about realization. My beholder's share remains at the level of "Oh, wow"—and I think he is happy about that. □

LAURA OWENS IS AN ARTIST BASED IN LOS ANGELES.