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[See table of contents](#)

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Review of

Jeff Koons. Shine. Palazzo Strozzi, Florence, Italy. October 2, 2021 – January 30, 2022.

From October 2, 2021, to January 30, 2022, the Palazzo Strozzi of Florence hosted the exhibition of the American contemporary artist Jeff Koons who was born on January 21, 1955, in York, Pennsylvania. Koons, who studied at the Maryland Institute College of Art in Baltimore and the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, is known for his stainless-steel sculptures of *Puppy*, *Rabbit*, and the huge floral sculpture *Balloon Dog* (JeffKoons.com 2021). As the true heir to Marcel Duchamp and Andy Warhol, his work explores themes like pop culture, sexuality, ready-made, and kitsch. The exhibition is entitled, *Jeff Koons. Shine* and curated by Arturo Galansino and Joachim Pissarro, who have gathered thirty-three of the artist's most celebrated works from the mid-seventies to the present day.

The exhibition begins with the monumental *Balloon Monkey (Blue)* (2006-2013) installed in the courtyard of the Palazzo Strozzi (figure 1). Thirty-two other works have been distributed in eight rooms inside the building. Upon entering, in the first room, the viewers see two mirror-polished stainless steel with transparent color coating statues *Seated Ballerina* (2010-2015) and *Sacred Heart* (1994-2007). In the second room, seven pieces from the *Luxury and Degradation*, and *Statuary*

series are installed. Two examples on display in the show are *Jim Beam - J.B. Turner Train* (1986), and his most iconic work the *Rabbit* (1986) which in 2019 at Christie's New York has been sold for \$91,075,000 and broke the record of the most expensive living artist of the time (Christie's 2021). The third room holds five sculptures and paintings including *Balloon Dog (Red)* (1994-2000) (figure 2), and *Bread with Egg* (1995-1997). Most works installed in this room are from the *Celebration* series. Five works installed in room four come from Koons's early ready-mades such as *Sponge Shelf* (1978). Room five, hosts three works, *Dolphin* (2002) and *Lobster* (2007-2012) from the Popeye series that began in 2002, and *Hulk (Tubas)* (2004-2018) from the *Hulk Elvis* series. In room six, there are five pieces including two statues and three paintings from the *Gazing Ball* series (figures 3). Rooms seven and eight hold four sculptures such as *Metallic Venus* (2010-2012) from the *Antiquity* series and the oil on canvas painting *Olive Oyl* (2003) from the *Popeye* series.



Figure 1
Jeff Koons. *Balloon Monkey (Blue)*, 2006-2013. Stainless-steel. Courtesy of Palazzo Strozzi. Photograph by the author Ela Bialkowska.

The pieces which represent forty years of the career of Jeff Koons explore the concept of *shine*. Through this concept, the artist questions man's relation to reality and the work of art. Stainless steel is the main material of Jeff Koons's art production that he started using in the mid-eighties with his *Luxury and Degradation* series. Through employing stainless steel, the work of art becomes a shiny mirror in which spectators see themselves and the surrounding environment. As a result, the viewer, the work of art and the environment unite. The idea has its roots in the theory of the role of the viewer in the creation of the work of art or the *beholder's share*, first introduced by the Austrian art historian Alois Riegl in the early 1900s, and developed by the likes of Ernst Kris, Ernst Gombrich and their followers.

The theory was first introduced to Jeff Koons by the winner of the 2000 Nobel Prize in Physiology or Medicine and Dr. Eric R. Kandel, the author of *The Age of Insight: The Quest to Understand the Unconscious in Art, Mind, and Brain, from Vienna 1900 to the Present*, 2012. The book traces the interaction between art, neuroscience and psychology from Vienna 1900 until

recent times to explore how the human brain perceives and responds to the work of art. Accordingly, we perceive the outside world through our senses. The brain analyzes the received sensory information through hypothesizing and referring to memories and experiences and creates internal representations of the external world. What we see is the creation of our brain, and vision is a creative act. Thus, when looking at a work of art, each viewer brings their acquired memories, and experiences and interprets the piece differently (Kandel 2013).

In a conversation between Jeff Koons, Ann Temkin and Dr. Eric Kandel titled "An Artist's Creative Process in Action" at the New-York Historical Society, on January 26, 2017, Jeff Koons explains how he always wanted to find a psychiatrist, or somebody involved with the study of the mind, to write about his work. He used to watch Dr. Kandel on the Charlie Rose show, so he decided to contact him to see his work. After visiting his show where Koons's *Gazing Ball* series was on display, Eric emailed him and said, "Jeff, I went, I saw your exhibitions today, and I am blown away. You have contributed to the beholder's share" (Columbia University 2017).

Gazing Balls is a series of works produced from 2013 to 2021. In these series, Jeff Koons attached a blue glass shining ball on the replicas of classical sculptures, and paintings of the artists of the past from old masters such as Botticelli, Giotto, Rembrandt and Goya to modern artists like Picasso, Gauguin and Monet, among others (figures 3). When the viewer stands in front of each piece and looks at the work of art, they see themselves and their immediate environment in the shiny ball. Accordingly, viewers unite with the

artworks, and bring their unique emotions, thoughts and memories and interpret them in their manner. This union, and the participation of the beholder in the creative process, according to the artist, is the goal of his work (Needham 2015).



Figure 2
Jeff Koons. *Balloon Dog*, 1994-2000.
Mirror-polished stainless steel with transparent color coating. Courtesy Palazzo Strozzi. Photograph by Ela Bialkowska.

Koons then describes how Dr. Kandel's explanation of the historical context of the beholder's share helped him to put what he has been doing for years in the art-historical frame. Later in 2017, he was selected as the first Artist-in-Residence at Columbia University's Mortimer B. Zuckerman Mind Brain Behavior Institute. Dr. Kandel who also is the co-director of the Zuckerman Institute explained the goal of inviting Koons as the first Artist-in-Residence was making a bridge between brain science and art. There Jeff could explore the science of the brain and mind and have scientists visiting his studio and exchanging ideas with him. All these experiences helped him to understand how the brain perceives, engages and reacts to works of art (Zuckerman Institute 2017).



Figure 3
Jeff Koons. *Gazing Balls (Apollo Lykeios)*, 2013. Plaster and glass.
Courtesy Palazzo Strozzi. Photograph by Ela Bialkowska.

Jeff Koons' works link art to science, kitsch to academic, art history to pop culture and tradition to contemporary. Just like his art, the exhibition of his works in Florence, the cradle of the Renaissance, creates an encounter between the old and the new, past and present, and historical and contemporary. It ignites a dialogue between one of the most celebrated and controversial artists of our time: Jeff Koons, and one of the greatest masters of the Renaissance: Michelangelo, between two of the most famous statues of all times: *David* (1501-1504) and *Rabbit* (1986).

For more information on this event, please visit: <https://www.palazzostrozzi.org/en/archivio/exhibitions/jeff-koons-shine/>.

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