

BIG TIME

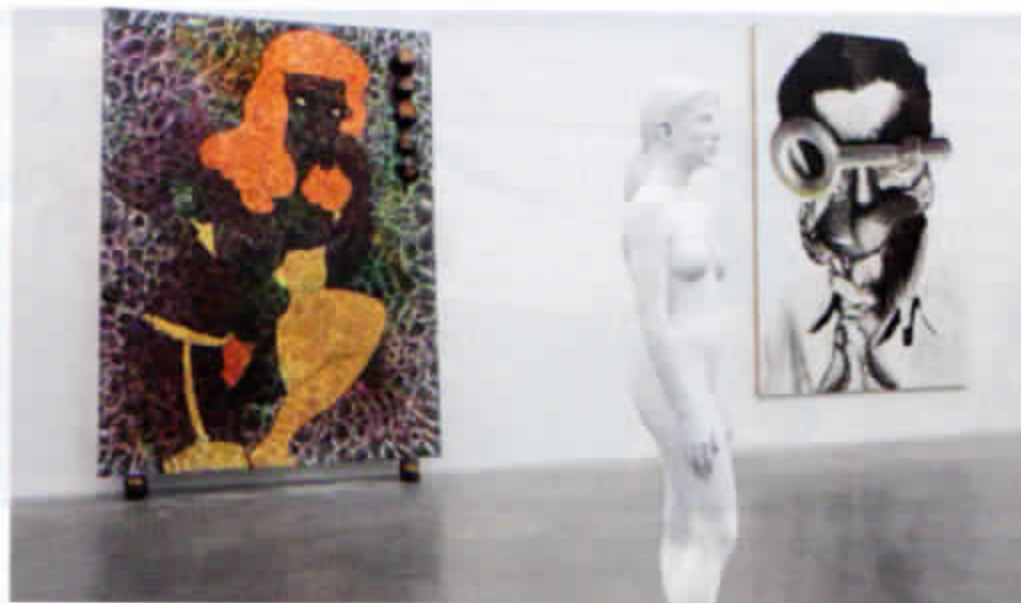
"Skin Fruit," at the New Museum.

BY PETER SCHJELDAHL

The art world is peculiarly suited to dramatize a problem, or at least a syndrome, of the present day: that of abominable wealth, by which I mean the effect of huge fortunes on people who don't have them. The global tide of prosperity that rose in the past decade has, in receding, stranded most boats that aren't ocean liners. This condition

the jolly democratic sentiments of their loaded buyers. (The several embodiments, since 1992, of "Puppy," Koons's forty-foot-tall Scottie dog in living flowers, amount to the "Mona Lisa" of a tinhorn Renaissance.) Objections to the event have centered on the perceived impropriety of a nonprofit museum's boosting the prestige of a board mem-

Like its title—a play on "skin flute," slang for penis—"Skin Fruit" seems determined to affront, disarmingly. It strives to be a knockout show of knockouts: big, strong works by artists of independent, raffish temperament, several of whom really are excellent and none of whom are shy. Nearly all of them either render or somehow refer to the figure, in key with the ruggedly humanist sentiments that Joannou has advanced through his Deste Foundation, in Athens, which produces exhibitions and publications on giddy, pop-philosophical themes. (Reprinted in the New Museum's catalogue, an essay by the dealer Jeffrey Deitch, who has been the Deste's curator and is now the director of the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los



Chris Ofili's "Rodin... The Thinker" (1997); Charles Ray's "Aluminum Girl" (2003); and Urs Fischer's "Noodles" (2009).

pertains with special poignance to a sphere in which the rich (collectors, patrons) and the relatively poor (artists, intellectuals) intermingle. The Greek billionaire Dakis Joannou, whose fabulous holdings of contemporary art are sampled in a controversial show with a remarkably icky title, "Skin Fruit," at the New Museum, where he sits on the board of trustees, presents a handy target for intensifying discontent. So does the show's curator, Jeff Koons, the foundational artist of Joannou's collection and the creator of the boom era's definitive art: perfectionist icons of lower-class taste—stainless-steel balloon animals, life-size pornographic statues, tinted rococo mirrors—that advertise

ber's collection. I find the fuss touching at a time when big money, besides being just about the only money there is, brands the big-time art it buys—art that behaves, in economic terms, like a form of money itself. Even a lately chastened market pitches the exchange of hard and soft currencies—cash and symbolic capital—at levels beyond the reach of nearly every public institution. The New Museum is facing up to facts, I believe, with its ad-hoc dependence on Joannou. The deeper imbroglio of "Skin Fruit" is its incitement to populist animus: the show arrives on today's downwardly mobile art scene like a bejewelled duchess at a party that—oops—turns out to be a barn dance.

Angeles, trumpets "the end of nature" and "the end of truth.") Joannou likes to invoke the heritage of classical Greece, though it's not easy to imagine this show enchanting Praxiteles. There are fine works by Robert Gober, Charles Ray, Cindy Sherman, Franz West, and Cady Noland. The prevailing tone, however, is set by items that are longer on provocation than on transcendence: "What If the Phone Rings" (2003), by Urs Fischer, a blond nude in wax inset with burning wicks, which will melt her down during the course of the show; "Pazuzu" (2008), by Roberto Cuoghi, a robustly ugly, nearly twenty-foot-high statue of the unfriendly Assyrian and Babylonian demon; "Saddle" (2000), by

Janine Antoni, a stiffened sheet of rawhide formed to the shape of a crawling woman; and "Mother/Child" (1993), by Kiki Smith, life-size wax figures of a woman mouthing one of her breasts and a man likewise attending to his erect penis. Two live-performance works scout the frontier between the sublime and the ridiculous. A sonorous-voiced museum guard, upon encountering a viewer, sings, twice, "This is propaganda, you know, you know," and then speaks the work's label: "Tino Sehgal, 'This is Propaganda,' 2002." Elsewhere, a male model changes into a loincloth behind a screen and climbs a ladder to an oak cross, where he dangles for a spell as the crucified Jesus. That's by the Polish artist Pawel Althamer. Claymation videos by Nathalie Djurberg, one of them depicting the amours of a girl and a tiger, aren't very good, but they enhance the show's vein of sexual whoop-de-doo.

The most understated sculpture on the premises is also the only one by Koons, a 1985 "One Ball Total Equilibrium Tank": a basketball suspended in the exact middle of an aquarium filled with chemically treated water. In an oft-told tale, this was Joannou's first purchase for his mature collection, which he snapped up, in 1985, for less than three thousand dollars, at an obscure East Village gallery. It's a ravishing piece, deft and subtle, which reminds us of Koons's first-rate sculptural knack and conceptual economy. His gifts haven't dimmed, on the evidence of his installation of "Skin Fruit." He elegantly harmonizes aggressive works, each of which plainly would prefer to be the only one in the room. Imagine a kennel of alpha dogs.

But the artists whom Koons convenes suggest a palace guard for his eminence in the art world. Nothing if not politically alert, he has been at pains to represent feminists and persons of color. Kara Walker's five big gouache drawings, from 1996, of the surreal iniquities of the slave-era South are terrifically accomplished. Works by the Anglo-African Chris Ofili—some of them in his notorious combination of cloisonné dots and elephant dung, and others in dreamy blue paint, charcoal, and aluminum foil—mark the occasion's nearest approach to beauty. The

impression of catholic taste dissembles Koons's ambition, in the past twenty-five years, to trump the field of advanced art with his fusions of luxury and squalor. (He hit a high point in 2008, when he was given the run of Versailles for a retrospective that peevd many in France but, judging from photographs, was pretty dazzling.) Koons is famous for a public persona of relentlessly smiley, Amway-salesman unctuousness. But "Skin Fruit" makes clear to me that his deepest passion is anger, provoked by situations over which he has no control. The object of that anger, like the proverbial aim of standup comedians, is to "kill."

Koons's recourse to an air of collegiality and aesthetic assault is dictated by a distinct vulnerability in his position. His career and the plutocratic culture that it has adorned represent an epoch-making collusion of mega-collectors and leading artists, which has overridden the former gatekeeping roles of critics and curators and sidelined the traditional gallerists who work with artists on a long-term basis of mutual loyalty. With numbing regularity, newly hot artists have abandoned such nurture for gaudy, precarious deals with corporate-style dealers like Larry Gagosian, Pace-Wildenstein, and David Zwirner. In the boom era, buzz about the opportunistic exhibitions of such dealers and the latest sales figures from art fairs and auction houses were what passed for critical discourse. The situation mesmerized newcomers, by flashing promises of ascension to the starry feeding trough. Now that such promises can no longer be made, the posturing of "Skin Fruit"—roughly, noblesse oblige, laced with a left-libertarian raciness—cannot long deflect the mounting potency of class resentment. People are going to notice that the defensive elements, in this particular scrimmage of sensibilities, are members of the putatively vanguard aristocracy of wealth and social clout. The future of art, and the corresponding character of cultured society, seem bound to be determined by some smart, talented, as yet unidentified parties among the howling sansculottes. ♦