

## Skin Fruit: Art's Sweeter on the Inside

By Rose C. Levy

While strolling in New York's East Village in 1985, Dakis Joannou happened into the now notorious *International With Monument* gallery, where he immediately fell for the piece *One Ball Total Equilibrium Tank* (1985) by Jeff Koons and bought it. That was to be the first piece of a personal collection now considered by many to be one of the best in the world, a collection you can see if you're in Manhattan before the 6<sup>th</sup> of June.

This exceptional exhibition at the **New Museum, *Skin Fruit: Selections from the Dakis Joannou Collection***, takes up four out of 5 of the museum's floors, features approximately 100 works from over 50 countries, and is made up of many mediums including sculpture, works on paper, paintings, installations, and videos. The curator, Koons himself, who had his first major museum exhibition at the New Museum, is not only the reason Joannou started collecting; he's also become a personal friend of the collector.

Everybody's talking about this exposition, and it's not only because of the hotshot artists on display. For one reason, the collection is much more mainstream than the artworks typically displayed at the museum, which is known for its determined exhibitions of talented, under-appreciated artists, and the only one in New York entirely dedicated to presenting contemporary art. Another reason is because Dakis Joannou is on the museum's board of trustees.



Roberto Cuoghi, *Pazuzu*, 2008. Epoxy, solventvarnish, fiberglass, polystyrene, and steel, 234 1/4 x 116 1/2 x 98 1/2 in. The

DakisJoannou Collection, Athens

## Non-conformists screaming uncle

Very cutting edge since it's opening in 1977, the New Museum is a haven for radical art lovers, and even has its own progressive website since 2003, **Rhizome**, the leading online platform for global new media art. News of the exhibition has left the unconventional art community questioning the motivators behind the exposition, and the a-list artists on display have critics claiming regression after such acclaimed cutting edge expositions as *Younger than Jesus*, curated by the New Museum's fresh and talented Lauren Cornell and Massimiliano Gioni. The choice of curator is yet another reason disapproving aficionados are slinging mud: why go bling when you have top avant-garde curators in-house? When viewing the exhibition it's not surprising to learn that the first time curator Koons is actually more comfortable dealing with his collection of old masters than arranging contemporary art, as one can argue the rooms tend to be slightly crowded and the scenographical goals unclear; on the other hand, having Koons select and organize the manipulation of the artwork is exciting, as artist's tend to notice, appreciate, and draw attention to details that scholastically trained curators might not. Despite the 2-bit *ready-made* criticism we tend to read about this exposition, important members of the art world have praised it, such as **Jeffery Deitch** (gallery owner and the new director of MOCA) who supports the idea of *"one of the most interesting, radical artists of our time doing an artistic curation of the best contemporary art collection of our time."*

## One ball in the equilibrium tank: 2 points for the New Museum

In the museum's defence, it is not uncommon for museums to ask trustees to display their works, and it's quite logical that a patron of a contemporary art museum has an impressive collection, so why not share it with the public? While the art on display hails from the posh, moneyed stratum of the contemporary art market, it does give the public a chance to view works from the major artistic players of the upper echelon, something that most public institutions do not currently offer. In fact, these are the types of work one is more likely to see on display during exclusive events such as **Art Basel** or the **Venice Biennale** than in a museum. Speaking of Venice, one has to wonder if Joannou and Francois Pinault share the same *Segalot* when one notes the similarity of the collections, to the point even that the same piece by Maurizio Cattelan: *All (2007)* can be seen here in the exposition, and on display in the renowned *Punta Della Dogana*, Pinault's latest palazzo artistico in Venetia. Besides Cattelan, the two collectors also share a penchant for Cindy Sherman, Jeff Koons, Takashi Murakami, Paul McCarthy, Cady Noland, and Richard Prince, among others. One original aspect of the Greek collectors work is the numerous works displayed from his compatriotic artists, which are rarer on the international art scene but not without merit.

Like Pinault, who uses his assets to furnish the most fashionable foundations, which house his own collections, Joannou founded the **DESTE Foundation for Contemporary Art** in Athens, at the suggestion of French art critic Pierre Restany, and has been organizing exhibitions and supporting upcoming and established artists since 1983.

Are Pinault and Joannou simply filling a need, by organizing these exhibitions, that hadn't yet been met? The works tend to be much more controversial than those that grace other well

known museums, yet they have that needed touch of wit and reflection that arouses the appreciation contemporary public – which is one of the reasons why the artists presented have become so well liked by multimillionaire collectors.

### **Peeling back the skin (fruit)**

In writings regarding the unsettling title of the exposition, the New Museum explains that: “Skin” and “fruit” evoke the tensions between interior and exterior, between what we see and what we consume.” If we use this to describe the contemporary art world, it’s symbolic of those who are in the know, and who aren’t.

Basically the controversy all goes back to the #1 question: **Who decides what’s good?** Obviously, if an artist’s work is displayed in a museum, the cote goes up. However, the economic downturn of the last 18 months, which has heavily affected the contemporary market, makes it almost impossible to count on anything stabilizing the value of contemporary art, even an exposition in a well known museum.

And honestly, despite a few turnips ( *Schedule of the Crucifix by Pavel Althamer, for example* ) the collection is good, and merits its worldwide notoriety. It’s also exciting that the public can finally see these works in a public institution and be able to give its own opinion of the high priced art traded in select circles. These artists are, in fact, the movers and the shakers of our era, and we shouldn’t have to wait until they’re “finished producing” to see them in a museum.

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