

Exhibitions

**Keeping it Real:
An Exhibition in Four Acts from
the D. Daskalopoulos Collection**
Whitechapel Gallery London 10 June to 22 May 2011

**Skin Fruit: Selections from
the Dakis Joannou Collection**
New Museum New York 3 March to 6 June

Have you ever read a collector's *curriculum vitae*? Neither had I, before the Whitechapel's 'Keeping it Real', an exhibition of the Daskalopoulos collection that started in June. The press release for the show informs us of Dimitris Daskalopoulos's degrees and business achievements, as well as his participation in international museum boards and councils (including the Tate International Council). As it happens, the Greek collector seems to move in the same high-flying circles as his compatriot Dakis Joannou, whose collection was also recently on display at the New Museum in New York, under the title of 'Skin Fruit'. Both Joannou and Daskalopoulos, for example, have been involved in the Guggenheim's International Director's Council and Executive Committee; Daskalopoulos is also a Guggenheim Trustee and a member of the Leadership Council at the New Museum, where Joannou for his part sits on the Board of Trustees. Indeed, it is because Joannou is a member of the New Museum's Board of Trustees that 'Skin Fruit' became controversial as soon as it was announced – even in the world of American museums, which rely almost exclusively on private sponsorship and support, mounting a full-blown exhibition of a trustee's private collection appeared to many as a clear conflict of interests. Collectors' works are often displayed in advance of a promised gift, but the New Museum has no permanent collection, thus precluding this option, and director Lisa Phillips has had to fall back on a vague celebration of collectors as tastemakers and on the dreaded rhetoric of 'private-public partnerships'.

Joannou the collector has certainly been active in other ways

Skin Fruit
installation view



than spending money on the market, sitting on boards and helping museums acquire and display artworks: he founded the DESTE Foundation in 1983, which has invited international curators to organise ambitious exhibitions in its Athens venue and elsewhere, as well as giving out a biannual prize to emerging Greek artists. In this sense, he has certainly left a larger imprint on the art world than Daskalopoulos, who only started collecting contemporary art 11 years ago (Joannou began in 1985, and appears to own twice as many artworks), and is still in the process of planning a foundation that would be open to the public. Despite such differences, the Whitechapel and the New Museum have had to tackle a very real economic fact: that these private collections can only gain in market value once they have received an institutional stamp of approval, as was clearly confirmed by the notorious 1997 touring exhibition 'Sensation: Young British Artists from the Saatchi Collection'. Both institutions have reassured critics that the two Greek collectors do not use art as an investment, as they buy more than they sell. Moreover, Daskalopoulos is said to have signed a contract with the Whitechapel promising not to sell anything for three years, while Phillips has intimated in press interviews that a similar (tacit?) agreement is in place with Joannou.

In addition to refraining wisely from exhibiting one of its Trustees' collections, the Whitechapel has generally ventured into this fraught territory more cautiously. Firstly, unlike 'Skin Fruit', which took over the whole of the New Museum, 'Keeping it Real' is confined to one small room of the Whitechapel Gallery, which will present works from the collection in four instalments over the year. Secondly, the Whitechapel started its cycle of collection displays with the British Council, thus foregrounding a general mission to make available artworks that remain otherwise inaccessible to the public. Finally, the content and mode of display were clearly controlled by Whitechapel curator Achim Borchardt-Hume, in order to emphasise the educational value of exhibiting the Daskalopoulos collection. In contrast, the New Museum invited Jeff Koons to curate Joannou's collection on the sole basis that they are close friends and that the artist's work has constituted a significant inspiration for the collector. While Koons may have successfully decorated Joannou's yacht and his daughter's wedding cake, his first attempt at museum curating failed to produce a coherent and meaningful exhibition. If Borchardt-Hume's prudent selection and plodding catalogue may err on the side of didacticism, the high quality of the work and the exhibition's intellectual and formal rigour stand as a welcome counterpart to the cramped, circus-like atmosphere at the New Museum, which seemed to revolve mainly around Koons's and Joannou's shared enjoyment of provocation, bad taste and the abject.

Both Greek collectors own works by the same artists (work by almost half the artists in Daskalopoulos's collection seems to have been displayed in DESTE Foundation projects at some point over the years) and both seem to share a general interest in human frailty. It has been suggested that the heritage of classical Greek sculpture has shaped Joannou's particular interest in representations of the human figure, which is central to 'Skin Fruit'. The human body also happens to constitute the theme of 'The Corporeal', the first 'act' or instalment of 'Keeping it Real'.



Both Borchardt-Hume and Nancy Spector, whose text for one of the DESTE Foundation exhibitions is reproduced in the 'Skin Fruit' catalogue, situate the collectors' works by Robert Gober and Kiki Smith in the context of the 1980s AIDS epidemic, a moment in which the body became politicised and the combination of sex and death acquired a new and terrible meaning. Whereas Joannou (and Koons) chose Smith's overtly shocking sculptural depiction of a *Mother/Child*, 1993, pleasuring themselves by sucking on their respective breast and penis, the 1980 untitled work included in 'The Corporeal' is more difficult to read: the four photographs show Smith washing her hands in blood during a performance photographed by David Wojnarowicz, which resonates with the video – included elsewhere in the display – of Marina Abramović busily scrubbing a skeleton clean.

Similarly, we are encouraged to view the Gobers at the Whitechapel in relation to Duchamp's famous urinal (and Sherrie Levine's bronze replica of *Fountain*), whereas at the New Museum Gober's works blended with mannequins and *mises-en-scène* by Charles Ray and others, emphasising traumatic narrative rather than melancholy loss. Although the variations on figurative painting and sculpture traditions offered by Ray, Tim Noble & Sue Webster, Janine Antoni, Chris Ofili, David Altmejd, Takashi



Sherrie Levine
Body Mask 2007

David Hammons
Untitled 1974

Murakami, Roberto Cuoghi and other artists in 'Skin Fruit' appealed to Koons for what he has termed their 'iconic' quality, 'The Corporeal' resolutely eschewed representations of the human figure in favour of metonymy, ambivalent part objects and indexical traces. The proliferation of genital organs, sexualised figures and sexual acts at the New Museum supported an interpretation of the exhibition's title as a pun on an American slang term for the penis ('skin flute'). In contrast, one of the centrepieces of 'The Corporeal', Louise Bourgeois's *Fillette (Sweeter Version)*, 1968-99, thrives on ambiguity: it is both castrated phallus and beloved infant, sweet little girl and menacing weapon. In the display, it resonates with Paul Thek's remarkable *Untitled (Meat Cable)*, 1969, indeterminate flesh-like morsels speared on a steel cable, which was infinitely more disquieting than any of the works purporting to show us images of death and decay at the New Museum. Discourses around race in 'Skin Fruit' also revolved around figuration, whether in Kara Walker's disturbing gouaches or Liza Lou's celebration of the heroic *Super Sister*, 1999, standing proud and armed in all her glass-beaded splendour. In 'The Corporeal', David Hammons plays more obliquely on his African American identity by including in his works his afro hair braids as well as traces of his skin – the framed blue imprints of his penis provide a witty variation on Yves Klein's well-known 'Anthropometries'.

'Skin Fruit's' veneration of 'iconic' images merged with the long tradition of Christian iconophilia in Pawel Althamer's *Schedule of the Crucifix*, 2005, in which a performer, we were told, may at any moment enter the room, change into a loincloth and crown of thorns, and climb with a folding ladder onto a hanging crucifix. If Daskalopoulos seems to have kept his distance from the icons, saints and sinners of Joannou's rowdy pantheon, he nevertheless partakes in one specific cult of images, to which he has alluded in newspaper accounts of how he looked up at the stars on the night, in 1999, when he acquired his first major artwork – one of Duchamp's 1964 replicas of his *Fountain* (included in 'Keeping it Real') – for \$1.76m. In a climate of catastrophic economic crisis in Greece and acute recession in both the UK and the US, such conspicuous displays of wealth by Joannou and Daskalopoulos may appear as obscene today as the idolatry first condemned by the iconoclasts of 8th-century Byzantium. Does this mean that those of us who enjoy the 'Keeping it Real' show are also involved in this strange cult of contemporary art? ■

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Imgreen & Dragset
Boy Scout 2008
detail

The New Décor
installation view

