

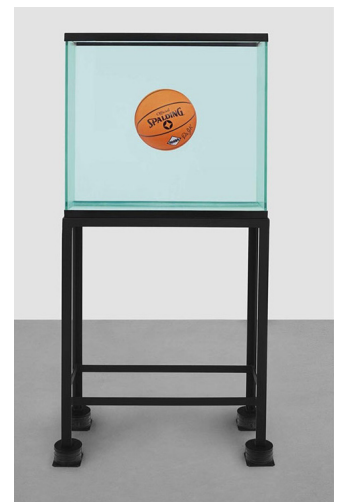
The Unexpected Appeal of a Jeff Koons Extravaganza

On a recent visit to the Glenstone Museum outside of Washington, D.C., I saw for the first time Jeff Koons' *Split Rocker* sculpture and was surprisingly impressed.



J. Koons, *Split Rocker*, Glenstone Museum. (Photo by N. Lee)

I recall seeing Jeff Koons' floating basketball many years ago and being quite struck by it. Its visual simplicity combined with its physical complexity ("How did he do that?") combined with its *objet trouvé* quality ("A basketball!?") were powerful. I still remember it decades later. Koons subsequently did many versions of this using two or three basketballs. All struck me as less powerful than the original, simpler one-basketball version.



J. Koons. *One Ball Total Equilibrium*, 1985.

Koons' tendency to cheapen an idea, which I first saw in those repetitive and not very thoughtful variations on the floating basketball, proved to be pervasive in his work. Much of it since then has struck me as stupid, exploitive, silly. Close up photographs of his penis going into the vagina of his then porn-actress wife? Please! A large gilded ceramic rendering of Michael Jackson and his pet monkey? Please!



J. Koons, *Michael Jackson and Bubbles*, 1988.

Entitling the series “The Banality Series” as he did this and some later work didn’t make up for it. To say, “*Watch this! I am going to show you how stupid art can be by making really stupid art!*” is not clever. It is not clever, it is not intellectually demanding, it is not emotionally insightful. It is stupid and, yes, banal. When I had seen photographs of his large flower structure, *Split Rocker*, done some thirty years later, I had the same reaction. I thought, “Oh, please!”

But when I went to the Glenstone Museum recently and saw it in person, my reaction was very different and very unexpected. Rather than an “Oh, please!”, my reaction was “Wow!” This was, for some reason, powerful. Why?

The scale of it is the the first thing. It is huge at about 50 feet tall. All big things have an impact, of course, but when the thing is representational, the scale has an additional impact. This is why statues of emperors, gods, and heros are so frequently oversized and sometimes very oversized. The size of the figure makes an impression on us, regardless of the statue’s

other attributes (or lack of them). With the Koons *Split Rocker*, there is this gigantic *head*! And here I am, here are we, so very tiny beneath it. That alone stuns.



The scale of *Split Rocker* at Glenstone.

Glenstone's siting of the work is also important, isolating it and placing it on the crest of a hill. As we approach, it grows from a some strange thing small on the horizon to bigger and bigger, then too huge. When we get there, we are dwarfed by it.



The siting of *Split Rocker* at Glenstone.

And then, what is it that we are dwarfed by? A goofy rendition of a goofy cartoon character rendered in flowers! The head looks like some indeterminate cartoon character. When I saw it, I at first interpreted the cylindrical forms protruding from the sides of the head as ears, which they could well be given the cartoonish look of the whole. Giving my distaste for Koons, I had not read anything about this piece prior to seeing it — which proved to be a blessing, allowing me to discover it on my own. So why the title “Split Rocker”? What did that mean? Only



Left side of *Split Rocker* at the Glenstone.



Backside, showing flowers' split. (Photo N. Lee)

when I walked to the back and saw the bifurcation of flowers and flower colors did I understand that the “split” could be literal. Then, given that the “split” was literal, “rocker” could also be literal and the cylindrical “ears” became the handles of a child’s rocking horse rocker.

I am guessing Koons intended for the “rock-er” to also suggest “...as in ‘Rock N Roll rocker’”. So the title now became much more complex and suggestive.



Left side of *Split Rocker* at the Glenstone. (Photo N. Lee)

And flowers? They are beautiful; it is hard to argue that. And they are tacky. Topiary, for god's sake! Tacky is and always has been part of the point for Koons. But bottom-line, the flowers are beautiful. And (this next comparison may shock, but...) I was reminded of visiting Stonehenge, of seeing the stones loom up on the crest of the hill as our bus approached just after dawn; special bus — no other tourists for the first hour) and of standing next to and amongst the stones, huge and powerful, making me feel small both physically and philosophically. Similar feelings came to me here with *Split Rocker*. I felt small both in size and importance. And made small by what? By a cartoonish structure of planted flowers? Yes. By our culture, by our culture.

Looking at documentation of other installations of *Split Rocker* one realizes how very important the flowers themselves are and how very important is Glenstone's decision to make this a permanent installation rather than a temporary installation as has been the case elsewhere. By making it permanent and by maintaining it, Glenstone has allowed the flowers to grow in profusion and in doing so mask the rather simplistic form of the underlying armature and its splitting and two halves. When installed in 2014 at Rockefeller Center in New York City, *Split Rocker* was not nearly so wild and indistinct and mysterious looking. Because it was covered with just a thin layer of flowers, it looked very readily and simplistically



Split Rocker installed at Rockefeller Center, NYC, with flowers minimally grown in.

like two rocking horse heads, split and attached, end of discussion.

Similarly when it was first installed at Glenstone and the flowers were more sparse, it did not have nearly the impact it has now.



Glenstone version, before flowers had fully grown in.

With time (and presumably considerable care by the Glenstone landscapers), the flowers grow in, taking over and obscuring the simplified forms of the underlying armature and creating a bizarre and strangely disturbing “creature” whom we can’t identify or make much sense of but who seems definitely “creature” and quite imposing for its size and otherness.



Split Rocker, with flowers fully grown in, October 2019, Glenstone Museum. (Photo by N. Lee)