

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

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**Jeff Koons Is the Most Successful American Artist Since Warhol. So What's  
the Art World Got Against Him?**

Carl Swanson



*Koons holding a gazing ball aloft in his studio alongside several sculptures destined for his show at David Zwirner.*

**Honk Honk Honk! Honk!**

Jeff Koons's 5-year-old son, Eric, is blowing a yellow plastic toy horn in his face, and the preternaturally unruffled artist is, for a human second, irritated.

"Stop," says Koons. "No blowing the horn."

"It's mine," Eric says.

"It's not yours," Koons says. "It's Dad's." Then he deftly takes it from Eric, handing it off to one of the children's caretakers.

We are standing in the middle of Koons's quarter-city-block West Chelsea studio complex with the six children he has with his wife, Justine, who worked here before she married him; their nannies; and his extremely nice assistants, who exude an almost midwestern courteousness.

I'm in the capital of the Koons empire, an earnest and well-capitalized toy-chest kingdom quite sheltered-seeming from the raucous galleryland that ends a few blocks south. The place is an industrial procession of hushed rooms, staffed by close to 130 mostly young people. Koons's artwork is intensely labored, in order to look like no human hand was ever actually involved. There are guys at computers with 3-D-imaging programs, in front of a foam mock-up of a ballerina statue he plans on having carved in stone with lasers to get the delicate filigree of the tutu *just so*. There's a tall fluorescent-lit painting hall with rolling wooden scaffolding, so Koons's painters can reach the top of the paint-by-numbers canvases. There's a room that looks like a robot infirmary from the far-off future where various parts of bronze-cast Hulk sculptures are being carefully attended to; there's a storage room with containers marked for old inflatable toys that are Koons's most well-known muses; and there's a room behind an air-lock door in which people are dressed in protective suits like on *Breaking Bad*.

It is a large operation, and everyone makes way for Koons. The 58-year-old artist is polite, - proprietary, aware of every tiny detail around him, his eye on a meticulous hunt for deviations from his vision. As he surveys the labor, he drinks from his Led Zeppelin coffee mug (he's a huge fan) and tells me his other primary mug has a picture of the chubby totemic *Venus of Willendorf*, a 25,000-year-old carved figure found in present-day Austria, a longtime fascination of his and also the subject of an elaborate stainless-steel sculpture he'll be showing this week in New York. "I believe that art has been a vehicle for me that's been about enlightenment and expanding my own parameters, to give me courage to exercise the freedom that I have in life," he tells me. "Every day I wake up and I really try to pinch myself to take advantage of today and to use that freedom of gesture to do what I really like to do."

Three decades into a choppy but astonishingly high-profile career, Koons remains something of a boy wonder—a trim, soft-spoken, systematic, and tightly scheduled puppet master who speaks in a reassuring near singsong, his language all patient, bright-eyed affirmation, as if reciting from a well-worn, well-worked-out self-help text ("Removing judgments lets you feel, of course, freer, and you have acceptance of things, and everything's in play, and it lets you go further"). He is unflappably kind, almost daydreamy, and speaks so unlike most artists, with their anxiously self-justifying obfuscatory academic jargon, that you wonder, as everyone always has, if you are encountering a sort of put-on—a Method performance of childlike mystic wonderment. ("I always have thought that kind of walking out of Plato's cave is really the removal of anxiety and the removal of all judgments," he says). "What he says about his work—it is an extension of his work," says his friend and onetime dealer, Jeffrey Deitch, now the director of L.A.'s Museum of Contemporary Art. "For Jeff, the work does not stop with the object. It's a whole vision of the world and a whole vision of art and life which is Jeff Koons."

The effect is a bit frustrating but also soothing. You remember his voice more than what he says, and his pastor-and-naïf affect suffuses the entire vast, white-walled studio complex, which seems as happy and purposeful as any Internet startup. Office hours start at a Bushwick-unfriendly 8 a.m., and in these last weeks of preparation before his first New York gallery show in a decade, the painting studio is running in three calm shifts.

**The work being done** is actually not for one show but two, at probably the city's most powerful galleries: Gagosian, which has represented Koons since 2001, after production costs derailed his partnership with Deitch (one person who knows him says, "His perfectionism basically bankrupts everyone who works with him"), and gallerist David Zwirner, the ambitious and prosperous younger rival to Larry Gagosian, who instigated an art-world gossip kerfuffle when he announced in the fall that Koons was doing a show with *him*. Both shows open this week, but what one curator a few months ago called an art-world "battle royale"—the two megadealers competing over the work of a super-profitable artist—has settled into something else, and just maybe what Koons wanted all along: the beginning of a Year of Koons, culminating in summer 2014's full-career retrospective at the Whitney Museum—its last exhibition in its Madison Avenue headquarters before moving to the bottom of the High Line. At the park's other end, Koons is hoping to suspend a full-size replica locomotive from a crane, nose down.

Koons is, by the measure of sales of new work, which is the money-mad art world's only objective measure, the most successful living American artist, but he has never before had a museum retrospective in New York, his home base for 36 years. And it's clear that, for him, one is not enough. "Even though the Whitney has given me the Breuer building, there still isn't that much space," he says, explaining why he's staging these two simultaneous shows after such a long hiatus. "There's a lot of work that unless people see it now, they may not see it then."

The gallery shows will both be opening during Frieze week, when the bespoke London-bred art fair descends on New York and makes the city not just the center of the global art world but its entire circumference. And it says something of Koons's celebrity and symbolism that artist Paul McCarthy is going to be displaying a huge joke about Koons there: his *own* 80-foot-tall inflatable balloon dog.

Koons has made his name manufacturing toys for rich old boys—exacting pagan monuments to mass-culture triviality, like his stainless-steel balloon animals or vibrantly colored metallic *Popeye*, which he calls a self-portrait—and along with Damien Hirst and Takashi Murakami, he is one of a small group of power-Pop impresarios who helped define the aughts as an era of large-scale spectacle. And displayed wealth. (His collectors include Eli Broad, Dakis Joannou, Steven Cohen, and the royal family of Qatar.) A brand-new work by Koons, like the human-size bronze Hulk sculptures he's been producing of late, is said to run between \$4 million to \$6 million and is usually pre-bought by his collectors. (The last decades' bull market in art means Koons is operating in a very different price climate than Warhol, Rothko, or Pollock ever did.) Older work, at auction, goes for even more; a few years back, Adam Lindemann sold his *Hanging Heart*—a stainless-steel sculpture based on something Koons saw in a shopwindow

display and supersized—for \$23.6 million at Sotheby’s reportedly without ever even unwrapping it and taking it home. (Gagosian bought it, probably for a client.) Last fall, a *Tulips* sculpture was sold (to casino magnate Steve Wynn) at Christie’s for \$33.7 million. The circle of collectors and dealers is so small and so awash in cash that the process can seem to an outsider a bit like a rigged game, in which a bad deal can be considerably more valuable than a good one. If you buy a giant balloon toy for \$30 million, you may have spent a few million more than you had to or even expected to; but you’ve set the value of that work and also elevated the value of all of the balloon toys in your collection. Which is especially good, since there aren’t very many people who can afford to spend \$30 million on a giant balloon toy, and those who can tend to take pleasure in cornering a market.

Much has always been made of the fact that Koons is in league with the plutocrats and once worked on Wall Street, selling commodities. But he’s always been quick to refuse the art world’s carefully patrolled shibboleths—that work has personal meaning, that it must contain some social criticism, that it express ambivalence about the art market. Koons does not make ambivalent work, which is his way of giving people what they actually enjoy: a lavishly elevated version of mass-cultural charisma. Koons has long aspired to the ubiquitous pop stature of Michael Jackson, whom he once paid weird (and famous) tribute to with a large porcelain sculpture of the singer and his admiring pet chimp, Bubbles. But a closer model might be Andy Warhol, who was similarly circumspect in his talk about the importance of just liking things without judgment, though he smuggled enough camp sensibility into his work to make it seem slyly subversive. There is nothing subversive in the way Koons works or the way he talks. “Self-acceptance and acceptance of others” is one of many koanlike out-of-the-blue affirmations he recites to me. “Acceptance of everything.” As Zwirner tells me: “He says if you’re critical, you’re already out of the game.” Deitch strikes a sweeter note: “I think Jeffrey’s love of children and family—that connects to his effort to retain that childlike inspiration, to understand how children perceive.”

The idea of boyhood is everything to Koons: He’s a bit like Norman Rockwell in that way. (Think enough about Koons and you start seeing just about everybody in him.) That might seem like an odd observation to make about someone who owes his fame beyond the art world to the work that was also his greatest professional and personal heartbreak—a much-derided-at-the-time series of photo-realistic paintings and sculptures of himself and his then-wife, Ilona Staller, an Italian porn star who went by La Cicciolina, copulating gauzily (and, in some cases, not so gauzily). But to hear him tell it, he really thought he was making work anybody could identify with, to help relieve us, he says, of “guilt and shame.” When he was still married to the porn star, who hardly spoke English and to whom he spoke either through a translator or Koons’s peculiar pidgin-Italian-accented English, he told *Vanity Fair* that “the sculpture that I am most interested in is our child. I don’t believe that marble bust I made is my way to enter the Realm of the Eternal. To me the only way to exist in the eternal is through biological sculptures.” Later, he said he dreamed of opening a museum to which children would drag their parents.

What’s new in the Gagosian and Zwirner shows is that he’s trying to place himself in art history—quite literally, by placing art history in his work—dragging classical statues onto the

canvas or casting them in plaster. His references this time are Picasso and Praxiteles. There will be a mirror-polished classical Venus statue and one that takes his big cast-in-metal balloon-animal sculpture in a different direction: *Balloon Venus*. His balloon-twisting consultant, an L.A. balloon artist named Buster Balloon, told me it took him 85 versions using a 60-inch-long balloon to get that one right; Koons then cat-scanned the actual balloon sculpture, to make sure he got the measurements exactly.

“One of the main reasons that I work with inflatables is that the aspect of inside/outside—if you look at an inflatable and you think about it, it seems very empty inside,” Koons tells me. “Oh, it’s air in there, so it’s empty. But that moment that your exterior space around you feels denser, it gives you more of a sense of confidence in the world. You think about your own inside. It’s denser. It’s blood, it’s guts, it’s tissue. And so if you’re not around that concept of the inflatable, it’s more of a void out there. Okay? It’s denser inside here than outside. It’s vacuums. But when you’re experiencing an inflatable, for that time, it’s vacuous inside that object and it’s empty inside.” I ask if he always talked this way about his work. “In some manner,” he answers. “I’ve had time to think about these things.”

Walking around the studio, he shows me a checkerboard piece that alternates between Titian’s *Venus and Adonis* and Picasso’s black-and-white *The Kiss* from 1969. Koons has said the Titian painting is among his favorite of all time: She’s naked, wanting Adonis to hang out; he’s dressed and heading out with the dogs to go hunt. Koons owns *The Kiss* and says “it really helped change my life.” An aging Picasso is having this “whole dialogue with his own mortality,” he says, explicating more than the painting, it seems. (Several works are layered over a background by the turn-of-the-century painter Louis Eilshemius, “who screamed for 50 years for recognition in the face of an apathetic world,” according to his poetic 1941 *Times* obituary.) Superimposed on the checkerboard is the image of a Uli figure, a sacred wooden statue that comes from Papua New Guinea. They’re used in funerals and fertility rites and represent tribal leaders, “but they’re both masculine and feminine, because they can protect their community, they can defend the community, and at the same time they can nourish the community.”

As they do most every Friday afternoon, Koons, Justine, and their six children are gathering to drive the three and a half hours to their 650-acre farm near Koons’s childhood home in York, Pennsylvania. The oldest, Sean, is 11 and wearing neon Ray-Bans and a striped stocking cap; the youngest, Mick (“like Mick Jagger”), is just 8 months old. Koons is clearly uncomfortable having his family, and his private life, made available and public for me even for an afternoon—the anxiety of a perfectionist focused, for most of his recent career, on removing personal and subjective elements and delivering instead perfectly polished expressions of what he calls “objective” work. And to see him with the six children—screaming, scrambling, wanting his attention—is to see his lifelong experiment in maintaining himself in a state of childlike wonder challenged a bit by their feral reality. But then again, childlike wonder is a concept much more useful to adults than to children.



*With his wife, Justine, and their six children.*

**It is often said** that an artist like Koons works at the top of the art world—a single piece could pass as barter for a glass-walled condo at One57. But it would probably be more accurate to say that he works above the art world, in a rarefied, barely occupied penthouse beyond the reach of critics, curators, other artists and other dealers who make up what is usually called the art Establishment. That Establishment doesn't just ignore the work of the unknown artist but also, for the most part, that of the world-famous—especially Koons, Hirst, and Murakami, who have become so big and so rich it no longer seems important to have opinions of them. Instead, they are talked about as cultural phenomena about which one should have ideas—balloon dogs, reality television, Occupy Wall Street. Like Warhol, Koons is a Pop artist who is himself a Pop figure, one who gets to hang out with the world's richest collectors, who can afford to fund his visions of the unsullied magical object. “The desire that Koons creates with people is very much about possession,” says Tobias Meyer, worldwide head of contemporary art at Sotheby's. “It's about owning it, ingesting it. It's proto-sexual. The ability to have the physical proximity to this object.”

“He exists as a kind of fascinating artistic limit-case,” says Scott Rothkopf, the curator of the retrospective. “Of fabrication. Of the size of one's audience or celebrity. Or of risk-taking and impassioned commitment to one's work.” In an essay on the “Hulk Elvis” paintings, Rothkopf wrote, “What he is selling is not just a painting or an optimistic dream of youth and love, but the dream of a perfect object ... an extremely arduous and expensive process, and his paintings are about that, too ... they are also about the people who are willing to pay for them.”



**Most self-made people** consider themselves outsiders, no matter how at the center of things they find themselves. And part of Koons's self-understanding is that he's keeping his past with him. The farm to which Koons is retreating with his clan was originally his grandmother's, which he bought back in another kind of nostalgic preservation of the idea of his childhood. During the week, he and his brood live uptown near the good private schools. But you get the idea their real home is in the countryside with their sheep and Icelandic horses. "The kids don't even like to go to Central Park anymore," Justine tells me as she corrals them. "Too many other people."

Koons has had a very long career. When he began making headway in the early eighties, the city was giving itself over to the painterly swagger of the neo-Expressionists: David Salle, Julian - Schnabel, Jean-Michel Basquiat, especially. Koons's stuff was in another register, starting with ready-mades of junky plastic things he found in shops on 14th Street and in Chinatown. Later, he moved on to putting vacuums inside fluorescent-lit clear Plexi cases: This series was called "The New."

Readymades like these can be seen as ironic critiques of commodity culture, domestic labor, generalized deep-pile-carpeted anomie. But Koons has always had an almost animistic interest in the ordinary, store-bought thing, and to him that work is and was a deeply earnest tribute to late-industrial perfection. He paid for production (vacuums are expensive) with the money he made on Wall Street. "I was good at selling," he once told an interviewer about that gig. "A lot of my work is about sales. And it was about being independent from the art market. So I didn't have to kiss anybody's ass. And that I could make exactly what art I wanted to make."

The art he wanted to make was peculiar. First, a sink-or-swim show called “Equilibrium”—basketballs floating in vitrines of water, drolly framed Nike basketball-culture posters, and bronze casts of a lifeboat and a flotation vest. Then one about the effects of advertising, class, and alcoholism, “Luxury and Degradation”—painted ads for booze, accompanied by steel models of things like a suitcase travel bar or an ice bucket and an old-fashioned train, each car a little bottle of Jim Beam. This was followed, later in 1986, by “Statuary” (his famous “inflatable” bunny, cast in stainless steel) and then 1988’s career-making “Banality.”

And then he met Ilona Staller and lost his equilibrium. He saw her in an issue of *Stern* magazine in 1988: She was wearing a see-through dress, and he used the photograph as the model for a sculpture called *Fait d’Hiver*, where a naked woman is lying in the snow, joined by a penguin and a pig. Staller was a member of the Italian Parliament as well as a porn star. The next year, he sent her a fax, and they met up. He once described meeting her backstage at a show she was performing in: “I enjoyed very much that she was standing there without any pants on.” She was “one of the greatest artists alive. She was able to present herself with absolutely no guilt and no shame.” He had the idea that they would make a porno film together, and they took lots of photos where they were having sex with each other, which Koons turned into paintings and sculptures called “Made in Heaven.” And which are, for all the ways they anticipated an age of celebrity narcissism and porn wallpaper, still shocking: horrifyingly unguarded, emotionally raw, and sexually explicit—especially hard to take at the peak of the aids crisis. “Jeff had confused fantasy with reality,” Deitch once told *The New Yorker*. “It was as though he felt the ‘Made in Heaven’ work wouldn’t be authentic unless they were married.”

When it came to New York from the Venice Biennial, the work generated a lot of attention but didn’t sell much. Museums weren’t interested; the art world was embarrassed by him. Koons was given only one more New York solo gallery show in the nineties. And on top of all that, he and Staller split up.

Then things got worse: He and Staller had a son, Ludwig, over whom they soon began an expensive and dispiriting custody battle. Koons split with his then-gallerist Ileana Sonnabend (who’d advised against the marriage). And in a fit of disappointment and self-loathing, he destroyed many of the “Made in Heaven” pieces. He had exposed himself, and been humiliated.

His comeback started with *Puppy*, from 1992, which finally made its way to Rockefeller Plaza in 2000. A 40-foot-tall West Highland white terrier, covered in 70,000 flowers, it was an eager and unavoidable critical and public success. *New York’s* Jerry Saltz named it the public art event of the aughts, calling Koons a “driven perfectionist in pursuit of unconditional love.”

In a kind of retreat-and-recovery mode, Koons began photographing simple objects that pertained to life’s transitions—cake, an egg, a diamond ring—and realized that he should make sculptures out of them. The idea was a sort of tribute to his lost son: They were also objects from a child’s party, and Koons wanted Ludwig to know he was thinking about him. This began the “Celebration” series, which allowed him to slowly crawl back to the top. But in doing so, he lost



the critics—who had always been a bit skeptical, thinking of him, as the *Times* put it in 1991, as “one last, pathetic gasp of the sort of self-promoting hype and sensationalism that characterized the worst” of the eighties. In 2004, Robert Hughes wrote that Koons is “an extreme and self-satisfied manifestation of the sanctimony that attaches to big bucks. Koons really does think he’s Michelangelo and is not shy to say so. The significant thing is that there are collectors, especially in America, who believe it. He has the slimy assurance, the gross patter about transcendence through art, of a blow-dried Baptist selling swamp acres in Florida.”

All of this criticism is, ultimately, valid, if somewhat beside the point: Koons’s work is impersonal, repetitive, awe-inspiring but largely un insightful, uninflected with any of the ambivalence about the world we live in today that animates most critically lauded contemporary art. But that doesn’t seem to be what he’s trying to do anyway. “I am very conscious of the viewer because that’s where the art takes place,” he once told an interviewer. “My work really strives to put the viewer in a certain kind of emotional state.”

What a balloon dog or a puppy made of flowers or a shiny hanging-heart sculpture offers is a picture of industrial perfection, a naïve piece of uncomplicated beauty that can be appreciated without using words like *discourse*. Which is one very clear reason why he is held in such unsteady regard by critics and curators and is so beloved by spectators. As a reflection of the world in which it was made—a Pop universe of digestible wealth—it is perhaps as profound a picture as the work of Warhol’s was of his.

Tobias Meyer calls Koons’s work an expression of Disney-like “pathological optimism” and compares what he does to Bernini’s work at Villa Borghese. “One of the things which comes back to him, positioning himself as a contemporary master,” Meyer says, is “perfection. Which is something that was for a long time not a part of contemporary art, which embraced the nonart of the accident or the imperfect.” And which is how Koons can be the art world’s great populist artisan, even as he operates as its most exclusive salesman.

**Gazing balls are glass globes**, painted on the inside, which were once quite popular suburban-garden features (versions of them sell for about \$35 at places like Target.com). Koons remembers them from his childhood in York, Pennsylvania—simple mirrored balls that were somehow, magically, transfixing middle-class status symbols. “People put them in their yards because they enjoy the visual aspect of the ball, but they really do it for their neighbors,” Koons says. “And it really helps emphasize a place. It’s like a point, and everything is kind of reflected from that point.”

It’s hard to miss, in a collection of work harvesting classical myth, the overtones of Narcissus—the man really cannot stop working with mirrors. “Imagine little Jeff Koons walking into some backyard and seeing the world collapsing into this sphere,” Zwirner says, a little wistfully.

The balls that Koons had fabricated at a glass company in Punxsutawney, Pennsylvania, for his new works are dark blue, and he shows me how the tonality shifts slightly in the middle. In the

series, he installs them on white plaster casts—classical museum statuary and vernacular yard objects, like an inflatable snowman and mailboxes, rendered in the same plaster cast. Each of these works are priced at \$3 million or under—the smallest are in the six figures—and produced in editions of three. At these prices, they qualify as affordable.

In the last few years he put his sculptures on top of the Metropolitan Museum, at Versailles, and then amid the halls of Liebieghaus in Germany—producing an art-history-slideshow lecture leading, inevitably, to him. For now, though, he seems content to insert himself into art history in the most literal way imaginable—by making new work that collages with several-thousand-year-old work. “It’s about acceptance,” Koons tells me, monitoring his assistants across the room as he talks. “That’s the reason I like to work with these external things. I really think that the journey that art takes you on as an artist is that you first learn self-acceptance.”

But like many preaching that sort of self-help gospel, Koons seems still agitated by status anxiety. And, twenty years after being spectacularly shunned by the art world for “Made in Heaven,” by the need to find a place for himself in the canon—even as an artist rich enough to re-create it in his studio. Koons’s systematic literalism of reference, and his prodigious memory and free-associative narrative fervor make him a bit like your favorite art-history professor. (Get this man a mooc!)

“Plaster casts in the nineteenth century were very, very popular,” Koons explains, passing one sculpture inspired by mailboxes he’s seen in Pennsylvania, with flared V8 exhaust pipes sprouting like antlers out of the side, and a manifold on top. “They’ll go from these historical images to something that is everyday, like mailboxes,” Koons says, adding that this particular sculpture is about “personal identity.” There’s also an inflatable Christmas yard snowman. And more mailboxes, all lined up in a row, like at the end of a country road. “This is a sense of community, in a way,” he says. “A little bit, to me, like the art world. And it’s also at the same time you get kind of the sense of loss. The loss of, I guess, loss of a location, loss of a place, identity.”

Back in the painting studio. “Could you move back here just a bit?” he asks the painters, who silently unlock the wheels of the rolling wooden scaffolding they work on. He points to the sculpture depicted in the middle: Greek, 100 B.C., of Aphrodite, naked, swatting a shorter, cloven-hoofed Pan away with her sandal. Eros—the winged baby—floats amused above her shoulder. “He’s after her,” observes Koons of Pan with a tiny trace of relish. “He’s really being aggressive with her. If you look here at his testicles, his phallus has been knocked off. But if you look at the support ...” There is a buttress between Pan’s form and her thigh. “The support’s a phallus. And the whole energy of the piece, the whole narrative, is a phallus. It’s telling you everything.”