

## GAGOSIAN GALLERY

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# PUPPY love

Behind Jeff Koons's blockbuster art for billionaires is an impulsive determination to make the world smile. **BY DAVID SALLE**

**J**OHN UPDIKE ONCE WROTE, WITH ONLY MINIMAL IRONY, THAT America is a vast conspiracy to make you happy. The task of representing this happiness periodically gets reassigned. Today the visual arts have the ball, and no artist has done more to make American happiness a legitimate subject—even the guiding aesthetic principle of his art—than **Jeff Koons**.

I first met Koons in 1979, at his studio. He was polite, affable, earnest, a Pennsylvanian like Updike, and I liked him immediately. Looking back at that meeting, I realize that he also possessed a quality I had not often seen: a wit that was diamond-hard but devoid of cynicism. And despite the passage of time, as well as the complications brought by unprecedented success, I don't think he has changed at all.

The Whitney Museum has given over nearly the entire Marcel Breuer building on Madison Avenue (for the last show there) to the first full-scale retrospective of Koons's art in his own country. This comprehensive survey, sensitively curated by the dynamo Scott Rothkopf, gives the full measure of the artist's diverse output, placing his works in the context of intellectual, emotional, and technological development.

Koons's art represents the conflation of the Ready-made with the Dream. Major artists are often a

combination of disparate qualities, derived from the intertwining of two or more previously unconnected influences. Think of de Kooning (Ingres and housepainting) or Jackson Pollock (Veronese and Navajo sand painting). Koons's art begins with the legacy of Duchamp but combines the French master's contrarian irony with the perverse, highly sexualized emotionality of Salvador Dalí.

Critics (and, for that matter, Koons himself) want to see his art as a continuation of Andy Warhol's, but it is really a late flowering of the Dalí mind. Unlike Warhol, for example, he uses the literal in a way that is not in fact literal-minded. Koons's work has always dwelled in the realm of metaphor, even parable. When I met him he was making sculptures from cheap inflatable toys: brightly colored globular, cartoony-shaped flowers set in front of mirrors. The pieces were of modest size, 12 to 18 inches tall, sometimes sitting on the floor in the corner of a room. That was it: an inflatable nothing looking at itself in a mirror. The work was so goofy, and it so effortlessly hit the sweet spot between delirious kitsch and self-aware critique—and the man himself was so winningly sincere—that whatever doubts I had evaporated. It takes someone with a very open heart to find such expression in a blow-up vinyl flower.

Much has been made of Koons's embrace and deliberate seeking out of fame. But even though the cult of celebrity is part of his art and his thinking, it is separate from his value as an artist. To gauge the latter we need to ask: Are the objects themselves, his forms, more interesting or larger than their interpretations? The answer is sometimes yes and sometimes no. But where Koons often succeeds is in making things that continue to resonate in the mind and spirit, even if they are perfectly obvious.

Koons is at heart a classicist who is concerned with the expressive capacity of the human form. Figurative painting and sculpture have been, with a relatively brief detour, the classic form in

Western art for centuries. Koons seems to want to be a new kind of Renaissance sculptor. He wants to make figurative monuments, to give people things that will make

**GREATEST HITS**  
Clockwise from top left: *Cake* (1995–97); Koons with *Puppy* (1992); *Split-Rocker* (Orange/Red) (1999); *Metallic Venus* (2010–12).



them gasp. A monument is something that people can rally around, that they feel good about being photographed in front of. “We were there. We saw it.” His iconic sculptures do seem to memorialize something, though I’m not sure what. Our former innocence?

Walking through the Whitney’s third-floor galleries, where Rothkopf has installed an ensemble of paintings from the early 2000s, I felt the giddy destabilization in works such as *Bagel* and *Junkyard*, both good examples of his painting at its peak, promiscuous minglings of hair, stockings, food, and flesh that draw you in even as they hold you at arm’s length. The paintings are exquisitely composed but perhaps too complex to rank with his most famous work, and they give off a darker psychological tone, one that admits to conflicts that have for the most part been banished from the sculptures.

Koons is best known for a handful of instantly recognizable works: *Rabbit*, *Michael Jackson and Bubbles*, *Balloon Dog*, and the career-altering *Puppy*. Notice that this list includes none of his paintings, which, though at times radically beautiful, never achieve the sticking power of his objects—the things. When his work succeeds, Koons makes the thingyness of modern life coherent; for a moment the iconic and mythic feel personal. That’s very difficult to do for more than a season. Look at Damien Hirst: The shock of his vitrines and stuff in glass cases has faded. His work looks old-fashioned now; all that’s left is its rather obvious meaning.

Most public sculpture is a dubious proposition; it just can’t compete with nature or architecture. Koons’s *Puppy* is the single greatest work of public sculpture made after Rodin that I’ve seen. I once spent 10 days in Bilbao, where the first of the litter permanently resides, its flowered tongue delicately hanging out of its mouth directly in front



**CURTAIN'S UP** The enormous *Geisha*, part of the “Hulk Elvis” series, served as the backdrop for the Vienna State Opera in 2007–08.

of Frank Gehry’s Guggenheim. I was installing a show in the museum, and as I approached the building on foot, seeing the puppy provoked a feeling of joy. At first it was just a shape in the distance, then gradually the realization: It’s a dog! This continued to happen every day during a somewhat stressful week. I never tired of seeing it; I was so happy and grateful that it existed. What more can an artist do? •