

## GAGOSIAN GALLERY

### THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.



KEITH BEDFORD FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

Jeff Koons and his wife, Justine, will receive the Champion for Children Award from the International Centre for Missing & Exploited Children.

## The Work and Passions of Jeff Koons

**M**y favorite part of visiting the artist Jeff Koons and his wife, Justine, last week came when he offered me a tour of his studio on far West 29th Street, though studio doesn't quite do the space justice.

It more closely resembled an efficient German automotive factory, where in one division dedicated workers were casting knockoffs of some of the greatest sculptures in the history of art.



**URBAN GARDNER**  
**RALPH GARDNER JR.**

They're part of the artist's "Gazing Ball" series.

I hadn't come to interview Mr. Koons about his art, but about the International Centre for Missing & Exploited Children, which is honoring him and his wife with the Champion for Children Award at its inaugural gala on Thursday.

In the 1990s Mr. Koons had what he describes as a heart-wrenching experience trying to reunite with his child. It began when he and his first wife, Ilona Staller—a porn star turned Italian member of parliament, who is also known as La Cicciolina—separated after the birth of their son, Ludwig. Ms. Staller left for Italy with the boy when he was 2 years old.

Mr. Koons spent several years and millions of dollars in an ultimately unsuccessful effort to bring his child back to the U.S.

In 2007, he and Justine, an artist and former assistant in Mr. Koons studio, started the International Centre for Missing & Exploited Children's research arm, the Koons Family Institute on International Law and Policy.

In fact, the couple told me that the artist's famous balloon animals were inspired, at least in part, by Ludwig. "Jeff wanted him to realize he was thinking about him and trying to get him back," Justine explained.

Jeff agreed. "It was a way to be communicating with my son," he said. "When he looks back now," he knows, "I was thinking of him."

Perhaps it wasn't a fair question—I admit it wasn't a fair question—but I felt obliged to ask it anyway: Had the artist ever considered that a porn star might not be an ideal parenting partner?

One may recall the artist's graphic "Made In Heaven" series, which turned the couple's love life into very much a spectator sport.

Then again, I'm confident some porn stars make great parents, and many nonperformers paltry ones.

"It's not about somebody's profession," Mr. Koons said. "It's about stability."

Justine added: "Also, when you're in love, you're not thinking about those things."

The couple have six chil-

dren together, the oldest 13. They leave the city for Pennsylvania Friday afternoon—the artist bought the farmhouse that once belonged to his grandparents—sometimes not returning until Monday morning when the kids have to be in school.

"Nature is very important to me," 60-year-old Mr. Koons says, but the way it was for Picasso, a role model of his. Bending it to his will, or at least giving it every opportunity to circuit freely through him. He told me he works out with a personal trainer five days a week and can dead lift 342 pounds.

**'I still have a solitude in creating context.... I also like being in the real world.'**

"Jeff's in good shape," Justine testified. "Picasso influenced that sense of making work as he's getting older and older."

"I want to keep going," her husband said. "I felt his work got better and better."

Then again, Picasso was a sole practitioner. Koons has an army of assistants to do his heavy lifting. After the sculpture studio, he escorted me to the painting studio where artists were producing excellent copies of works such as Manet's "Le Déjeuner sur l'herbe."

"These are masterpieces I'm incorporating into my own word work," he explained with-

out saying more.

"I still have a solitude in creating context," he went on. "Pursuing my ideas and structuring my ideas. I also like being in the real world. I like being with people."

"At a certain point you can become bored with yourself," he added. "When you go outward it's a journey to the acceptance of others."

His experience trying to gain custody of his son and his work with the International Centre for Missing & Exploited Children has offered the benefit of taking him outside himself, of participating in a larger community. "And caring about other people the same way you'd care about your own," he said.

Ludwig, now 22, was in the city recently for 10 days and the family is optimistic he'll move here.

"We went to Brooklyn and showed him where other young people live in New York City," Mr. Koons reported.

"We went to see a Yankees game," he added. "We walked around Manhattan quite a bit. We went to Washington and took him to the National Gallery, the Air and Space Museum."

In other words, the kind of things he might have done with his son when he was 10, if he'd been around.

They also went to the New Museum on the Bowery. "He has such an aesthetic response to things," Mr. Koons said proudly. "He has an eye."

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