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CHRISTIE'S

Jeff Koons: 'I love how art can change your life'

Jeff Koons wasn't always convinced that he could make it big in the art world. Now even his critics have to admit he's a superstar. Photographs by Stefan Ruiz

William Cook



Jeff Koons photographed in his New York studio, 2016 © Jeff Koons

Early evening, always the best time of day in Greece, and I'm standing on the marble forecourt of The Romanos, a plush hotel beside the Ionian Sea. Big white waves are crashing against the sandy shore. I am pretending to admire the sunset; in fact I'm waiting — nervously — for Jeff Koons.

His people told me that he would be here, but now my excitement at the prospect of meeting Koons in this secluded corner of the Peloponnese — thousands of miles from his natural, big-city habitat, where he frequently comes across like a politician on a chat show — is turning to anxiety. He's running late, and I'm worried he might not show at all.

But here he comes, toned and trim, wearing slacks and a dark, short-sleeved shirt. The most striking thing about him is how young he looks: at the age of 60, he could pass for 40, or even 30

from a distance. His skin is smooth, his eyes are clear and bright. The word that suits him best is 'boyish'.

But he has come to the hotel to take part in a debate on art and democracy, and Nobel laureate Paul Krugman is among the other speakers. As we move into the bar, he is fretting. Is he dressed formally enough for the evening session?

The question to be debated is 'Can the arts create more democratic societies?' Koons's participation is fitting because his art is entirely democratic. Anyone can enjoy the irresistible, trash-aesthetic sculptures — such as *Lobster* (2007-12), below, which is offered in the Post-war & Contemporary Art Evening Sale on 10 May — with which he burst onto the art scene in the 1980s. The only thing that's elitist about his work is its price, but that's hardly his fault. The huge price tags are merely an indication of his remarkably broad appeal.

Not everyone is enamoured of Jeff Koons, of course. Plenty of art critics have been awfully rude about him. Is he for real? Is his work a scam? Is his entire career an elaborate in-joke at the art world's vast expense? 'Koons is the baby to Andy Warhol's Rosemary,' declared the late Robert Hughes.

I ask Koons how it feels to divide audiences so fiercely. 'Warhol is looked at today as this master of the 20th century, but the critics did not like Warhol,' he says serenely. 'Out of 10 critics you may have had three who were supporters, and the rest were all naysayers. Now there are no naysayers.' Koons seems confident that posterity will judge him kindly, and that his critics, like Warhol's, will eventually fade away.

Koons has been cast as a controversialist, but he's really refreshingly conventional — not only in the art he makes, but in the art he likes. 'I love Manet,' he says. 'What I adore so much about him is that there's no anger in his work at all.' His art collection ranges from Poussin to Picasso, from Manet to Magritte, all revolutionary artists in their time, like Warhol in the 1960s and Koons in the 1980s. 'When Manet died, the Louvre didn't even take his paintings,' he reminds me, returning to his theme.

Yet the more you see of Koons's work, the less you feel you know about him. Like Warhol, he has disappeared onto the front pages: fame has made him anonymous. His most controversial show, *Made in Heaven*, is a perfect case in point. Those works showed him having sex with his then wife, Ilona Staller, and they left nothing to the imagination.

It seemed the most revelatory art you could imagine, but there was less to it than met the eye. Before she became Mrs Koons, Staller was well known as an actress in pornographic films, under the sobriquet La Cicciolina. *Made in Heaven* was a vanishing act, merging Koons's private life with his wife's old day job. Far from exposing something intimate, he was merely hiding in plain view.

Jeffrey Lynn Koons was born in Pennsylvania in 1955. He had a happy, middle-class childhood, in a loving, stable family, surrounded by the colourful ephemera of Fifties Americana. 'As a child I enjoyed looking at cereal boxes,' he says. His father was an interior decorator. 'I remember drawing, around the age of three, and my parents coming in and really making me feel as if I'd accomplished something,' he tells me. He had a sister, three years older, who seemed to

do everything better than him. ‘But finally, there was something that I could do, and could maybe do better. I developed a sense of self from that.’

His boyhood hero was [Salvador Dalí](#), with whom he has much in common: he’s a natural showman, a tease whose works are frequently provocative but never dull. Not content with merely pinning posters on his bedroom walls, Koons got in touch with Dalí; and when the artist came to New York, Koons was invited to meet him. It was a formative experience.

‘I thought: Wow! I can do this! I can actually be a part of the avant-garde! I can make art a way of life!’ Art school — [first in Baltimore](#), [then Chicago](#) — was a further revelation. ‘The art history teacher brought up a slide of Manet and started to talk about the symbolism, and the different meanings that you could see within the image. Bam! That’s when everything opened up,’ Koons says.

He moved to New York to paint, switching to sculpture partly for practical reasons: ‘I was always a painter, but the works became so large that I had to take them off the wall.’ Then came an interlude in which he took a job on the membership desk of [New York’s Museum of Modern Art](#), and later worked as a broker on Wall Street; but he never stopped making art. ‘I had to have an income to create my works,’ he explains, ‘and I worked for a couple of years until, finally, I could not think about anything other than my art.’

He went full time, and his one-man shows — from [Luxury & Degradation](#) in Los Angeles (1986) to [Banality](#) in New York (1988) — caught the zeitgeist. The [Made in Heaven](#) show (1991) is not something Koons regrets, but the break-up of his marriage to Staller resulted in a difficult custody dispute over their son. ‘I did become very preoccupied with legal aspects of the custody situation,’ he says solemnly.

The artworks he made in that period are not as playful as they first seem. ‘My [Balloon Dog](#) is like a Trojan horse: the inside’s darker than the outside.’ The experience was especially painful for Koons, after what he’d been through in college. ‘When I was in art school my girlfriend became pregnant. I offered to marry her, but she didn’t want to get married so my daughter was put up for adoption. I was very distraught,’ he says, ‘and I always hoped that I’d be able to find my daughter.’ When she came of age she did make contact, and went to live with him. She is now married, ‘but we’re together a couple of weekends a month’.

Koons remarried in 2002. He and his wife, the artist Justine Wheeler, now have six children. ‘They love art. Our youngest, our three-year-old, would be able to point to something and tell you if it’s by Picasso or Manet.’

After decades of success, Koons is full of self-belief, and his energy and enthusiasm are infectious. People say he’s like a salesman, and it’s true he smiles a lot, showing off his perfect teeth; nevertheless, he seems utterly sincere. So what is it about him that rubs people up the wrong way?

Partly, of course, it’s the work; and partly it’s his working practices. More like a businessman than a tortured artist, he employs people to make his art. Yet that’s not new. [Rubens](#) was a rich entrepreneur who hired other artists to complete his paintings. He would have felt quite at home in Koons’s New York studio — networking, delegating and managing a large creative team.

Still, the art Koons creates is actually quite traditional. He makes figurative sculptures. If his works seem bland and empty (basketballs, vacuum cleaners, balloon animals, Michael Jackson), perhaps that's because so many of the things that surround us now are similarly hollow. He depicts the landscape around him with the accuracy of a Canaletto. Like any authentic artist, he reflects what he sees. Cynics regard his sculptures as critiques of consumerism; idealists see them as objects of delight.

When you meet Koons, he doesn't come across like an artist. But that is because he's more like an evangelical preacher. Art is his passion, his religion. 'I love art,' he says. 'I love how it can change your life. I go to my studio in the morning, I stay there until late evening, and I'm right back in there the next day, doing the things I love to do. And,' he adds defiantly, 'great artists always get better.'