GAGOSIAN GALLERY

CULTURE

THE GLAMOUR TW

Jeff Koons retrospective has arrived in Vauxhall. I will repeat that for the millionth among you, the nouveaux and the hard of believing. A Jeff Koons retrospective has arrived in Vauxhall.

It’s a surprise on many levels. The most salient is that Koons is the most celebrated and glamorous artist on the planet just now, an international art star who showed at Versailles and the Centre Pompidou; Vauxhall, meanwhile, is a grubby and inessential part of London without a past as far as modern art is concerned. There are places in the metropole where you can imagine a Koons retrospective occurring. Vauxhall isn’t one of them.

Yet here it is, opposite a row of back-up garages on a street that belongs to an episode of Minder, surrounded by council estates, occupying a workshop that was previously employed in the bang-Wilhelm manufacture of theatrical props. That was before Damien Hirst acquired it and turned it into the whitest and dinkiest suite of art spaces in London – the Newport Street Gallery.

If Koons is the biggest art celebrity on the planet, then Hirst is probably at No 2. Between them, they represent vast reserves of wealth, power and fame. Though not, perhaps, of credibility. Not in some quarters. When Hirst announced that he was opening a new gallery in Vauxhall with a collection of paintings by John Hoyland, the legendary British abstractionist, the response was shockingly muted. I loved the show. Lots of others didn’t.

Not that Koons is Hirst looking anything but delighted with themselves as they settle down on a black power sofa for this-pioneering joint interview. Trendy, as always, in a crisp two-piece suit – same as on this occasion to signal some informality – Koons looks like he should be selling apartments to celebrities on the Upper West Side, rather than explaining his art in Vauxhall. But he’s always done the first thing I want to know is when they met. Koons thinks it was in 1992 at Arles, a castle in Germany where both were invited to a group show. His contribution was a gigantic poppy made of the flowers, 438 tall, which sat in the courtyard of the castle, sewing a poppy-droopy, canisse bouchic. It’s now the centerpiece of the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao.

Hirst thinks that they may have met earlier, in New York, at a lunch organized by the madcap art dealer Jeffrey Deitch. But turning had his memory jogged in the correct direction by the more precise presence on the black settee, he begins업ly remembering the meeting in the stock.

"I was feeling quite intimidated. But then, left alone, and was absolutely friendly to me. He said, ‘Come inside the poppy.’ And I remember him saying, ‘This is a high-maintenance artwork,’ and I was thinking, ‘What the f*** is a high-maintenance artwork?’ Then he took me inside. And it was like a chapel in there: it all had to be worn. There had to be in with their hoopoe. And I thought, ‘Oh my God. Can I see exactly what a high-maintenance artwork does?’

"Listening to them on tape, it’s more obvious who’s the boss here. With his squatness, his directness, and his incessant interruptions, Hirst is in a showboat presence who demands constant attention, while Koons is stately, measured, teacherly. I find myself imagining a situation in which Hirst sticks up his hand and says ‘Please, sir,’ while Koons politely admits him to walk his turn.

This teacher-pupil relationship was exactly what was illustrated in the curing magazine ad that Koons produced in 1988, and that Hirst remembers seeing. Koons had a show at the Sonnenbad Gallery, in New York, called hulunbier: a very Koons subject. The gallery asked him if he wanted a catalogue, but Koons said he’d rather haveKoons played in those art magazines that had been hostile to him. He would storyboard them and star in them. In the most contentious of these ads, for Artrium, headteacher Koons showed himself in front of a classroom of enthralled schoolchildren, writing “Badminton as favours” on the blackboard.

"I wanted to show that I’m going after something. I knew they were opposed to me at Artrium. So I thought, ‘I’m going to show them.’ I’m going around them. I’m going to the future generation.’

For Art in America, he cast himself as Christ, surrounded by beautiful women tempting him with cals, for Flash Art, he showed himself hugging a pig. "I wanted to call myself a pig before anyone else could. So that people could only think more of me.” At which admission, they break out in union of happy guffaws.

Hirst was still a student at the time. He remembers coming across the ad in the culture library at Goldsmiths and being blown away by them. At more or less the same time, Charles Saatchi, who had recently opened his own private gallery in St John’s Wood, north London, put on a show of young artists from New York, including, and especially, Koons. As Hirst remembers it, and I can back him on this – the Saatchi show changed everything.

Inspired by New York Art News, in Switch’s review was called, Hirst decided to mount his own exhibition of young London artists – his Goldsmiths contemporaries – and to house it in a converted warehouse.
by the river, at Surrey Docks. That show was called Freeze. And, as I can
again vouch, it triggered a revolution. Freeze didn’t just launch the phenomenon
of the VRAs. Freeze began the popularisa-
tion of contemporary art in Britain that
would eventually result in Tate Modern.
No wonder, at the extra-private private
view of Koons’s show later that night, that
both Nicholas Serota, the emperor of the
Tate, and the new director of Ilamiaside,
Frances Morris, could be seen inspecting
the art a tad sheepishly. If Koons hadn’t
inspired Hirst, and Hirst hadn’t changed
the rules, Tate Modern would not be there now.

How come you’ve opened your own
gallery, Damien? “When I did my show at
the Tate,” he chuckles, remembering the
display for the London Olympics that went
on to be the best-attended solo exhibition
in Tate Modern’s history, “they wouldn’t
let me drink coffee in the gallery when
I was installing. I said, ‘Are you joking?
You can’t bring in a coffee?’ So I was,
like, ‘I can’t wait till I’ve got my own.’”

The entertaining selection of art he has
now installed in Vauxhall goes back to
the beginning: the celebrated Hoovers with
which Koons announced his arrival in the
art world in 1980. Sitting pristinely in
their glamorous Perspex cases, lit with
A-list neon, the Hoovers were a new
type of celebrity, ready-made for a
new kind of celebrity America.

Where Warhol’s soup cans spoke
of the noisy label choices available
on the modern supermarket shelf, the Hoovers seemed to
mark a shift in consumer

Bosom buddies
Hirst, left, and Koons

taste from the loud and the quotidian to
the silent and the fetishistic. Hirst tells me
he keeps one in his bedroom, next to the
bed. I am not in the slightest bit surprised.
With their voluptuous retro styling and
their purring presence, the Koons Hoovers
are tingly sexy. And, of course, they
came in 50 shades of red.

Everything in the show is from Hirst’s
own collection, except for a light box
borrowed from Koons himself and
a painting called Boy with Pony,
left by one of the Gettys. Hirst
began his buying spree 13
years ago, and now has, in
Koons’s words, “one of the
biggest collections of my
work in the world.” It
contains prime
examples from all
of the many Koons
phases — six
roomfuls of blue-
chip art worth a
mountain of Briton
pounds. Make that
two mountains.

Koons collects, too.
But from a different

tranche. “As Damien’s been involved with
contemporary work, I’ve been more
involved with non-contemporary.” He
owns pictures by Courbet, Manet, Picasso,
Dali. Altogether, there are about 100
works in his collection.

“It’s my way of time travel. And another
thing — I wanted to teach my children
that when they think of art, they think of
somebody other than their father. Instead
of ‘Oh, that’s what my dad does’, they
can look at art and think, ‘Oh, that’s
Magritte.’ So they have lots more sense of
opportunity in their own lives.

“You know, what’s really nice here is
that Damien and I can have a dialogue.
Boy with Pony is having a dialogue with
Picasso. Picasso is having a dialogue with
El Greco. El Greco is having a dialogue
with the art before him. This is what it’s
about. This type of cultural linkage.”

And with that, Koons and Hirst give
each other a mental hug and head off
downstairs, where the marvellous display
they have created together awaits them,
and you. 

Jeff Koons, Newport Street Gallery,
London SE1, until Oct 16.