

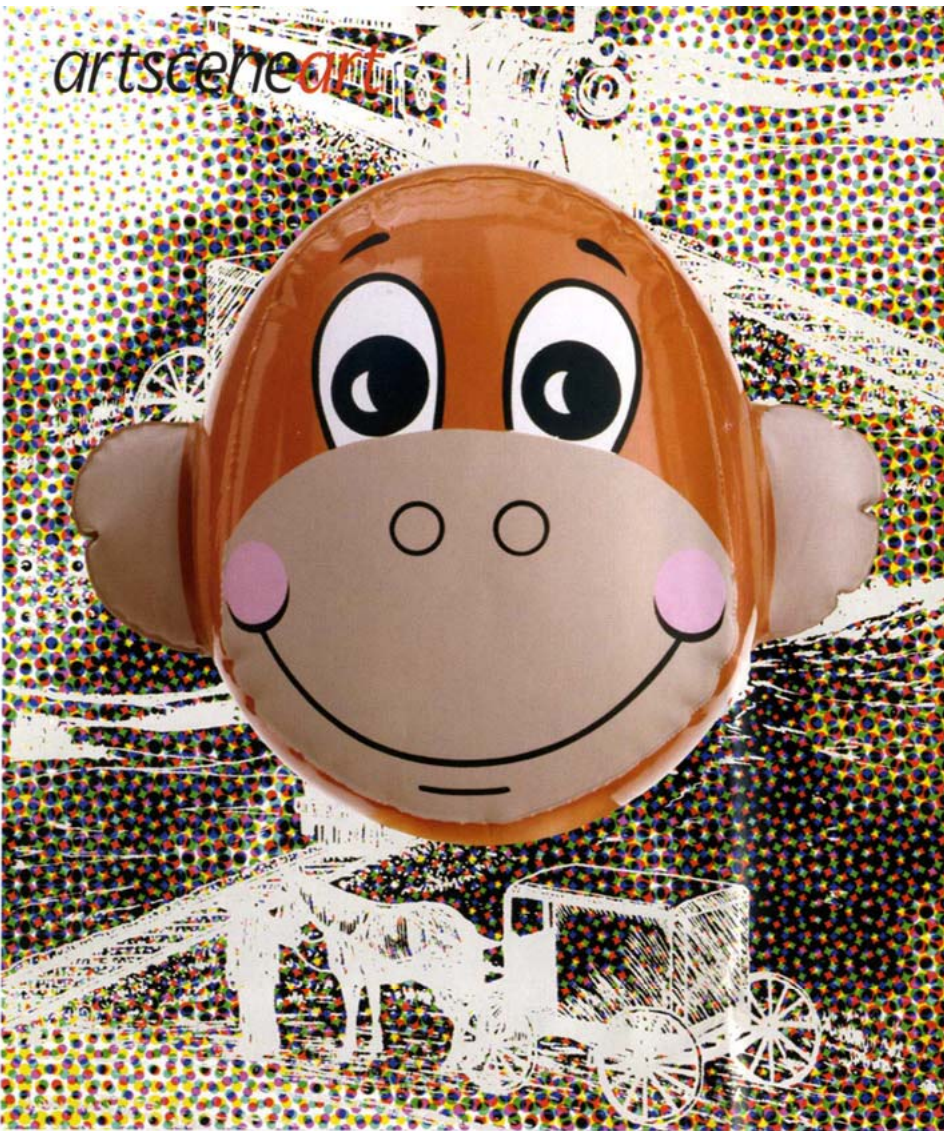


Loony Koons

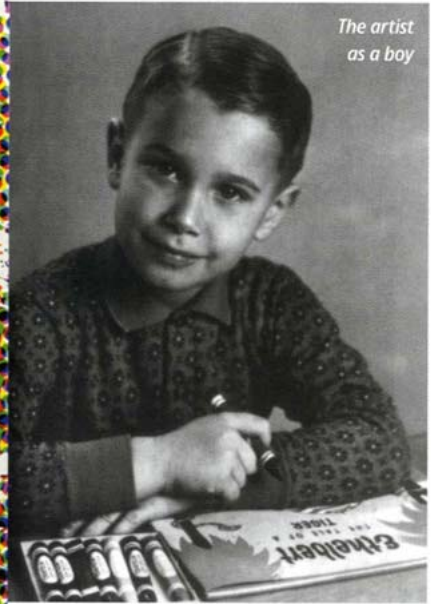
Just how wacky is the world of surrealist superstar Jeff Koons? Camilla Long hangs with him in Manhattan

Fifteen years ago, Jeff Koons had it all. At just 37, he was the toast of the art world, the small-town boy and former Wall Street broker who'd shot to stardom with his unapologetic use of slogans and sexual imagery. Hailed as the artistic bridge between Warhol and Hirst, his playful, kitschy work – balloon-dog sculptures, saccharine depictions of puppies, children's toys and even Michael Jackson's chimp – was lapped up by private collectors and museums alike. And in his new wife, La Cicciolina, the controversial Italian porn star and human blow-up doll, he had found his ultimate muse. Their artistic collaboration *Made in Heaven* – a series of explicit images of the couple in the grips of energetic sex, including a work entitled *Ilona's Asshole* – caused a global sensation, kicked off the YBA movement and turned Koons into an international art superstar.

And then he lost it all. The couple split up, and an acrimonious divorce case ensued. Cicciolina – the Hungarian-born Ilona Staller, whose nickname, 'little pinchable one,' derived from her tendency to call everyone 'cicciolino' – stormed back to Italy, taking with her their toddler son Ludwig. Koons responded by snatching him back to New York, whereupon a dramatic custody battle unfolded, in which he – rather richly – submitted pornographic tapes of Staller, ▷



Monkey Train
(Dots), 2007



The artist
as a boy

One painting of a lobster contains 251 shades of red. Not that Koons gets his hands dirty – he just oversees. 'These objects are exactly how they would be if I painted them myself,' he shrugs. 'I'm overseeing every colour that is made, every stroke, and if I look at something that isn't correct it will be changed. We're really at a point now where people know what's going on and so I don't do many re-dos. Years ago I did re-do, re-do, re-do but it makes no difference,' he says, before estimating his output as 'six and a half pieces a year'. It's surprisingly meagre but then, not everyone gets a Koons. At \$5

million a go, his works only really sell to a select band of private collectors, such as the French billionaire François Pinault, Stephanie Seymour's media-mogul husband, Peter Brant, and real-estate billionaire Eli Broad. He also occasionally produces public art: after the success of 1992's *Puppy*, a 43-foot topiary figure of a dog which was displayed in Bilbao, he is now designing a 161-foot scale model of a train dangling from a crane, which will emit soft choo-chooing noises in downtown Los Angeles. 'There's a lot of sexual metaphor in a train,' he murmurs. 'It's absolutely beautiful engineering. There's not one aspect of waste in steam engines. There's always a connection, always re-used... so you can get more power.'

Quiet and elliptical, Koons is not immediately easy to understand. On the surface he seems accessible, polite and obliging but his answers are generally long statements full of art terminology, and all rounded off with a wide, quizzical smile. Physically, he resembles a ventriloquist's dummy. Asked if he always wanted to be famous, his response is: 'I always wanted to be able to participate.' He eventually admits: 'I wanted to be famous, yes. I wanted to be known for powerful work... something to which you can feel connected.'

He is not particularly worried about how his work is received. At least not these days: 'I make my work >

< including one with her having sex with a snake (tail first) as evidence of her unfitness as a mother. In the event, he lost a fortune in lawyers' fees, and to this day he has not seen his son.

'I've been unable to succeed in getting my son home,' he says of Ludwig, who is named after Mad King Ludwig of Bavaria. Father and son talk on the phone but 'it's... difficult to get through,' says Koons, who has just this morning returned from the Italian consulate. 'We've received a tremendous injustice from Italy. The European Court has ruled in our favour, that our son should be returned immediately. It's a very painful situation. I can't have a relationship with my son – hopefully when he comes of age he can get an understanding of everything that took place and we can spend time together and have a real father-son relationship. He's 14 now. When he turns 18, I hope the first thing he'd want to do is get on a plane.' He pauses. 'I prefer not to dwell on it too much but, in general, if I didn't have my art around me, I really could have lost total faith in humanity.'

Instead, the prince of post-pop art threw himself into work. His scrubbed white studio in Manhattan's meatpacking district is now a hive of industry: some 80 assistants mix paints, spray inflatable animals and design art on computers. It's a painstaking operation.

He showed tapes of his ex-wife having sex with a snake





Made in Heaven.
Ilona on top (Rosa
background), 1990

so we tend to do a lot of events that bring in creativity and impact, very strong visual images,' he says. He met his wife, the artist Justine Wheeler, a couple of years after he broke up with Cicciolina. 'We met in New York City,' he says. 'A friend of hers worked for me, and I was at a bar one evening. We've been together since then.' Was it love at first sight? 'Yes, we've been together since that time, he says in his typically measured way. 'We have a lot of respect for each other.' Together they have three children: 'Sean, five, Kurt, three, and Blake who is one. They're really fantastic, wonderful kids,' says Koons, who, apart from Ludwig, also has a daughter Shannon, 32, from an early fling. She has just made Koons a grandfather with the birth of her first daughter, Kayla. 'Sean very much wants to be an artist,' he says of his second son. 'He's five, and his work is amazing. He's actually going to be taking over one part of the studio

< because it brings expanse to my parameters and expands me. It's about what my parameters might be, my connection with the community. I'm trying to create something that will be shared equally and that would be viewed no differently by others and hopefully you would look at in a very similar way to me. I like to work with different aspects of sexuality in my work because sexuality is one of the first segregators in any type of communication.'

But then Koons has always been known for his ad-speak, the smooth salesman's patter which so influenced other art dealers, such as the supremely successful Jay Jopling. After all, this is the man who once chopped up one of his paintings into 500 pieces as part of a shop-opening stunt, after all. Even today, at 52, thin and wiry and in jeans, trainers and a zip-up jumper, he is more internet millionaire than enfant terrible. 'I can only make the work I can,' he says. 'My art is not in an object, it's in the viewer. It's a chemical reaction, a chemical, physical sensation... I think my new paintings are fantastic.'

His punchy new show – 24 vast canvases which will go on display at the Gagosian in June – revolves around monkey faces, Led Zeppelin-style dots and Incredible Hulks. They are bright, fearsome, impressive. 'Hulks have a raw sense of testosterone energy,' he says, flipping through a plastic booklet of print-outs of the work. 'They look like guardian gods in an eastern kind of way – protectors. The exact vocabulary will come but right now we're calling the show *HulkElvis...*'

One of the pieces is based on a doodle by his three-year-old son, Kurt. 'The gestural painting is one that my son Kurt did,' he says. 'He's three. It's so free, there's no convention in any manner, you could be speaking to Kurt and asking him what he's doing there and he'd look back and still do it. It's an uncontrolled gesture and it's just beautiful.' For Koons, fatherhood informs his work at almost every level. 'My wife and I love spending time with our children and

Ex-wife Ilona
with their
son Ludwig



His desk is strewn with toys, teddies, pictures

at some point. He's very gifted and it's just something he wants to do, although his interests are not commercial. He just enjoys making gestures and he does it all the time. There's a moment he doesn't do something, he'll pick up a crayon or markers.'

Unsurprisingly, Koons's own childhood – as well as his childishness – plays a large part in his output. His desk is strewn with toys (collapsible donkeys, teddies, an Incredible Hulk model in cellophane) and pictures of his children. Elsewhere in the studio lie Amish-style toy carts, a nod to his upbringing in Pennsylvania. 'I knew I wanted to be an artist probably about the age of three,' he says. 'My parents showed me attention for something that my older sister couldn't do. I felt that it gave me a sense of self in the family, so I continued, although I never knew what art was. I spent all my time in art classes and at college, where I started to get a sense of the connection with the philosophy and theology, and how amazingly connected art was to all the disciplines in the world.'

The son of Henry, a designer, and Gloria, a homemaker, Koons – 'the name was originally German' – enjoyed a conventional Fifties childhood. 'You're a product of your biology and environment and how you respond to your environment and your biology,' he says. 'I had a very aesthetic father – an interior >

◁ designer – and a mother who was very politically orientated. My grandfather was a treasurer of York, a county clerk,' he concludes, with a note of pride.

Koons attended the Maryland Institute College of Art before moving to New York, where he worked as a commodities broker to fund his art. He made his mark in 1985 with *Three Ball 50/50 Tank* – an installation of three basketballs suspended in a fishtank. His 1988 show *Banalities* – which culminated with the gold-leaf sculpture *Michael Jackson and Bubbles* – established him as a major player, a pop-art provocateur with a preoccupation for product and advertising. 'I'm also influenced by Dada and surrealism,' he adds. In fact Koons was so obsessed with surrealism that he even visited one of his icons, Salvador Dali, in the Plaza Hotel.

His life now is a picture of Upper East Side respectability. 'I enjoy New York,' he says. 'I've lived in Munich and I love the southern German landscape but New York is really where our home is. We're really committed here, after 18 years.' Time off is 'with my children,' he says. 'We have a farm in Pennsylvania so we go there a lot on our weekends. Animals... this weekend we'll go snowboarding.'

As for downtime, he is not particularly interested in other media besides art: 'I've seen *Hulk*, but I'm not really interested in films,' he says. 'I get so bored when I'm watching a great film and I'm thinking do I have

to listen to this Hollywood narrative?' But then, the vacuum-packed world that Koons inhabits is often impervious to external influences. 'I tend to just read the immediate press, newspapers,' he says, looking slightly confused, 'but I live very much in a visual world and my experiences in my artwork come from a personal and visual experience.'

When asked what other young artists he admires, 'Someone who I think is underrated is...' he pauses, perplexed. 'Gary, who are some younger artists I've been interested in recently? Damien Hirst. Timothy... but these are all older people. I saw a drawing last night that I thought was phenomenal.'

Koons firmly believes that now is the most productive time of his life. He's also bringing out a new book, the first since 1992's *Jeff Koons Handbook*, a nearly comprehensive survey of his work, *Koons*. 'I'm doing exactly what I want to do, I'm focusing on what I want to do,' he says. 'There was a moment during the Nineties when I was involved in the custody battle situation with my son that I wish there was a greater flow of work, but there hasn't been a period where I haven't felt connected with my work.'

And how would he like to be remembered? 'Oh, that I don't really care too much about,' he smiles, sphinx-like. 'Other than my children say they felt they had a good dad.' How very cute, how very Koons. □
Koons is published by Taschen (taschen.com).

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