

Interview

# THE WIZARD OF ODD

He has made millions from casts of inflatable toys, starred in his own porn film poster and come back from a career low which left him broke, if not mad. Now, on the eve of two major London shows, **Gaby Wood** meets Jeff Koons – and his 70 assistants – in his Manhattan factory studio. Portrait **Todd Selby**

Plastic fantastic: (facing page) Koons in his vast studio complex; and, above right, Pink Panther, from the Banality series

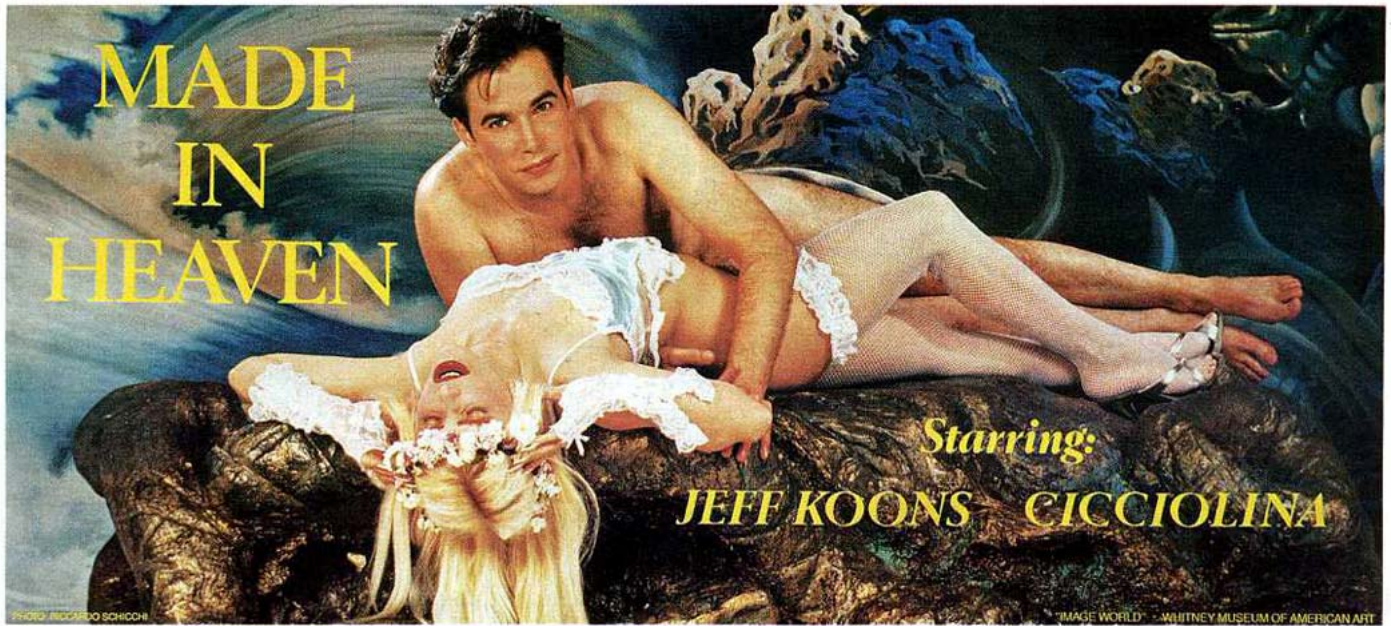


★ On a blustery day towards the end of the New York winter, I wander up to a door I assume must lead to Jeff Koons's studio. The area is a wasteland on the western edge of Manhattan – near a storage facility, signs for the Lincoln tunnel to New Jersey, and a shady private investigator's office – but by the look of things inside I can't be entirely wrong: when I go in there is an acid-green blow-up toy on a piece of equipment resembling an operating table. No sooner am I there, however, than a person in a lab coat and surgical mask shoos me out again and directs me to another part of the building. I feel as though I have accidentally walked in on a secret.

A few doors down, the art world legend himself is sitting in an office with his Taschen editor, going through hundreds of pages of proofs for his forthcoming monograph. He asks one of his assistants to show me around the studio while he finishes. I am still wondering if there was something in the earlier space I shouldn't have seen, when I am led into a vast warehouse that distracts me with its extraordinary assault on the senses. Koons's newest paintings, in various states of completion, cover every wall – they are enormous, graphic canvases with cartoon characters and found images laid over one another – a blow-up monkey head here, an Incredible Hulk there, a peg-leg pirate collaged over a train colliding with a horse and cart. Plaster casts lie around – of party balloons twisted into the shape of swans, and huge aluminium caterpillars are being painted to look like the inflatable toys on which they've been modelled. The casts can take six months to prepare for painting, my guide informs me, and the canvases take up to two years to complete.

Several years ago, Koons developed a colour-by-numbers system, so that each of his 70 highly trained assistants could execute his super-realist canvases and sculptures as if they had been done by a single hand. One team identifies every area of a digital printout that requires its own colour – there are no gradations, and no room for interpretation; every distinct shade is identified, mapped out and given a number. Another team then mixes each of these colours, and passes them on to a third team: the painters. No paint leaves the colouring table before being approved by Koons.

In the corridor that leads from the painting studio into the sculpture one, there is a column of old-fashioned punchcards, with which the Koons employees clock on and off. The effect is somewhere between a 19th-century factory and a Huxley-esque take on the future, and I find myself wondering what it is they are actually producing. Unlike Andy Warhol's factory, this one is producing one-of-a-kind works (the process is industrial, but the product is unique); and unlike that factory, it's not peopled by transvestites or addicts or musicians. There is an aura of the laboratory, as the brightly coloured ▶



**'HE BRINGS THE ROMANCE AND BEAUTY BACK IN. HIS WORK IS GLORIOUSLY HOPEFUL IN A WORLD THAT A LOT OF THE TIME CAN LOOK AND FEEL PRETTY NASTY,' SAYS DAMIEN HIRST**

◀ talismans of childhood are juxtaposed with images of a woman's open legs, or transformed from tokens easily punctured into unbreakable statues of steel. The Hulk looms large, repeated across many walls. What is Koons preserving and cross-breeding? Nostalgia, sex, childhood, fetishism? Some brave new self?

One answer might be: don't look to Jeff Koons for an answer. The gee-whizz wizard behind all this is the most boyish of 52-year-olds. He wears a daily uniform of loose black jeans and trainers with a zip-up top, and looks more like a genial children's TV presenter than a glossy art world bad boy. When he speaks, he veers between an earnest art-critical monotone and a trippy, childlike amazement. True, few children say such things as, 'I see my work as essentially conceptual'; on the other hand, few adults respond to a question about what constitutes perfect happiness with the words: 'A full box of cereal and a full carton of milk.'

Sometimes he manages to combine these two things to truly perplexing effect. When speaking about his latest planned public work – a fully functioning replica of a 500,000lb 1943 steam engine suspended from a crane above people's heads outside the Los Angeles County Art Museum – he gives a blow-by-blow deadpan description. 'It keeps gaining momentum until it's going full speed...' he says drearily. 'Woo-woo-woo-woo-woo-woo-woo – very climactic, very orgasmic.' Later on, Koons brings up on a computer screen an image from his notorious *Made in Heaven* series of 1991 – in which he featured himself naked alongside, inside and on top of his then-wife, the Hungarian-

Italian porn star and MP La Cicciolina. The image he chooses is 'Silver Shoes', a full-frontal portrait of La Cicciolina's genitals, framed by a pair of white fishnet stockings. 'I like this one, I think it's nice,' Koons says innocently, before going on to point out the least salient thing about it: 'There's a lot of white.'

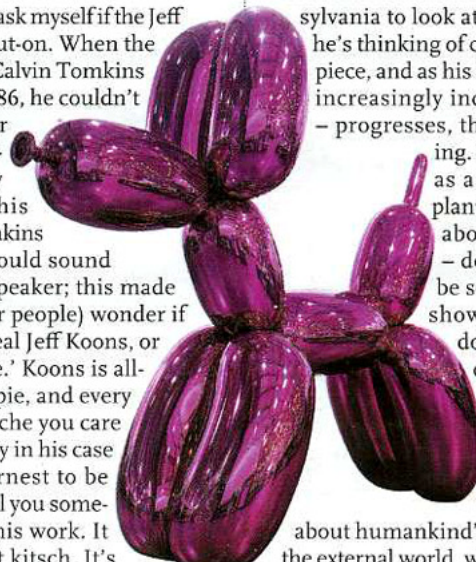
I am not the first to ask myself if the Jeff Koons persona is a put-on. When the *New Yorker* art critic Calvin Tomkins first met Koons in 1986, he couldn't make out whether Koons was 'amazingly naive or slyly performative'. 'In his soft-spoken way,' Tomkins wrote recently, 'he could sound like a motivational speaker; this made me (and a lot of other people) wonder if I was talking to the real Jeff Koons, or if there even was one.' Koons is all-American, sweet-as-pie, and every other down-home cliché you care to come up with – only in his case these appear too earnest to be clichés, and he will tell you something similar about his work. It is not ironic. It is not kitsch. It's optimistic. It exists in order to make people feel better about themselves. It – and all other objective art from Duchamp to Lichtenstein – is about 'self-acceptance'.

While sincerity may be his style, Koons

**Porn again: (from top) with his wife La Cicciolina in 1989 in a work that sealed his notoriety but started a career downturn; Balloon Dog (Magenta)**

does have a magician's facility for not responding to any questions. I don't mean he doesn't speak – oh, does he speak – but he appears to be engaged in a conversation with himself, to the point where after an hour or so it seems almost perverse to ask him anything more at all. He tells me he is tired after driving to Pennsylvania to look at a 19th-century canon he's thinking of co-opting as a sculpture piece, and as his lulling speech – and its increasingly indeterminate meaning – progresses, the sleepiness is catching. Take this, for instance, as a riff on his 12m-high plant sculpture, *Puppy*: 'It's about control, and chaos – do you want to serve or be served? Do you want to show a lot of love to your dog or do you want your dog to bring you the paper? Do you want to show your neighbour the same kind of respect that you'd like for yourself? It's about humankind's relationship to itself, the external world, whether there's a higher power outside of oneself...'

Too verbose to be oracular, too random to be eloquent, Koons nevertheless releases the occasional pearl of sense. The real readymades he's interested in, he says, are not the objects, but the people reflected in them. Inflatable toys, which have influenced him since the beginning of his career, 'turn everything inside out. They're dense on the outside, and ▶



PREVIOUS PAGE: BERNHARD SCHAUER/TASCHEN; THIS PAGE: HAMBURGER KUNSTHALE, HAMBURG; JEFF KOONS STUDIO

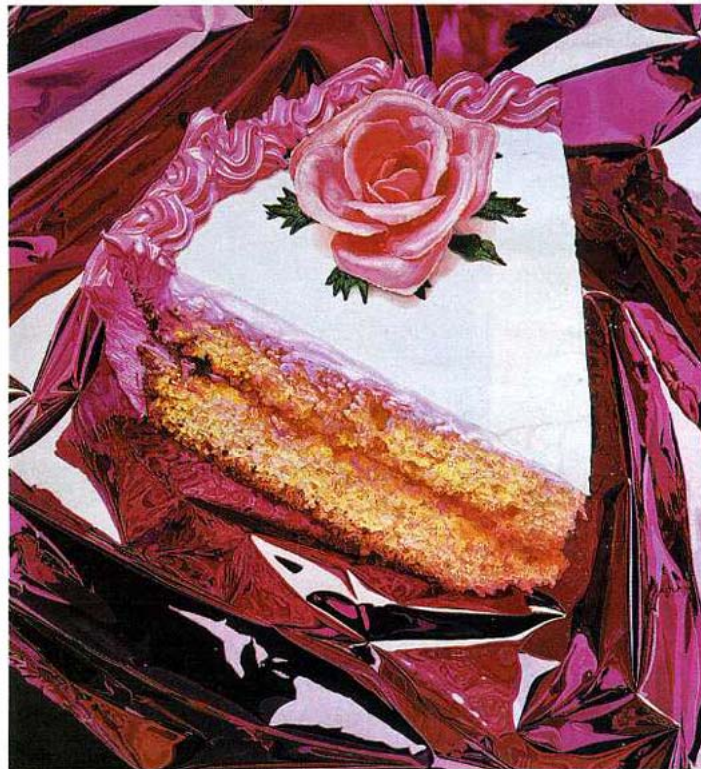
◀ everything that's ethereal is on the inside. We inhale air, that's a sign of life, and when you exhale your last breath that's a sign of death. When an inflatable has a hole in it, it's deadly.'

Koons has remained a phenomenon for almost 30 years. Two things you can't take away from him are the consistently high market value of his work and the extraordinary influence he's had on younger artists. Damien Hirst tells me: 'Koons is a massive influence on me and my whole generation.' Hirst remembers seeing the *New York Art Now* show at the Saatchi Gallery as a student in 1988, and being inspired by it to put together the now mythic *Freeze* exhibition, which launched the careers of the YBAs.

Koons's stainless steel *Rabbit* was a centrepiece of that Saatchi show, an inspired cast of a blow-up toy holding a carrot, which drew gushing comparisons with artistic and cultural touchstones from Brancusi to *Playboy*. He was already known for a series of Hoovers in vitrines, and basketballs half-suspended in water – a project he'd researched with the help of Nobel Prize-winning physicist Richard Feynman. This was Koons in his earliest, most thoughtful incarnation. Seeing his work then, Hirst says, 'I couldn't get my head around its simple beauty at first; I was stunned, the bunny knocked my socks off and the Hoovers were a stroke of pure genius. As an artist I always look for objects to represent our times and Jeff got it right with those pieces. A million out of 10.'

**Koons is from York, Pennsylvania.** The son of Gloria, whose family had connections to local politics, and Henry, who ran an interior design firm, Jeff discovered that drawing was something all of his own – something he could do better than his sister Karen. 'It gave me a sense of myself. It gave me a place in the family. I never knew what art was, and every day I continued to learn what its possibilities were.'

If he didn't know about art, he knew about a certain kind of aesthetics: every time he visited his father's design showroom, it would be transformed into an entirely different setting – what was a baroque bedroom one week might be a modern, leather-chaired family room the next. 'I became aware of how your emotions can change according to colour, tex-



**THE IMAGE KOONS CHOOSES TO SHOW ME IS A FULL-FRONTAL OF LA CICCIOLOINA'S GENITALS, FRAMED BY A PAIR OF STOCKINGS. 'THIS ONE'S NICE,' HE SAYS INNOCENTLY**

ture and design,' he explains. As his painting skills improved, he would copy old masters and his father would sell them in his showroom. But Koons was also, as a child, extremely adept at selling things himself. He started out by proffering sweets door to door, and liked it so much he moved on to wrapping paper and ribbons – his parents would drop him off in a

**Midas touch: (from top) Michael Jackson and Bubbles; and Cake, from the expensive, emotional series Celebration, over which Koons went bust**

community of a hundred houses or so, and pick him up later. 'I loved it,' Koons says earnestly, 'because I enjoyed knocking on the door and not knowing who was going to answer it, what the environment was going to look like, what type of odour was going to come from the living room...'

Eventually, all of this would come together – the salesmanship, the shiny wrapping paper, the feel for the knick-knacks in people's living rooms and the desire to appeal to a broad swathe of strangers. But first, Koons went to art school in Chicago. At that point, the only artist he'd taken up passionately was Salvador Dali, and, as it happened, his mother was able to track Dali down at his hotel in New York. Koons, then 17, went to visit him, and Dali took him under his wing. They went to an exhibition of Dali's work together and Dali showed him a painting for which Koons recently bought the study: *Fifty Abstract Pictures Which as Seen from Two Yards Change into Three Lenins Masquerading as Chinese and as Seen From Six Yards Appear as the Head of a Royal Bengal Tiger*. It looks exactly like the layered, kaleidoscopic work Koons is doing now.

I ask Koons if what appealed to him about Dali was his character – the figure of the artist as self-made myth – or the work itself. He says he's always had a lot of respect for 'different images Dali has done. I always felt he was treated unfairly. Just because Breton went against Dali he got labelled a little bit, but he was a very generous person.' (Breton dubbed Dali 'Avida Dollars', an anagram of his name and an expression of his purported greed.) 'My experience with him made me feel I could do anything – you can have a life and art can be really at the core of your life.'

After art school – so the story goes – Koons heard Patti Smith singing on the radio and, instantly compelled by the Seventies New York music scene, hitched a ride to Manhattan the next day. A friend from college worked in the music business, and the evening he arrived he ended up having dinner with Talking Heads frontman David Byrne. At night, he hung out in bars with other artists, such as Julian Schnabel and David Salle; by day, he had a job at the membership desk of the Museum of Modern Art.

'When I first spied him I have to say I had a good laugh,' Ingrid Sischy, editor-in-chief of ▶

◀ Interview magazine, recalls in the new Taschen book on Koons. She was working at MoMA, and Koons was an in-house legend. He'd dress up in clown-like clothes and get people to sign up for membership. At home on the Lower East Side he turned the inflatable toys he wore around his neck into the core of his art. 'When I first came to New York I was making paintings,' he says, 'and my paintings became so three-dimensional that I took them off the wall. And when I did, I put two inflatables side by side on a table – an elephant and a panda. That was in 1978.' Those toys formed his first exhibited work. Koons left MoMA and worked as a commodities trader until he found a gallery and could fund all his work without the day job.

In 1988, he became a bona fide art world star. His show, *Banality*, opened in three galleries simultaneously – in New York, Chicago and Cologne. He showed giant painted porcelain and wooden figurines which have since become widely celebrated: a blonde woman embraced by the Pink Panther, a gold-painted Michael Jackson with his chimp, a piece called *Fait d'Hiver*, in which a mesh-clad woman is glued to the ground as a pig and two penguins approach her head. The sculptures were funny, grotesque, suburban, and seemed to be the pinnacle of what Koons had been saying about the times in which he lived – the commodities, the celebrity, the mass-kitsch.

After the *Banality* show, Koons received a call from the Whitney Museum. They were putting together a show based on the power of the media and wanted to give Koons some billboard space in Manhattan that would be part of it. Koons was keen: his idea was to use the billboard in order to publicise himself – as a movie star. And the easiest way to become a movie star was to do porn. He had been looking at men's magazines in the course of doing the *Banality* work, because he wanted to give his production people examples of how to paint flesh. One of the images he'd liked was from *Stern* magazine, of a woman in a mesh dress – he'd used it as the basis for *Fait d'Hiver*. Then one day, at a service station in Italy, he saw the same woman – Ilona Staller or La Cicciolina – in a porn magazine. He was fascinated. 'I'd never seen erotic images based in Eastern European culture,' he says. 'They tend to have strange, surrealistic fantasy backgrounds. So I was very attracted to the sets, but I was



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also,' he adds, 'very attracted to Ilona.'

He wanted to do a billboard in exactly this idiom, based on Masaccio's 15th-century painting, *The Expulsion from the Garden of Eden*. He planned to call it *Made in Heaven*, starring Jeff Koons and La Cicciolina as a one-off ad for a nonexistent film. 'So I thought, I'll just basically collage myself into these images – I'll ask Ilona to do everything the same – the same sets, same photographer, same film processor, everything the same, except I want to be there, too. So I went to Europe and I met her, and arranged with her manager to do these photo sessions. When we started doing these sessions, you know, she started flirting with me,

Jolly green giants: (from top) Hulk (jungle), one of several paintings of the cartoon hero; and Puppy, a topiary sculpture outside the Guggenheim, Bilbao

and before I knew it we'd developed a relationship.'

And before anyone else knew it, they were married and posing in front of glass sculptures of themselves in tantric positions in the middle of the Sonnabend Gallery in New York. What became the *Made in Heaven* series was by far Koons's most controversial work, and while it brought him to new heights of notoriety, it also signalled the beginning of a certain end for him. The couple had a son, Ludwig (now 14), and when they divorced soon afterwards he became the subject of an intense transcontinental custody dispute.

Koons still hopes that when Ludwig turns 18 he will jump on a plane and come and see him. While he waited, beginning back in 1993, he embarked on a body of work that was designed to celebrate Ludwig's return. The *Celebration* series – a set of hyper-real paintings and giant sculptures of balloon animals, gift wrap and piles of Play-Doh – took so long and cost so much to produce that Koons went bust, if not entirely mad. Koons was accused of pathological degrees of perfectionism, but he shuns this: 'I could have crumpled up 20 pieces of paper and said, "Here it is," but I didn't want to do that,' Koons says now. 'They pre-sold the work before they knew exactly what it was going to cost to deliver something. So hypothetically, if they sold something for \$10, and then we found out it was going to cost \$1,000 to make... we ended up having a lot of loss. People started to panic instead of just funding the work.'

It seems ironic – or perhaps all of Koons's work is double-edged like this – that such a celebratory series should have been made at such a time of anxiety. 'The only thing I had to hang on to was my artwork, to maintain a sense of humanity, and trust in humanity,' Koons confirms. Fifteen years later, the *Celebration* work is still incomplete, and Koons is continuing with it, despite having translated many of its ideas into later shows.

One of the people who rescued *Celebration* was Justine Wheeler, who came to work in the studio in 1995. Koons and Wheeler are now married, and have three sons of five, three and one. Koons also has a 32-year-old daughter, Shannon, who was given up for adoption on the strict instructions of his college girlfriend's parents, and has since come back into his life.

Two years ago, Justine asked Koons's old ▶



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Family ties: (top) La Cicciolina, the mother of his son Ludwig (now 14); and, below, Koons and wife Justine



◀ friend and gallerist Jeffrey Deitch to organise a surprise 50th birthday party for him, and the occasion seemed to cement his success. His professional comeback, which had begun around 1999, when his *Pink Panther* sculpture sold for just under \$2m, was secure. Sonnabend took him back, and Larry Gagosian now represents him, too. At the party, it was reported, guests who had been engaged in long-running feuds all made up with one another, and for the evening at least it seemed that Koons's whole philosophy of art might well be on the money. 'You think it's about performance,' he says, 'and actually art is not about performance. It's about self-acceptance.'

Critic Calvin Tomkins has argued that there's not necessarily a relationship between what Koons says and what he does, but I think this may be letting him off lightly. Is it really fair to take him seriously if he shows you an inflatable monkey head and then uses it to compare himself to painter Francis Picabia? ('I like to make a lot of references to art history in general,' Koons tells me, 'because it gives a sense of warmth and a tie to humanity.')

When art critic David Sylvester interviewed Koons in 2000, and asked him about his recent methods of production, he began by comparing his factory to that of Raphael and Rubens. But Sylvester pointed out that unlike Raphael or Rubens, Koons did not actually do any of the painting. Koons replied that he wanted to 'grow as much as possible as an artist, instead of being tied down in the execution of the work.'

Art historian Hal Foster warns me to be wary. In answer to the question of what's being made in his factory, he suggests that Koons 'might just be in the business of mystification – of trying to confuse people precisely through the short circuit of art, commerce, factory, hype. I think that's really how he functions now – he is his own best work. He sees that as Warholian – you know, Warhol became his own best art object – in other words, it's a performance and the work is secondary, even though it's what passes through the market.'

But Damien Hirst thinks Koons has done something crucially different from Warhol – that all his curiously humourless talk about humanity is actually an accurate description of the way the work functions. 'We all owe a debt to Warhol,' Hirst explains, 'for making it OK for artists to do many things: to celebrate crap! To enjoy junk! To make money, for fuck's sake! But Jeff picked up the ball and ran with it. He brings the romance and beauty back in – something Warhol maybe let go of. His work is gloriously hopeful in a world that a lot of the time can look and feel pretty nasty. Like all great artists he's taken us to a new level, and to me he's easily as important as Warhol.' ★

The Taschen monograph *Jeff Koons* is published in August. Two exhibitions of Koons's work, *Hulk Elvis* and *Popeye*, are showing at the two Gagosian Gallery spaces in London until 27 July ([www.gagosian.com](http://www.gagosian.com))