

Face to face with the incredible hulk of American contemporary art

Take a team of assistants, 24 paintings, three metal monkeys and a visit from Damien Hirst: it's the new exhibition by Jeff Koons. **Alastair Sooke** reports

It's a sticky afternoon at the start of June and London's Gagosian Gallery is almost as busy as the gridlock-snarled roads surrounding King's Cross station a stone's throw away. There are a couple of days to go before a major new show of 24 paintings by the American artist Jeff Koons opens to the public, and stress levels are running high.

Men shuttle between the gallery and a truck outside, shunting orange crates containing the oil paintings. Five of Koons's assistants stand in front of one that has already been hung, a swooning fusion of colours in which a looping red line coils across a background of Lichtenstein-like dots. Copying an A4 printout of what the work should look like, they dab at the canvas with tiny brushes, applying finicky touches.

In the middle of the mayhem is Koons, fielding calls from his Manhattan studio, which is currently staffed with around 85 people. "We want everything to be perfect," he tells me with a genial grin, before murmuring into his mobile again.

For such a notorious perfectionist, the artist – dressed in a drab grey shirt and shapeless jeans – seems remarkably down-at-heel. Koons is now 52, his beaming moon-face has lost its

boyishness, and that celebrated salesman's smile feels ever so slightly strained.

As he shuffles between galleries, it's hard to believe that this is the smart-talking former Wall Street trader who created a batch of controversial work during the 1980s that earned him worldwide fame. His pieces from that era continue to fetch big money: at last month's contemporary art sales in New York, one of his Hoovers enclosed in Plexiglas sold for more than \$2 million.

When you turn from the artist to his new paintings, though, you're confronted at once with the Koonsian chutzpah of old. *Hulk Elvis*, as the series is called, is a splendid body of new work. The presiding motif is a photorealist rendering of an inflatable toy in the shape of the raging comic-book character, the Incredible Hulk. The bulging green meathead roars out of the canvas in a fist-clenched pose that Koons compares to Andy Warhol's screen-prints of Elvis Presley (hence the show's title). It is, as Koons puts it, "a very high-testosterone body of work".

Every canvas in the exhibition – which sold out long before it opened – is layered with images and dots and delirious brushwork. Monkey heads, trains, horses,

carriages, silhouettes of Led Zeppelin and delicate illustrations from an 18th-century Japanese erotic poem are all visible. The overall effect is bewildering, but it's also a knock-out: *Hulk Elvis* is rampant, thrilling.

"I like things that are visceral," Koons says, "so I wanted to make strong, heroic paintings. I think it's a very mature body of work. I'm really proud of it."

After planning the composition of each painting using a computer, Koons delegated their execution to his army of assistants. But he's adamant that this is effectively the same as if he had painted them himself – just quicker. "I provide my assistants with source material that they duplicate," he explains. "All of the colours are pre-mixed, so there's no subjective aspect of one person mixing something a little more red, and somebody else making it more blue. These works are exactly the way they would be if I made every mark myself."

Pinning the artist down on the series's precise significance, though, is tricky. Perhaps the Hulk represents America, which has adopted an aggressive, Hulk-like stance abroad in the four years since Koons began the series? Certainly, the paintings grapple with American iconography – one of them depicts the country's Liberty

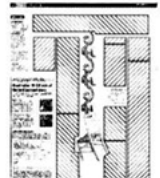
Bell, which supposedly summoned the citizens of Philadelphia to hear the Declaration of Independence.

Koons wrinkles his nose before switching his bland smile back on. "You know, I never get involved in political things that way," he says. "I like to think the work is more international than that. When you get into specific political dialogues, it limits the work."

Perhaps, then, the Hulk represents Koons's own rage? Over the past few years, he has made no secret of the anger he bears towards his former wife Ilona Staller, the Hungarian-Italian porn star turned politician, aka "La Cicciolina".

The couple married in 1991 after working on a sexually explicit series of images called *Made in Heaven*. They had a son together but while they were divorcing, Staller took Ludwig, now 14, away to Italy. Today Koons is denied access to his child. Since the early 1990s, he has been working on *Celebration*, a series of monumental sculptures and paintings in honour of his son.

"I really don't get to see Ludwig any more, which is a terrible situation," he says.



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"But the *Hulk Elvis* paintings are just what they are. I can speak about certain narratives that I see within the work – but, you know, the viewer can find their own narrative. As objects, the paintings aren't important. The art happens inside the viewer."

Koons is far more prepared to unpack the art-historical references within the works. "All the dots are homage to Roy Lichtenstein," he says before walking over to another canvas. "And that vaginal shape refers to Gustave Courbet's painting *The Origin of the World* [a study of female genitalia]."

Pausing before one of the more abstract landscapes in which a silhouetted tree-trunk sprouts from a couple of rocks, Koons says, "That's a reference to one of my own paintings called *Ilona's Asshole*. The rocks are testicles."

The painting in question is an X-rated image from *Made in Heaven*, which drew stalk-eyed hordes when it was exhibited in New York in 1991. Koons insists that the series, which depicts Staller dressed in white lingerie in a number of explicit clinches with the artist, is not pornographic. "It was innocent," he says emphatically. "It was really about purity – about acceptance of the body."

His comment provides a key to understanding his career. A great deal of his work evokes innocence – but at the same time feels saturated with sex. One of his most famous works, the stainless steel *Rabbit* from 1986, embodies this Koonsian paradox: a shiny replica of a children's blow-up toy, it plays on the fact that bunnies have erotic associations, too (think *Playboy*).

Over at Gagosian's smaller outlet in Mayfair is a complementary Koons show consisting of four older works from his 2002 *Popeye* series, including *Dog Pool Panty* – a painted-aluminium cast of a children's paddling pool that contains a close-up photograph of bronzed female flesh covered with lace.

"There is nothing more important than sex," Koons declares. "Absolutely nothing. Without sex, we wouldn't have

survival of the species."

Suddenly he breaks off and gazes towards the gallery's entrance. Storming towards us is the stocky figure of Damien Hirst, fresh from the triumphant unveiling of his spectacular £50 million diamond-encrusted skull, trailing his dealer Jay Jopling in his wake.

"I'm a huge fan of Jeff's," Hirst tells me. "The first time I saw his work was in a show at the Saatchi Gallery while I was still at Goldsmiths in the late '80s. Our tutors said that it wasn't art – so we loved it. It just blew me away."

Koons has been called the link between Warhol and Hirst, and he is certainly Hirst's forebear in terms of celebrity and riches. Hirst's pickled tiger shark, suspended in formaldehyde, is indebted to Koons, who presented basketballs floating inside fish tanks in the mid-'80s. So does Hirst acknowledge any artistic debt to Koons?

For a moment the Britart maestro, until now flushed with the day's success, looks taken aback. "Maybe a little bit," he says sheepishly. Then he rummages in his pocket, pulls out a crumpled fiver and offers it to Koons with a cackle, as though cancelling out the debt. Koons, his weary smile still in place, looks befuddled. A fiver? Is that it?

But before the awkwardness of the moment can take hold, Hirst gestures towards the *Hulk Elvis* paintings with a "f***ing brilliant", and the two men – two of the biggest names in contemporary art from the past couple of decades – trundle off around the gallery.

❖ 'Hulk Elvis' and 'Popeye' are at Gagosian's London galleries until July 27. Info: www.gagosian.com. 'Jeff Koons', a limited edition monograph (Taschen, £600), will be published on July 25.