



(ART)

# \*YES, I LOVE GIANT PUPPIES AND PORN STARS DON'T YOU?

Please enjoy the art of Jeff Koons.  
It's very hard to create.  
And even harder to explain by Chris Heath

AT THE LONDON opening party for Jeff Koons's *Hulk: Elvis* show this June—at which Koons, whose older work now regularly goes for seven figures, was presenting twenty-four new paintings—a stranger approached him. The room would soon be streaming with the crowd you'd expect at an event like this—the more upmarket paparazzi, fellow artists (“We love him,” pronounced Damien Hirst with casual authority), collectors and critics, London scenesters, various McCartney daughters—but this early arrival seemed a little more unpredictably disheveled. He carried a plastic bag from a local drugstore, from which he pulled an invitation to the opening, printed on a thick card, and pushed it toward the artist. Rather than treat this as an imposition, Koons took the card and carefully did a drawing, all sweeping lines and curls, on its blank reverse. >>>

( Photographs by MARTIN SCHOELLER )

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Once Koons had moved on, I asked the man for a closer look.

"It's an exploding penis," he suggested, though he seemed to be speculating. "A festive penis." He also told me that the following week he faced eviction from his houseboat and invited me to a protest against this fact, then tucked the Koons drawing into his plastic bag. I inquired what else he had in there and he showed me. "These are the cheapest toothbrushes you can buy," he explained.

When Koons first broke through twenty or so years ago—with works such as his Plexiglas-encased Hoover vacuum cleaners, basketballs suspended in saline solution, and porcelain sculpture of Michael Jackson and his pet chimp Bubbles—there were many skeptics. To the suspicious, his use of the banal and kitsch was some kind of glib art trick, another insubstantial, slick '80s con. (A later series, which pictured Koons in sexually explicit poses with his wife-for-a-while, the Italian porn star Iona Staller, also rankled critics.) But over the years, the potency of Koons's works endured, and other triumphs followed—most notably a series of balloon dogs, moons, and flowers (large metal sculptures that appeared light enough to float away) and the near universally adored *Puppy* (forty feet high, of blossoming flowers).

As this new show's title suggests, many of Koons's latest paintings feature images of the Incredible Hulk, a comic-book icon who had interested Koons little until he came across a Hulk inflatable while visiting a fair with his children and saw the character anew: as both a Western fantasy figure and an Eastern guardian god. The Elvis aspect, Koons said, was suggested by what he saw as the Hulk's Presley-esque pose. As I walked around this new exhibition with him—with its mesmerizing layers and oddly juxtaposed pop symbolism—Koons identified homages to artists from the past and pointed out obscured images of Led Zeppelin in the background of many of the paintings. This was about testosterone, Koons explained, and a reminder of growing up in Pennsylvania as a kid. "Zeppelin was kind of like the very beginning for me being involved in sociology," he said. "Something very powerful."

Koons's own explanations of his art's purpose and power can seem willowy and opaque—"It's about self-acceptance, and when you accept yourself, accept your own history, there's no blockage, there's just transcendence then into the acceptance of others," he told me, for instance. Whenever I pressed him to explain further, I was reminded of something the author Douglas Coupland once said about Koons: "He an-

★ Koons and his assistants construct an aluminum sculpture of an inflatable caterpillar at his New York studio. *Jeff Koons*, a first-of-its-kind limited-edition book that meticulously details Koons's career, is available this month from Taschen.

swers every pointed question with the same beatific smile, like the pope playing poker." But I was never completely sure Koons was playing any kind of poker at all—his body language and demeanor exist in that curious place where hiding everything and hiding nothing seem virtually indistinguishable.

When I asked Koons about the drawing he had done for the bag-carrying man, he said that for years he would draw a flower in such situations, but that very recently he had started doing this new sketch: a landscape of rocks and a tree with foliage wrapped around. I mentioned that the recipient thought it was a festive penis, and Koons nodded—evenly, impassively, inscrutably—and noted that within it there were two rocks, and a tree. "There was a penetration," he agreed, as though quietly puzzled and distantly appalled that anyone could possibly think otherwise, or think anything too much or too little of it.

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