



## POP ART POPEYE

This month, the controversial Jeff Koons opens his first major exhibition in the UK at the Serpentine Gallery, with the focus for his work being a face familiar to us all. *Liat Clark*

A character born out of the Great Depression, Popeye is the emblematic American hero. With unwavering morals and no qualms about resorting to violence when threatened, Popeye symbolised an America that could not be phased by the impending doom of the 1920s. For Koons, *Popeye* represents a catalogue of work that continues to borrow from popular culture. For the Serpentine, and the UK, it is the first major collection of his work shown in a public gallery. The series began in 2002 with Koons' assortment of household objects and inflatable children's toys appearing alongside collages of hyper-real

cartoon imagery, scattered with glimpses of nudes.

Consumerism is always present in Koons' work, putting him in the firing line. *The New Republic's* Mark Stevens called him a "decadent artist... who serves the tacky rich," and a now infamous rant from critic Robert Hughes declared: "Koons' work is so overexposed that it loses nothing in reproduction and gains nothing in the original. Koons is the baby to Andy Warhol's Rosemary."

The cause for all the commotion was Koons' 1988 *Banalities* series, which saw him in magazine advertisements surrounded by images of wealth. Although life and art became a little blurred during these years, nothing is ever what it seems. Koons' work has always rested on a series of unexpected juxtapositions and dual meanings – down to the

inflatable pool toys in *Popeye* displayed in all their psychedelic vulgarity. The metal imitations are transformed with expert brushstrokes to look as penetrable as real plastic, despite their weight.

Koons rescues recognisable objects by altering them, updating Marcel Duchamp's "ready made" concept, developing his own idea of what it means.

"In the mid-1980s I realised I didn't care about objects, I only cared about people. People were really the ready

made and their reaction to something, the value of something, was only the viewer," says Koons.

In recent years, his work has opened up to the masses, with *Puppy* – a giant floral Highland Terrier – installed outside the Bilbao Guggenheim, and *Hanging Heart* appearing in the Palace of Versailles.

The positioning of the latter seemed controversial to some, but what could be more fitting for the birthplace of extravagance than a striking piece that Koons called "overt happiness". At the other end of the spectrum from a disdainful Hughes, Koons sees his works of excess as works of excessive beauty that he wants to share with his public. "I want my work to have a certain charge, and I think that people who view the work like it, that intensity."

Koons' juxtapositions can confuse and unsettle – particularly the constant clash of children's toys and sexual imagery. But for Koons, these images portray innocence: "the most important thing in life is life itself and the continuation of life. So a very profound dialogue in sexuality is just one of the core things of having any involvement within your own life and your own participation with life."

It is this participation that he is constantly attempting to instill in the viewer. In the same way

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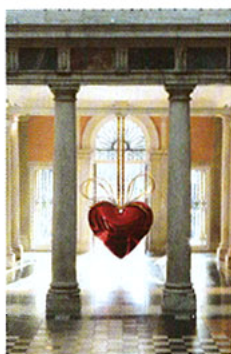
that Koons interconnects the art world in his mind by referring to old masters, Warhol, or even himself, he wants to do the same with the viewer, and for them to in turn, to do so with themselves.

"Art can tie you in sociologically to things – aesthetics, philosophy. Art really is not a very important activity other than connecting you to yourself and then hopefully you have transcendence and it connects you to others." ■

*The Popeye series exhibits from 2 July – 13 September. Serpentine Gallery, Kensington Gardens, W2 (serpentinegallery.org)*

SINCE Jeff Koons' *Hanging Heart* went for £11.3 million at auction in 2007, a handful of contenders have stepped up to threaten his pole position in the race to sell "the most expensive piece of art by a living artist". Lucian Freud broke the record last year, and both artists' feats appeared to be scuppered by Damien Hirst's infamous diamond encrusted skull, reportedly sold for £50 million.

In the rush of investors and collectors clambering for ownership of "the most expensive piece", the crowning title has lost all meaning. Like all things in the art world, the meaning was always transient, and, as the one-upmanship reaches new heights of excess verging on the ridiculous, one figure appears to be an apt reprieve in this time of recession – Popeye.



TOP: JEFF KOONS IN FRONT OF THE PAINTING POPEYE AT HIS CHELSEA STUDIO, NEW YORK 2003 | LEFT: OLIVE OYL, 2003 | HANGING HEART, 1995–2004 | IMAGES COURTESY OF TASCHEN AND SERPENTINE GALLERY