

the conversation

Jeff Koons

Bunnies, balloons, puppies: his playful art, and outrageous prices, have made him a star. On the eve of a major UK show, *Tim Teeman* tries to get a straight answer out of the king of kitsch

Can this squat building with opaque glass door on the fringes of the meatpacking district in New York really be the studio of one of the world's most outrageous artists? It feels too nondescript for the man who has represented sex with his wife in sculptural form; who has made a giant dog from flowers; who began his lucrative artist's life by encasing Hoovers in Plexiglas; and who has made a stainless steel rabbit into a signature piece. But then, a moment later, Jeff Koons is standing alongside an inflatable lobster on a metal table, tickling its stomach to "send it to sleep", in a room that is designed and lit as an operating theatre.

The artist, once married to the Italian porn star La Cicciolina, is about to have his first major English exhibition at the Serpentine Gallery in London. The *Popeye* series includes sculptures and paintings of the cartoon hero and inflatable lobsters and dolphins accessorised with chains, ladders, pots and pans, which "give the pieces a cultural history, give it a past", Koons says. A large *Popeye* portrait is being finished in what can only be described as Koons's factory; in the many rooms are Koons's 120 workers, mostly young, some in white overalls wearing protective masks, others looking like cool art students. They are applying paint to canvases and fiddling with inflatables constructed around meshes. There are giant Incredible Hulks, books of all his works, activity everywhere: Willy Wonka's chocolate factory made art.

In an ante-room a small team of assistants tip-tap at computers: here Koons, 54, designs the works. "Or I doodle, create two or three-dimensional montages. Anything really large gets made in Germany. The paintings and the colour-correcting happens here." His voice is smooth and monotone, like a therapist's. He looks incredibly boyish, his face smooth and toffee-coloured. There is a sharp disconnect between the outrage and flash of the work and its genial, low-key creator.

His love of inflatables comes from being given a Styrofoam swimming device to strap on his back as a child in York, Pennsylvania. "It was like a life-saving tank," he says. "It gave me a great sense of independence. Pool toys are inflatable, just like people. Inflatables really are metaphors for the continuation of life. Anything that is deflated is a symbol of death." Ah, Jeff, let us adjourn to Pseud's Corner. But he means it. We may find the art hilarious (and his critics say vacuous and underpinned by brash self-publicity), but for Koons it is serious. And unless our hour together was poker-faced performance, he is serious about us taking it seriously.

"They always put on the side of the inflatable that it is not a life-saving device, but I find them life-saving — they're able to turn the world inside out. When you think about the internal life of a body there is a density to it: blood, brains, a certain density of thought. The external world is just like air. An inflatable seems empty but there is a density to them."

Koons's father was an interior decorator at a furniture store. "My sister Karen, who's three years older than me, could always do things better than me. When it came to art my parents gave me the sense that it was something I could do better than her. Art gave me a sense of self and identity, which I used to remove anxiety." About what? "There are certain rules of art. I don't like hierarchies." He says he was a happy boy but "wanted more expansion, for life to be vast and exciting. Art has given that to me in letting me be able to trust in myself and turn transcendence into acceptance..." Uh-huh. "The most chemically charged your body can feel is through acceptance." As a young boy, the colour of grass or a shade of pink made him feel "a certain intensity, not just physically but intellectually".

Aren't your works just outrageous fun? "They are big and optimistic," Koons says. "I believe in love and life — in the past, the moment and the future. Art invites you into human history." What does he say those who criticise his work as money-grabbing and sensationalist? "In general I don't look at things like whether people accept my



ART WITH A PORPOISE? No, it's Jeff Koons and an inflatable dolphin in the spray booth of his New York studio and, right, his *Popeye*, oil on canvas, completed in 2003

Inflatables toys are metaphors for the continuation of life. Anything deflated is a symbol of death

work or don't get my work. Some people are open, some are not open. They don't want to experience possibilities."

A printer makes a funny noise. "Dan, that's a little loud. Everybody, I'm trying to do an interview." Poor Dan hasn't done anything except sit beside a machine making a belching sound. A diva moment — that's reassuring. "My work tries to equalise," Koons says, back in serene mode, "it tells the viewer that they don't have to come to it with any history except their own." Some have said his work is a triumph of commercialism, that it's kitsch. "I don't believe in kitsch," he says. "It exists but it's fetishism, like a dog chasing its tail. Even the concept of kitsch is a judgment. I don't believe in judgments. I believe in being open to things and in acceptance. My work isn't a performance." His father died in 1994, his mother still comes to his openings. Yes, maybe they were shocked at the explicitness of his works at the beginning, he says, "but they realised I was thinking about things."

He studied art in Maryland, then Chicago, and was "very charged" by the Surrealist tradition, "sharing a dialogue" with Dalí, Lichtenstein and Warhol. Art was about "participation" rather than ambition. "Not the self, not narcissism." Many people think you are a narcissist, I say, exhibiting work such as having sex with your wife. "I believe in the intensity of life," he says.

Koons moved to New York in 1976, began holding parties featuring his inflatables and got a job in the ticket booth of the Museum of Modern Art. "At lunchtimes I helped on the membership desk. I wanted to make my encased vacuum pieces... so I became a mutual funds broker, and then registered for selling stocks, bonds and commodities. That gave me independence from the commercial art world."

But he denies being commercially savvy or publicity-garnering. "It was more self-reliance. When I was a child I went door-to-door to sell gift-wrap and sweets and chocolates. I was brought up to be self-reliant." His critics have said that his commercial-mindedness infects his work. "I don't believe in that. If something is good it has significance, and there will be a value placed on that. If I tried to create something of economic value there would be no art there, and there would be no economic value in it either. It's like trying to create something that's 'new'. There is no significance in trying to create something in an analytical way. It's a profound mistake."

But he is no starving artist: one of his works, *Hanging Heart*, sold in 2007 for \$23.6 million, then a contemporary art record. "I feel very grateful for the platform," he says opaquely. "To see this value placed on things, that people hold things in such significance, is great." Yes, but what about that vast sum? "It's wonderful for myself, my family, the sense of things being taken care of. But making money is not my intention. I want to make powerful work."

His works may make you laugh or breathe aghast, but of his reclining ceramic model of Michael Jackson and Bubbles the chimp, he says: "I wanted it to be a spiritual figure, to give people a sense of confidence to let go. It was my take on Renaissance sculpture."

So it's not ironic? "It's all intuitive and done with generosity," he says, very seriously. "I've never liked cynicism. There is irony in my work. I like multiple levels of meaning. The rabbit, to me, is a symbol of Easter, a politician, it could be a Playboy bunny. The greater a chameleon something is, the greater its possibilities."

There was ire from some quarters of the French Establishment over the decision to exhibit his work, including his monumental

garden-made dog, *Puppy*, at Versailles last year. "My intention was to show harmony. Many people told me that Louis XIV would have enjoyed it."

The recession has not affected him, he claims, and he seems blithe about the anticipated crash of the contemporary art market. "There's harmony in the market. It's cyclical. Today is a great time to make art. I don't believe in getting caught up in the emotion of things. People are engaged in life and the environment." So you wouldn't care if your \$23 million work of art was suddenly worth a lot less? "It's apples for apples," is Koons's stony reply. "I collect art at the top and at the bottom of the market, and I got the best things in my life at the top of the market because you can't get them at the bottom: Picasso, Poussin. It's not about money." But it never is when you have lots of money, of course.

Is he aware of Jeff Koons as a brand, just as Warhol created a brand? That stings. "I'm aware of a certain context my work is seen in, but Andy would create certain things to lead people there. That's all I have to say about that."

Where we see a desire to shock, in the sculpture of Koons and La Cicciolina having sex, Koons claims, "If you try to shock, interest in the work would not be long-lasting. What people find most shocking isn't the image, it's the honesty. I see the pieces as Baroque, Rococo. I saw Ilona (La Cicciolina's name is Ilona Staller) on the cover of a magazine. She was wearing a knit dress that I incorporated into my work about her." Does he love sex as much as his work suggests? "I do. I believe in preservation and procreation. Sex for me connects the past, present and future."

After performing Tantric poses in front of one gallery, and creating a sex-themed series of pieces (*Made in Heaven*, to be exhibited at Tate Modern from October 1), the couple married and had a child, Ludwig, who — after they separated in 1998 — Staller took back to Italy. In their bitter divorce, Koons was originally awarded custody of Ludwig by an American court and he has since set up the Koons Family International Law and Policy Institute under the auspices of two other child-abduction organisations. Since 1993 Koons has been making a series of works, *Celebration*, aimed at communicating his love for Ludwig directly to him. Last year Staller was threatened with jail for not allowing Koons to see his son.

How much support Koons should pay is being re-examined by Italian legal officials. "When my son was abducted by Ilona I realised that I had nowhere to turn to," Koons says. "It's terrible. My son is 16 and I've not been able to have a relationship with him even though I am supposed to be able to. It's a heartbreaking experience. When the parent who's with the child has so much control, the other parent is very distanced. In the future I hope to have a relationship with my son and for my son to have a life that he feels happy in."

Koons has six children. His only daughter, Shannon, 34, came back into his life in 1996 after being adopted as a baby. As well as Ludwig, he has four sons (aged 7, 5, 3 and 1) with his present wife, Justine Wheeler, who came to work at the studio in 1995. "Family life is the most important thing to me." Being an older father doesn't bother him at all. He doesn't dwell on mortality: "I

care about my experience now, being able to communicate now."

But it must be tough to know that the public is always waiting for him to outdo himself: the next landmark Koons will be of a steam locomotive hanging from the roof of an LA museum. "I just want the pieces to have a voice and presence. I am self-reliant. If I had to pump gas, I'd pump gas."

He goes to change into a suit to pose with an inflatable dolphin. The factory produces about ten paintings and ten sculptures a year, he says as we walk through the workspace. But is it his work, or the work of the 120 people who make it? "I'm the artist, absolutely, but the collaborative aspect, the sense of community, is important to me," Koons says. "But these are my visions. The only reason they exist is my vision." And with that, art's Willy Wonka disappears to change into his performing clothes and revel in the density of his inflatables.

Biography

Early life

Koons was born in York, Pennsylvania, in 1955. He attended art school, then moved to New York, where he worked as a Wall Street broker to fund his work. Like Warhol, he set up a large studio and promoted himself as much as his art.

Blow-up

Koons is fan of what he describes as "childlike wonder" and his work has often used or been inspired by toy inflatables. More recently his *Celebration* series includes giant sculptures of balloon animals. His most iconic work is *Rabbit*, an Easter bunny balloon cast in shiny stainless steel. Symbolic of the art market in its boom years (in 2007 Koons's *Hanging Heart* sold at auction for \$23.6 million), the rabbit was recently re-created deflating by the British artist Jonathan Monk.

Family man

His former wife, Ilona Staller, abducted their son, Ludwig, after they divorced. Koons has four sons with his current wife, and a daughter from an earlier relationship.



Jeff Koons: *Popeye* Series, Serpentine Gallery, London W2, July 2-September 13 (www.serpentinegallery.org, 020-74026075). *The Times* is the media partner.

Competition

To win one of 20 pairs of tickets to the private view on July 1 (6-9pm) Culture+ members only can enter at www.timesplus.co.uk/culture. The competition closes on June 25.

Talk

There is a *Jeff Koons: Popeye* Series talk at 7pm on July 2 at the V&A, introduced by James Harding, Editor of *The Times*. Tickets are £8 each and Culture+ members get a 10 per cent discount on merchandise when they show their membership card on the night. To book tickets please call 020-79422211 and quote reference "Times Culture+".

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