

# King of **Kitsch**

**JEFF KOONS** has made a successful career transforming lowly objects of popular culture into fine art trophies for billionaires.

by JASON EDWARD KAUFMAN

If any living artist has made a dent in mainstream American consciousness it's Jeff Koons. He may not be a megawatt star of the magnitude of Jennifer Lopez or Brad Pitt, but the affable, business-savvy Koons has become a bold-faced name, and his candy-colored balloon sculptures enjoy a modest celebrity of their own.

It makes sense that Koons would find a place in popular culture. His art is no more snobbish than a supermarket tabloid. His stock in trade is scaled-up sculptures of tacky figurines and toys, everything from Michael Jackson and topless blondes to bunny rabbits and The Incredible Hulk. His trick is to render these trifling subjects in flawlessly crafted, rich materials, such as porcelain or polished stainless steel. He makes kitsch on steroids that's built to last.

Many of his subjects are straight out of Playskool—plastic inflatable pool toys, goggle-eyed cartoon characters and balloon animals modeled on the ones clowns twist for toddlers at birthday parties. His more grown-up works have included vacuum cleaners in vitrines, basketballs in fish tanks and stainless-steel versions of ceramic liquor decanters. Most controversially, he acted out erotic fantasies with a porn star he saw in a magazine and later married (more on that debacle later), but his primary motifs have been kitsch and kid stuff. ▷

Photo: Getty Images/Harold Cunningham







"Hanging Heart (Magenta/Gold)," 1994–2006, one of the glitzy, highly polished metal baubles from the "Celebrations" series, which features toys and party favors.

Photos: Getty Images/Emmanuel Durand; Getty Images/Michael Gottschalk (facing).



"Tulips," 1995–2004, and "Balloon Flower (Magenta)," 1995–1999, versions of which have sold for tens of millions of dollars, were in a Koons exhibiton at Neue Nationalgalerie in Berlin in 2008 and 2009.

A quarter-century after the death of Warhol, there's nothing shocking about using commercial motifs as fine art. But it may come as a surprise that some people in the art industry regard neo-Pop Koons as the leading figure of his generation. And his sculptures sell for tens of millions of dollars.

"Tulips," a cluster of 15-foot-long balloon blossoms in color-coated steel, sold last year at Christie's New York for \$33.7 million. The buyer was Las Vegas casino owner Steve Wynn. That was a record for the

artist and remains the second-highest price paid for a work by a living artist. (An abstract canvas by German painter Gerhard Richter sold for \$34 million the previous month.)

"Balloon Flower (Magenta)," from the same series, went for \$25.8 million at Christie's London in 2008, and a year earlier Ukrainian businessman Victor Pinchuk paid \$23.6 million at Sotheby's New York for "Hanging Heart," a 9-foot suspended steel bauble shaped like a Valentine's Day chocolate box. ▶



## Peerless Popularity

At mid-career, Koons, 58, is at the top of his game, with collectors and museums competing to acquire his works. He regularly exhibits in the United States and Europe; in 2008 alone he had shows in the Neue Nationalgalerie in Berlin, Germany, on the roof garden of the Metropolitan Museum in New York City and in the French royal palace at Versailles. When the new U.S. embassy opened in Beijing, China, “Tulips” graced the reflecting pool out front, on loan from the artist.

Perhaps the key to his success is the cozy relationship Koons has cultivated with fabulously rich collectors. Los Angeles developer and philanthropist Eli Broad calls him “a good friend” and has amassed two dozen of his works. Greek construction tycoon Dakis Joannou, another billionaire, has more than three dozen pieces by Koons, including a custom paint job for his yacht. Other mega-wealthy devotees include Christie’s chairman François Pinault and Connecticut newsprint mogul and art magazine publisher Peter Brant. Their deep-pocketed advocacy has boosted prices and continues to buoy the Koons market.

Earlier this year, he had simultaneous exhibitions at Larry Gagosian and David Zwirner in Manhattan’s Chelsea neighborhood, arch rivals among the world’s most powerful galleries. Dealers generally prefer to have exclusive representation, but Koons, like a number of star artists, can call the shots. He is more CEO of a corporate brand than an artist in the traditional sense, overseeing fabrication of new product lines in a factory-like workshop in Manhattan.

“Balloon Dog,” 1994–2000, is his icon. The 10-foot-tall canine—which comes in mirror-finished blue, magenta, yellow, orange and red steel—is one of the most recognizable works of contemporary art, matching Damien Hirst’s notorious pickled shark (a dark riff on Koons’ floating basketballs). It may be a king-size child’s toy, but the work’s voluptuous pneumatic volumes and lustrous reflective surface dazzle audiences from K-12 and beyond. His menagerie includes similarly seductive balloon swans, rabbits and monkeys, typically issued in editions of five uniquely colored examples.

His most picturesque work is “Puppy,” an adorable 43-foot-tall West Highland Terrier composed of tens of thousands of flowering plants shelved on an irrigated armature. First exhibited in Germany in the early 1990s, a second version of the topiary terrier permanently guards the famed Guggenheim Museum Bilbao in Spain and another is on the lawn of Peter Brant’s Greenwich, Connecticut, farm. Would-be detractors often come away reluctantly enthused by the technical perfection, exuberant visual effects and childlike innocence of such seemingly silly sculptures.

How did Koons become such a phenomenon? ▷



“Balloon Dog (Yellow),” 1994–2000, and “Sacred Heart (Red/Gold),” 1995–2007, in the outdoor exhibition “Jeff Koons on the Roof” at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, in 2008.





A helium-filled balloon "Rabbit" was created for the 2007 Thanksgiving Day Parade in New York, and two years later was suspended in the South Hall of Covent Garden in London.

Photos: Getty Images/John Phillips; Getty Images/Daniel Roland (facing).



"Michael Jackson and Bubbles," 1988, a porcelain figurine of the pop star and his pet chimpanzee.

## Path to Prominence

Born in 1955 to a middle-class family in York, Pennsylvania, Koons took art lessons as a child and sold his Old Master-style paintings in his father's furniture store. "I always believed that I got into art because my parents encouraged me to feel I had more skill in that area than my [older] sister," Koons says. He studied at Maryland Institute College of Art and at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago before moving to Manhattan in 1977, where he sold tickets and memberships at the Museum of Modern Art, then quit to tele-market securities on Wall Street.

After his first solo show in 1985, he quit Wall Street to focus on his art, creating the well-received "Statuary" series, including stainless-steel renditions of the Jim Beam train decanter and a 41-inch inflatable "Rabbit." Their high-polish, silvery surfaces transformed cheap mass-market items into objects that critics and curators deemed intriguing updates to the tradition of sculpture.

His next series, "Banality," offered more kitsch, now in painted wood or porcelain made to order by European craftsmen. Ceramics included a topless starlet embracing the Pink Panther and a rococo gold-and-white Michael Jackson and his pet chimp,

Bubbles. Another piece featured a painted-wood pig being pushed by babies, titled "Ushering in Banality."

Before critics had made up their minds whether to snicker or gag, Koons came out with a body of work that nearly ended his career. He hired La Cicciolina, a Hungarian-born porn actress and member of Italian Parliament, to collaborate on a porn film. Instead, they posed for photographs of hardcore sex acts that were exhibited amid sculptures of flowers, cherubs, puppies and a marble bust of Koons rising heroically from a base of rock crystals.

When the "Made in Heaven" series was shown at the Venice Biennale in 1990 and a year later at a gallery in New York, the "Culture Wars" were raging, with conservatives railing against "obscene" or "blasphemous" art, and the work was seen as a publicity-seeking provocation. Many critics found the images repellent rather than erotic, and Koons, who had married the porn star, was spouting loony patter about the series' relationship to divine love and the Sacred Heart of Jesus. It looked like Koons would go the way of fellow '80s art stars whose careers evaporated in the market downturn. ▷





Two views of "Pink Panther," a porcelain piece from the 1988 "Banality" series.

Photos: Getty Images/Daniel Roland (far left); Getty Images/Don Emmert; Getty Images/Christian Kober (facing).



The towering topiary "Puppy" has presided over the plaza of the Guggenheim Bilbao in Spain since the museum opened in 1997.

The scandal got ugly when Koons and La Cicciolina divorced in 1992, and she absconded to Italy with their son, Ludwig Maximilian, prompting Koons to spend millions seeking to regain custody. He came back with flower "Puppy" in 1992, then dropped out of sight and began working on "Celebration," a series of child-themed paintings and sculptures in honor of Ludwig that included "Tulips," "Hanging Heart" and "Balloon Dog."

To finance fabrication, a consortium of billionaire collectors prepaid for works, but costs spiraled out of control and Koons and his business partner, former Citibank art adviser Jeffrey Deitch (who later became director of the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles), handed over production to Larry Gagosian for the exclusive right to sell the series. With powerful collectors and dealers invested in Koons' future success, it was no surprise when in 1999, his porcelain "Pink Panther" sold to Peter Brant for \$1.8 million, six times the artist's previous auction record. By 2001, his "Michael Jackson and Bubbles" had sold for \$5.6 million and the Koons boom had begun. >





Koons with the oil painting "Antiquity 3," 2009–2011.



The artist with assistants in his factory-like workshop in the Chelsea neighborhood of New York.

## Pitchman or Parodist?

It couldn't have happened if Koons were not a pitchman par excellence. He's trim, clean-cut and always wears a dark suit and white shirt, looking like a used car salesman or FBI agent. He speaks deliberately in a near monotone, exuding the tranquil calm of a Valium addict or glassy-eyed evangelist. And he has his schtick down pat, repeating aphorisms with the practiced skill of a politician or pastor. He says that people can be intimidated by art, and he doesn't want them to feel that they have to disavow their true feelings in order to appear more sophisticated. The antidote he preaches is salvation through banality, claiming we should tolerate all levels of taste and celebrate the lowest.

And he ladles out a mix of pop psychology, spirituality and sexuality that he says lies encoded in his work, enough to keep theory-minded critics guessing. But it's not clear if his appropriated images are parodies or not. Is he debunking American culture, pointing to cartoons, consumer goods, tchotchkes, toys and pornography and asking us to disdain all the banal garbage that some people love? Robert Hughes, the late great critic for *TIME* magazine, dismissed him as a "parody of parodies," but others suspect that Koons is simply naïve and that theorists read satire where none is intended.

Koons says that his affection is sincere and that he presents undemanding subjects to endorse populist taste, and his supporters swear his populism is heartfelt. Yet, part of his appeal is the apparent irony of his overt bad taste.

Photos: Getty Images/Ralph Orlowski; Getty Images/Fanthomme Hubert (facing).

## Mastering the Art Business

Koons' success as an artist is all the more astonishing when one considers that he takes his motifs directly from popular culture and hires others to do the fabrication. He says he is in the lineage of Marcel Duchamp, who first used "readymade" found objects as artworks, but Koons has had to settle a number of copyright infringement lawsuits for what courts deemed his piracy of images.

He has professionalized Warhol's concept of the artist's studio as "Factory." His block-long Chelsea workshop is a light-manufacturing facility, replete with front office and a maze of rooms devoted to phases of production. He employs as many as 80 assistants at a time, grouped into teams making digital mock-ups, transferring images to canvas, mixing pigments, painting canvases or metal casts, or polishing sculptures fabricated by Carlson & Co. near Los Angeles.

By making art that mimics sleek consumer products in exquisitely fabricated industrial materials, Koons celebrates consumerism and provides his patrons with durable long-term investments. "I've always wanted the viewer to feel a sense of security in the work," he told Calvin Tomkins for a *New Yorker* profile, sounding like the Mr. Rogers of contemporary art. ▷



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“Balloon Swan (Blue),” “Balloon Monkey (Red)” and “Balloon Rabbit (Yellow),” all 2006–2013, arrayed in a showroom at Gagosian Gallery.

## Coming Attractions

Koons himself has become a wealthy family man. He has four children with his second wife, Justine Wheeler, his former production manager whom he married in 2002. (He won custody of Ludwig, who remains in Italy, and has become close to a daughter who was put up for adoption when he was a college student.) He lives in a townhouse on Manhattan’s Upper East Side—reportedly filled with works by Courbet, Magritte, Dalí, Lichtenstein and contemporary artists—and escapes to the farm in Pennsylvania that belonged to his grandparents.

His career is flourishing with a retrospective opening at the Whitney Museum in New York City in June then traveling to the Centre Pompidou in Paris and possibly the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles. He has received honorary degrees and awards, and was commissioned to create a limited-edition “Balloon Venus” container for vintage Dom Pérignon. Recently, he cast classical antiquities in plaster and affixed blue-glass lawn “gazing balls” to their bodies—a combination of art history and suburban aesthetics. He currently is making replicas

of the Liberty Bell and The Dictator, a Civil War cannon with a two-and-one-half-mile range that he says he looks forward to firing off.

But Koons seems to know that his best work is public monuments like the flowering “Puppy” that have a magnetic appeal to broad audiences. His most spectacular ongoing project would create an iconic landmark in front of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art on Wilshire Boulevard. The idea is to dangle a full-scale, 70-foot-long metal replica of a 1943 Baldwin steam locomotive from a 160-foot crane. Several times a day, the wheels will spin, the funnel will smoke and the whistle will blow as the train picks up speed then slows to a stop. The spectacle will no doubt thrill visitors, especially children. But it could be seen also as a dramatic emblem of post-industrial America: the iron horse that facilitated Westward expansion and economic boom hoisted like a still-kicking carcass. The \$25 million cost has delayed the project, but one day it may be realized, assuring Koons another page in the annals of art history. ♦

Photo: Getty Images/Cindy Ord

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