

Jeff Koons

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Jeffrey "Jeff" Koons (born January 21, 1955) is an American artist known for his reproductions of banal objects—such as balloon animals produced in stainless steel with mirror finish surfaces.

Koons' work has sold for substantial sums of money including at least one world record auction price for a work by a living artist. The largest sum known to be paid for a work by Koons is *Balloon flower (Magenta)* which was sold at Christie's London, on Monday, June 30, 2008 (Lot 00012) in the Post-War & Contemporary Art Evening Sale, where it sold for £12,921,250 or \$25,765,204.

Critics are sharply divided in their views of Koons. Some view his work as pioneering and of major art-historical importance. Others dismiss his work as kitsch: crass and based on cynical self-merchandising. Koons has stated that there are no hidden meanings in his works.^[1]

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Jeff Koons



at the 2009 Tribeca Film Festival

Born	January 25, 1955 York, Pennsylvania
Nationality	American
Field	Sculpture, printmaking, balloon modelling
Training	School of the Art Institute of Chicago, Maryland Institute College of Art
Works	<i>Puppy</i>
Influenced by	H.C. Westermann

Life and art

Early life and work

Koons was born in York, Pennsylvania. As a child he went door to door after school selling gift-wrapping paper and candy to earn pocket-money.^[2] As a teenager he revered Salvador Dalí, to the extent that he visited him at the St. Regis Hotel in New York City. Koons studied painting at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago and the Maryland Institute College of Art. After college, he worked as a Wall Street commodities broker while establishing himself as an artist. He gained recognition in the 1980s and subsequently set up a factory-like studio in a SoHo loft on the corner of Houston and Broadway in New York. It was staffed with over 30 assistants, each assigned to a different aspect of producing his work—in a similar mode as Andy Warhol's Factory (notable because all of his work is produced using a method known as Art fabrication).^[3]

Koons's early work was in the form of conceptual sculpture, an example of which is *The Equilibrium Series* (1985), consisting of three basketballs floating in distilled water that half-fills a glass tank.



Rabbit in Naples, Italy, 2003

Arts journalist Arifa Akbar reported for *The Independent* that in “an era when artists were not regarded as ‘stars’, Koons went to great lengths to cultivate his public persona by employing an image consultant.” Featuring photographs by Matt Chedghey, Koons placed “advertisements in international art magazines of himself surrounded by the trappings of success” and gave interviews “referring to himself in the third person.”^[4]

Koons then moved on to *Statuary*, the large stainless-steel blowups of toys, followed by the *Banalities* series that culminated in 1988 with *Michael Jackson and Bubbles*, a series of three life-size gold-leaf plated porcelain statues of the sitting singer cuddling Bubbles, his pet chimpanzee. Three years later, one of these sold at Sotheby's New York for \$5.6 million. Two of these sculptures are now at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art and the Broad Contemporary Art Museum (BCAM) at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. The statue was included in a 2004 retrospective at the Astrup Fearnley Museum of Modern Art in Oslo which traveled a year later to the Helsinki City Art Museum. It also featured in his second retrospective at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, in 2008.

Relationships

Koons and his college girlfriend had a daughter, who got adopted. She is now named Shannon Rodgers and reconnected with Koons in 1995.^[citation needed]

In 1991, he married Hungarian-born naturalized-Italian pornography star Cicciolina (Ilona Staller) who for five years (1987–1992) pursued an alternate career as a member of the Italian parliament. His *Made in Heaven* series of paintings, photographs, and sculptures portrayed the couple in explicit sexual positions and created even more controversy.

In 1992, they had a son, Ludwig. The marriage ended soon afterward. They agreed to joint custody of the child, but Staller absconded from New York to Rome with the child, where mother and son remain. A long custody battle ensued with the award of sole custody to Koons by the U.S. court in 1998, which had also dissolved the marriage. However, he ended up losing custody when the case went to Italy's Supreme Court.^[5]

In 2008, Staller filed suit against Koons for failing to pay child support.^[6]

Koons is now married to Justine Wheeler, an artist and former employee who began working for Koons's studio in 1995.^[7]

Puppy 1992

Koons was commissioned in 1992 to create a piece for an art exhibition in Bad Arolsen, Germany. The result was *Puppy*, a forty-three feet (12.4 m) tall topiary sculpture of a West Highland White Terrier puppy, executed in a variety of flowers on a steel substructure. In 1995, the sculpture was dismantled and re-erected at the Museum of Contemporary Art on Sydney Harbour on a new, more permanent, stainless steel armature with an internal irrigation system.

The piece was purchased in 1997 by the Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation and installed on the terrace outside the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao.^[8] Before the dedication at the museum, an Euskadi Ta Askatasuna (ETA) trio disguised as gardeners attempted to plant explosive-filled flowerpots near the sculpture,^[9] but was foiled by Basque police officer Jose María Aguirre, who then was shot dead by ETA members.^{[10][11]} Currently the square in which the statue is placed bears the name of Aguirre. In the summer of 2000, the statue travelled to New York City for a temporary exhibition at Rockefeller Center.

Media mogul Peter Brant and his wife, model Stephanie Seymour, have an exact Jeff Koons duplicate of the Bilbao statue on the grounds of their Connecticut estate.

In 1999, Koons commissioned a song about himself on Momus's album *Stars Forever*.

Recent work

In 2001, Koons undertook a series of paintings titled *Easyfun-Ethereal*, using a collage approach that combined bikinis, food, and landscapes painted under his supervision by assistants.

In 2006, he appeared on *Artstar*, an unscripted television series set in the New York art world and from February 15 to March 6, 2008, he donated a private tour of his studio to the Hereditary Disease Foundation for auction on www.charitybuzz.com.

In 2006, Koons showed his *Hanging Heart*, a 9 feet tall highly polished, steel heart, one of a series of five differently colored examples, part of his *Celebration* series.^[12] Large sculptures from that series were exhibited at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York in 2008.



Puppy in Bilbao



Tulips in Bilbao



Kiepenkerl, located in the Hirshhorn Museum's Sculpture Garden in Washington, D.C.

A drawing similar to his *Tulip Balloons* was placed on the front page of the Internet search engine Google. The drawing greeted all who visited Google's main page on April 30, 2008 and May 1, 2008.^[13]

Cracked Egg (Blue) won the 2008 Charles Wollaston Award for the most distinguished work in the Royal Academy's Summer Exhibition.^[14]

Koons had a minor role in the 2008 film *Milk* playing state assemblyman Art Agnos.^[15]

On October 13, 2009, the giant silver rabbit used during the Macy's Thanksgiving day parade was put on display for Nuit Blanche in the Eaton

Centre in Toronto.

Curating

In 2010 Koons curated an exhibition of works from the private collection of Greek billionaire Dakis Joannou at the New Museum in New York City. The exhibition, called *Skin Fruit: Selections from the Dakis Joannou Collection*, generated debate concerning cronyism within the art world. Koons is heavily collected by Joannou and had previously designed the exterior of Joannou's yacht *Guilty*.

BMW Art Car

Jeff Koons was the artist named to design the seventeenth in the series of BMW Art Cars. His artwork was applied to a race spec E92 BMW M3 which competed at the 2010 24 Hours of Le Mans with BMW Motorsport.^[16] The car was revealed to the public in Paris at The Pompidou Centre on 2 June 2010.^[17]



The Koons-designed car, driven by Andy Priaulx, Dirk Müller and Dirk Werner retired after 53 laps of the race.

Exhibitions

Since a 1980 window installation at the New Museum of Contemporary Art in New York, Koons' work has been widely exhibited internationally in solo and group exhibitions. In 1986, he appeared in a group show with Peter Halley, Ashley Bickerton, and Meyer Vaisman at Sonnabend Gallery in New York. In 1997, the Galerie Jerome de Noirmont organised his first solo show in Europe. His *Made in Heaven* series was first shown at the Venice Biennale in 1990.^[18]

His first museum solo shows include the Deutsche Guggenheim, Berlin (2000), Kunsthaus Bregenz (2001), the Museo Archeologico Nazionale di Napoli (2003) and a retrospective survey at the Museum of Modern Art, Oslo (2004), which traveled to the Helsinki City Art Museum (2005). In 2008, the *Celebration* series was shown at the Neue Nationalgalerie, Berlin, and on the roof of the Metropolitan Museum of Art^[19].

Considered as his first retrospective in France, the 2008 exhibition of seventeen Koons sculptures at the Chateau de Versailles also marked the first ambitious display of a contemporary American artist organized by the chateau. The *New York Times* reported that “several dozen people demonstrated outside the palace gates” in a protest arranged by a little-known, right-wing group dedicated to French artistic purity.^[20]

The May 31 – September 21, 2008 Koons retrospective at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago,^{[21][22][23]}

which was widely publicized in the press, broke the museum's attendance record with 86,584 visitors.^{[24][25]} In July 2009, Koons had his first major solo show in London, at the Serpentine Gallery. Entitled, "Jeff Koons: Popeye Series," the exhibit included cast aluminum models of children's pool toys and "dense, realist paintings of Popeye holding his can of spinach or smoking his pipe, a red lobster looming over his head."^[26]

Art market

Koons's works have sold for astronomical prices at auctions and privately. His auction records have primarily been achieved by his sculptures (especially those from his Celebration series), whereas his paintings are less popular.

In 2001, one of his three *Michael Jackson and Bubbles* porcelain sculptures sold for \$5.6 million. On November 14, 2007, a magenta *Hanging Heart*, one of five in different colors, sold at Sotheby's New York for \$23.6 million becoming, at the time, the most expensive piece by a living artist ever auctioned.^[12] It was bought by the Gagosian Gallery in New York, which the previous day had purchased another Koons sculpture entitled "Diamond (Blue)" for \$11.8 million from Christie's London.^[27] Gagosian appears to have bought both Celebration series works on behalf of Ukrainian steel oligarch, Victor Pinchuk.^[28] In July 2008, his *Balloon Flower (Magenta)* also sold at Christie's London for a record \$25.7 million. In total, Koons was the top-selling artist at auction with 81.3 million euros (\$117.2 million) of sales in the year to June 2008.^[29]

During the late 2000s recession, however, art prices plummeted and auction sales of high-value works by Koons dropped 50 percent in 2009.^[30] A violet *Hanging Heart* sold for \$11 million in a private sale.^[31] However prices for the artist's earlier Luxury and Degradation series appear to be holding up. The Economist reported that Thomas H. Lee, a private-equity investor, sold "Jim Beam J.B. Turner Train" in a package deal brokered by Giraud Pissarro Segalot for more than \$15 million.^[32]

Koons has been represented by dealers such as Sonnabend Gallery, Max Hetzler in Berlin and Jérôme de Noirmont in Paris. The exclusive right to the primary sale of the "Celebration" series is held by Gagosian Gallery, his dominant dealer. The artist is widely collected in America and Europe, where some collectors acquire his work in depth. Eli Broad has 24 pieces, and Dakis Joannou owns some 38 works from all stages of the artist's career.^[33]

Classification

Among curators and art collectors and others in the art world, Koons's work is labeled as Neo-pop or Post-Pop as part of an 80s movement in reaction to the pared-down art of Minimalism and Conceptualism in the previous decade. Koons resists such comments: "A viewer might at first see irony in my work... but I see none at all. Irony causes too much critical contemplation."^[citation needed] Koon's crucial point is to reject any hidden meaning in his artwork. The meaning is only what one perceives at first glance; there is no gap between what the work is in itself and what is perceived.^[citation needed]

He has caused controversy by the elevation of unashamed kitsch into the high art arena, exploiting more throwaway subjects than, for example, Warhol's soup cans. His work *Balloon Dog* (1994–2000) is based on balloons twisted into shape to make a toy dog.

His sculpture differs in two major respects to the original:

1. it is made of metal (painted bright red to give the appearance of balloons),

- it is more than ten feet (three metres) tall.

Evaluation and influence

Koons has received extreme reactions to his work. Critic Amy Dempsey described his *Balloon Dog* as "an awesome presence... a massive durable monument."^[34] Jerry Saltz at *artnet.com* enthused that it was possible to be "wowed by the technical virtuosity and eye-popping visual blast" of Koons's art.^[35]

Mark Stevens of *The New Republic* dismissed him as a "decadent artist [who] lacks the imaginative will to do more than trivialize and italicise his themes and the tradition in which he works... He is another of those who serve the tacky rich."^[36] Michael Kimmelman of *The New York Times* saw "one last, pathetic gasp of the sort of self-promoting hype and sensationalism that characterized the worst of the 1980s" and called Koons's work "artificial," "cheap" and "unabashedly cynical."^[37]

In an article comparing the contemporary art scene with show business, renowned critic Robert Hughes wrote that Koons is "an extreme and self-satisfied manifestation of the sanctimony that attaches to big bucks. Koons really does think he's Michelangelo and is not shy to say so. The significant thing is that there are collectors, especially in America, who believe it. He has the slimy assurance, the gross patter about transcendence through art, of a blow-dried Baptist selling swamp acres in Florida. And the result is that you can't imagine America's singularly depraved culture without him."^[38] Hughes placed Koons's work just above that of Seward Johnson and was quoted in a *New York Times* article as having stated that comparing their careers was "like debating the merits of dog excrement versus cat excrement".^[39]

To the question - "Is it important that your work be famous?" - Koons replied: "There's a difference between being famous and being significant. I'm interested in [my work's] significance — anything that can enrich our lives and make them vaster — but I'm really not interested in the idea of fame for fame's sake."^[27]

He has influenced younger artists such as Damien Hirst^[40] (e.g. in Hirst's *Hymn*, an eighteen-foot version of a fourteen-inch anatomical toy), and Mona Hatoum.^[citation needed] In turn, his extreme enlargement of mundane objects owes a debt to Claes Oldenburg and Coosje van Bruggen.^[citation needed] Much of his work also was influenced by artists working in Chicago during his study at the Art Institute, including Jim Nutt, Ed Paschke, and H. C. Westermann.^[41]

In 2005, he was elected as a Fellow to the American Academy of Arts and Sciences.

Copyright infringement litigation

Koons has been sued several times for copyright infringement over his use of pre-existing images, the original works of others, in his work. In *Rogers v. Koons*, 960 F.2d 301 (2d Cir. 1992), the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Second Circuit upheld a judgment against him for his use of a photograph of puppies as the basis for a sculpture, *String of Puppies*.^[42]

Koons also lost lawsuits in *United Features Syndicate, Inc. v. Koons*, 817 F. Supp. 370 (S.D.N.Y. 1993), and *Campbell v. Koons*, No. 91 Civ. 6055, 1993 WL 97381 (S.D.N.Y. Apr. 1, 1993).

More recently, he won one lawsuit, *Blanch v. Koons*, No. 03 Civ. 8026 (LLS), S.D.N.Y., Nov. 1 2005 (slip op.),^[43] affirmed by the Second Circuit in October, 2006, brought over his use of a photographic advertisement as source material for legs and feet in a painting, *Niagara* (2000). The court ruled that Koons had sufficiently

transformed the original advertisement so as to qualify as a fair use of the original image.

Koons has also threatened others under copyright, claiming that a gallery infringed his proprietary rights by selling bookends in the shape of balloon dogs.^[44] Koons abandoned that claim after the gallery filed a complaint for declaratory relief stating, "As virtually any clown can attest, no one owns the idea of making a balloon dog, and the shape created by twisting a balloon into a dog-like form is part of the public domain."^[45]

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Film and video

- *Jeff Koons: the Banality Work* by Jeff Koons, Paul Tschinkel, Sarah Berry. Videorecording produced by Inner Tube Video and Sonnabend Gallery (New York, NY), 1990.
- His *Balloon Dog (Red)* sculpture was one of the artworks brought to life in *Night at the Museum: Battle of the Smithsonian*.

External links

- [jeffkoons.com](http://www.jeffkoons.com/) (<http://www.jeffkoons.com/>)
- Examples of work and literature (<http://www.artnet.com/ag/fineartthumbnails.asp?aid=9741>)
- Jeff Koons interviewed (<http://www.jca-online.com/koons.html>) by Klaus Ottmann
- Actual Exhibitions from Jeff Koons (<http://www.artfacts.net/index.php/pageType/artistInfo/artist/2297/lang/1>)
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- Jeff Koons on MutualArt.com (http://www.mutualart.com/Artist/Jeff_Koons/AB81FA827D72079B#/69643A3130303330372C73656C65637465643A74727565) Biography and various articles
- Gaby Wood meets Jeff Koons (<http://www.guardian.co.uk/artanddesign/2007/jun/03/art>)
- Koons's Balloon Dogs - Collection (<http://armchairtravelogue.blogspot.com/2009/12/giant-balloon-dogs-of-jeff-koons.html>)
- Photos of "Celebration" Sculpture Series during its production process (<http://www.PrototypeNY.com>)

Retrieved from "http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jeff_Koons"

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