

Activity Card

Adam McEwen: I Think I'm in Love

Jeff Koons

Artist whose controversial work included a 40-foot high puppy made of more than 70,000 live flowers

JEFF KOONS, the artist who has died aged 49, was responsible for some of the most provocative and iconic artworks of the last twenty-five years.

Among his meticulously produced sculptures were an enormous puppy made entirely of living flowers, a series of tanks in which basketballs were suspended as if by magic, and a life-sized depiction in porcelain of the pop singer Michael Jackson, along with his pet chimp Bubbles.

Koons preached an art for the masses. Armed with such slogans as 'Banality as Saviour' and 'Embrace Your Past', he overturned notions of good and bad taste by interweaving high art production methods with the most devalued and kitsch baubles.

These emblems of consumerism ranged from brand-new Hoover vacuum cleaners to inflatable toys to a host of gaudy, hand-carved souvenirs. In Koons' hands they became the keys to an astute and sophisticated critique of contemporary culture.

The direct descendant of Marcel Duchamp, inventor of the 'readymade', and Andy Warhol, the master of pop iconography, Koons presented to the world a persona of sometimes bewildering sincerity. Seeing himself as a facilitator rather than an artist in the more conventional sense, he employed a small army of assistants to fabricate his works. Shiny, immaculately made and often very expensive - both to produce and to purchase - the results spoke eloquently of materialism, sentimentality, desire and death.

Coming to prominence in the early 1980s, Koons and his work were seen by many as the embodiment of the times - a double-edged compliment, as that decade was increasingly dismissed for its materialistic excesses. At the height of the artist's first run of success, when he was said to have earned more than \$2.5 million following three simultaneous exhibitions in different cities, the critic Robert Hughes declared, "The art world is very sick."

Koons was accused variously of being a cynic, a faker and a peddler of shock effect - the last, particularly, after his 1991 show entitled 'Made in Heaven', which consisted of highly explicit large scale images and blown-glass sculptures of the artist having sex with his wife at the time, the Italian hard-core adult film actress known as Cicciolina.

But the consistent thread running through his work was a deep understanding of the human desire for unattainable perfection, which he identified as being at the heart of pornography and sex, in the seduction of a highly polished surface or in the amniotic suspension of a basketball in a tank of water. His sculpture 'Rabbit' (1986), a 40-inch high representation of an inflatable toy bunny, flawlessly cast in gleaming stainless



Koons (1998): work spoke eloquently of desire, sentimentality and death

steel, has a dense, packed quality which from its first appearance qualified it as one of the most enigmatic and compelling artworks of its time. The art market concurred in 2003, when one of three examples exchanged hands for \$1.8 million.

Taking the banal promises of advertising and marketing at face value, Koons invented an artistic language which was all the more powerful for its unsettling ambiguity. Like many artists before him, he held up a mirror to society; Koons' mirror was just that much more intensely reflective.

The son of a furniture-store owner, Jeffrey Koons was born on January 21 1955 in York, Pennsylvania, where he lived until the family moved to the suburbs when he was five. He began taking art lessons at the age of seven; at eight he was appending the signature 'Jeffrey Koons' to his copies of Old Masters, which his proud father would display in his store, and which before long were selling for several hundred dollars.

After high school Koons

enrolled at the Maryland Institute of Art in Baltimore. During his first year there he traveled to New York City and spent an entire day visiting art galleries with Salvador Dali, having boldly telephoned the Spanish artist-showman at his hotel after seeing him in the newspaper.

Koons received his BFA in 1976, following a year as a visiting student at the Art Institute of Chicago, where he came under the influence of the artist Ed Paschke. Soon afterwards he moved to New York City, and within two weeks he had a job manning the membership desk at the Museum of Modern Art.

His few years there were to become legendary, as he cultivated a series of outlandish outfits with which to attract museum-goers to the membership booth: aiming for the "outrageous but not offensive", his outfits included paper bibs, a pencil moustache (after Dali), two ties worn simultaneously, loud polka-dot shirts, a sequined jacket and an inflatable flower which he would wrap around his neck. He sold five

times as many memberships as any other sales person.

During this time Koons was beginning to experiment with his earliest serious artworks, combining inflatable toys, flowers, Plexiglass and mirrors. In 1980 he left the museum, became licensed to sell mutual funds and took a job at First Investors Corporation, thus financing his breakthrough sculptures of vacuum cleaners encased in Plexiglass boxes.

His first New York show was in the window of the New Museum in 1983, when he displayed several new vacuum cleaners; the show was titled 'The New'. He continued to make and exhibit pieces from the series, now combining them with cigarette and car advertisements housed in lightboxes.

But Koons was disappointed with the way his career was going, and in 1983 he returned to his parents' home, now in Sarasota, Florida. When he moved back to New York he took a job as a commodities broker at Smith Barney, and began

to concentrate in earnest on producing his work (his favourite commodity, he once said, was cotton; when asked why, he replied, "I'm an artist, and cotton is soft").

From this point on Koons' career showed an unusual sense of structure, each exhibition comprising a discrete body of work, distinguished by title, mood and materials, much in the manner of a series of advertising campaigns.

'Equilibrium' (1985, at the gallery International with Monument) included his basketball sculptures, along with cast bronzes of floatation devices such as a life jacket. 'Luxury and Degradation' (1986) consisted of stainless steel copies of products associated with liquor consumption, such as 'Travel Bar' and a seven-car 'Jim Beam Train', flanked by mechanically printed ink-on-canvas Frangelico liqueur advertisements.

'Statury' (1986), exhibited as part of a group show at the gallery of renowned dealer Ileana Sonnabend, alongside work by three of Koons' long-time friends, Peter Halley, Ashley Bickerton and Meyer Vaisman, was followed in 1988 by 'Banality'.

Koons was as concerned with the undermeath of a sculpture as he was with the top. During the mid-1990s his notorious perfectionism came close to bankrupting him, when he sent large works intended for a show entitled 'Celebration' back to the fabricators because the finish on the stainless steel casts was under par.

Rumours circulated that his career was finished; but in typical fashion, Koons responded with an acclaimed series of large paintings which drew as much from current popular iconography as from the history of pop art.

When the sculptural works for 'Celebration' finally appeared, in the form of such pieces as 'Balloon Dog' (20xx), an enormous red, polished steel replica of a dog made from balloons, they confirmed that the artist was once again at the top of his form.

Koons would pay a price for the era's of the line between his personal life and his art when, in 1994, following their separation, Cicciolina debunked to Italy with their young son Ludwig. The situation dismayed the artist; he later said that many of his sculptures were intended to let his son know that he was thinking of him.

Koons was the subject of numerous retrospectives at museums and institutions around the world. His 'Puppy' has been installed outside the Sydney Opera House, in New York City's Rockefeller Centre, and outside the Guggenheim Museum, Bilbao.

Jeff Koons married, first, Ilona Staller (marriage dissolved); they had a son. He married secondly, in 2003, Justine Wheeler; they had two sons. He also had a daughter from an earlier relationship.

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Image: Adam McEwen, *Untitled (Jeff)*, 2004. C-Print, 37 x 52 3/4 in (93.98 x 133.99 cm). Courtesy the artist and Petzel, New York

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