

Made in Heaven (1989–92)

These sculptures and paintings mark a new direction in Koons's work. The artist publicly presented his relationship with his then-wife, former porn star and member of Italian parliament Ilona Staller (Hungarian,



b. 1951), as his subject to show the public that art allows one to accept oneself and one's desires: "I went through moral conflict. I could not sleep for a long time in the preparation of my new work. I had to go to the depths of my own sexuality, my own morality to be able to remove fear, guilt, and shame from myself. All of this has been removed for the viewer."

After seeing the iconic painting *Expulsion of Adam and Eve* (1426–28) by Massaccio (Italian, 1401–28) in Florence, Koons began to explore the themes of guilt and shame. Originally presented as an installation of sculptures surrounded by paintings, the works overtly depict the artist and Staller engaged in sexual acts, while the sculptures subtly reference the aim of traditional religious art: to create a transformative, emotional experience for the viewer.

Through the public presentation of their private love, Koons intends for their relationship to become a model for one's relationship to one's sexuality. Unashamed of their sexual union, the couple declares their actions—and themselves—as heavenly.

Easyfun (1999–2000), *Easyfun-Ethereal* (2000–02), and *Elephant* (2003)

Koons's animal mirrors from the *Easyfun* series and paintings from the *Easyfun-Ethereal* series as well as the work titled *Elephant* present a fantastical and playful mix of cartoon cutout forms, colorful abstraction, and hyperrealistic images from advertising and marketing. While the *Easyfun* series and *Elephant* continue the playfulness and mirrored surfaces of *Celebration*, the *Easyfun-Ethereal* paintings present a whirlwind of historical, pop cultural, and painterly references—such as those



to the work of surrealists Salvador Dalí (Spanish, 1904–89) and René Magritte (Belgian, 1898–1967), action painter Jackson Pollock (American, 1912–56), and pop artist James Rosenquist (American, b. 1933)—that also extend the artist's ongoing interest in the baroque and rococo periods' use of spiritual ecstasy and sensual excess as a tool for enlightenment.

Sexuality

Koons's work often seeks to transcend social norms surrounding pleasure and self-acceptance. Koons believes that "acceptance really has to start on the ground level. The very foundation for one to have a life. To be able to find more meaning in life, is to be able to accept one's own sexuality. When I speak about sexuality, it's really at the core of one's self-acceptance."

LEFT TO RIGHT
Bourgeois Bust - Jeff and
Ilona, 1991
Marble
44 ½ × 28 × 21 in.
Collection of Stefan Edlis
and Gael Neeson

Elephant, 2003
High-chromium stainless
steel with transparent
color coating
36 ½ × 29 × 19 in.
Collection of the artist

Celebration (1994–present)

On entering the museum, visitors are greeted by *Hanging Heart* (1991–2006), a one-and-a-half-ton sculpture based on a lightweight blown-glass Christmas tree ornament. Part of Koons's *Celebration* series, which illustrates celebratory moments such as holidays or birthdays, *Hanging Heart* suggests an almost impossible-to-achieve perfection. *Celebration*, begun in 1994, is the artist's longest-running series due to the technical complexity and lengthy process of creating the works. Famous for his perfection, Koons often spends years trying to achieve simple shapes in monumental sizes, heavy weightlessness, and optically perfect mirrored finishes.

Pre-New (1979–80) and *The New* (1980–87)

The *Pre-New* and *The New* series draw on the American public's ongoing desire for the latest consumer products. His belief in the public's enjoyment of objects reflects the legacy of pop artists Andy Warhol (American, 1928–87) and Roy Lichtenstein (American, 1923–97), whose works recognized the influence of mass production on American culture. In addition, by encasing and lighting these commercial products as if preserved artifacts, Koons follows the



readymade tradition begun by surrealist artist Marcel Duchamp (French, 1887–1968) who in his infamous work *Fountain* (1917), repositioned a urinal within a gallery and elevated an ordinary object to the status of fine art.

Equilibrium (1983–93)

This series continues the artist's examination of consumption and the desire for the eternal. Similar to *The New* series, the tanks and bronze works do not fulfill their intended function but instead serve as metaphors for social aspiration. From the basketballs that balance and float in womb-like tanks to the Nike ads of basketball heroes, Koons questions how perfection and success are created, marketed, and maintained.



Commerciality in Koons's works

Raised in a family in which his father owned a furniture store, Koons was influenced by his father's changing showroom. By mixing elements of fine art with household appliances and their seductive display, Koons monumentalizes the quest for order, permanence, status, and the new, often sought through the purchase of objects whether they are consumer goods or fine art.

LEFT TO RIGHT
Toaster, 1979
Toaster, acrylic, and
fluorescent lights
27 × 9 × 13 in.
Neil G. Bluhm

Aqualung, 1985
Bronze
27 × 17 ½ × 17 ½ in.
Private collection

Works in the exhibition

Pre-New, The New

Hoover Celebrity III
The New Jeff Koons
Toaster

New Hoover Deluxe Shampoo Polishers,
New Shelton Wet/Dry 10-Gallon Displaced
Tripledecker

Equilibrium

Aqualung
Lifeboat
Moses
One Ball Total Equilibrium Tank
(Spalding Dr. J 241 Series)
Three Ball Total Equilibrium Tank
(Dr. J Silver Series)
Two Ball 50/50 Tank (Spalding Dr. J Silver
Series, Spalding Dr. J 241 Series)

Luxury and Degradation

Baccarat Crystal Set
I Could Go For Something Gordon's
Jim Beam - J.B. Turner Train
Stay in Tonight

Statuary, Kiepenkerl

Bob Hope
Italian Woman
Rabbit
Two Kids

Kiepenkerl

Banality

Art Ad Portfolio
Bear and Policeman
Buster Keaton
Christ and the Lamb
Michael Jackson and Bubbles
Naked
Pink Panther
Stacked
Ushering in Banality
Woman in Tub

Made in Heaven

Bourgeois Bust - Jeff and Ilona
Ilona's Asshole
Large Vase of Flowers
Made in Heaven
Manet
Poodle
Self-Portrait
Silver Shoes

Celebration

Balloon Dog (Orange)
Cracked Egg (Magenta)
Diamond (Yellow)
Hanging Heart (Blue/Silver)
Moon (Violet)
Play-Doh

Easyfun, Easyfun-Ethereal, Elephant

Cow (Light Blue)
Kangaroo (Orange)
Sheep (Lilac)
Walrus (Blue Green)

Couple
Lips

Elephant

Popeye

Caterpillar Ladder
Chainlink
Dolphin
Elvis
Lobster
Popeye
Titi

Hulk Elvis

Landscape (Tree) III
Liberty Bell
Triple Hulk Elvis I

The importance of the viewer

Koons is interested in the viewer's experience, and many of his works literally reflect the viewer in their mirrored surfaces. Whether incorporating the reflections or thoughts of viewers, Koons tries "to capture the individual's desire in the object, and to fix his or her aspirations in the surface, in a condition of immortality."

COVER
Rabbit, 1986
Stainless steel
41 x 19 x 12 in.
MCA Collection, partial gift
of Stefan T. Edlis and
H. Gael Neeson

All works © Jeff Koons

Museum of
Contemporary
Art



MAY 31–SEPTEMBER 21

JEFF KOONS

Whether drawing from popular culture, commercial objects, or art history, Jeff Koons has always been interested in his works' relationship to the viewer and how art can be a powerful vehicle for self-acceptance and a democratic tool to transform the world. In presenting the familiar as beautiful, Koons aims to reawaken the viewer to a childlike sense of wonder toward the world.

Born in 1955 in York, Pennsylvania, Koons attended The Maryland Institute College of Art in Baltimore. Visiting museums in New York and Washington, D.C., he was exposed to the work of the Chicago imagists. Inspired by this art, he studied painting at The School of the Art Institute of Chicago in 1975. In 1988, the MCA presented his first solo museum exhibition. Twenty years later, *Jeff Koons* offers an unprecedented opportunity to experience firsthand the artist's belief in the transformative and transcendent power of art.

Since 1979 Koons has produced work in discrete series. While his works are meant to be easily understood, including their titles that simply reflect what is seen, this guide offers an overview of some of the themes in these series. The exhibition, designed through extensive collaboration with the artist, is roughly organized chronologically. See the back page for a list of works in the exhibition, organized by series.

Luxury and Degradation (1986)

This series explores the consumption habits and social aspirations of—as well as the subtleties of the marketing of luxury to—various income levels. Understanding consumers' psychological investment in commercial objects, Koons exposes “how luxury and abstraction are used to debase people and take away their economic and political power.”

Statuary (1986)

The *Statuary* series questions the elevation of certain objects or personalities into commemorative statues. Made of highly reflective stainless steel, these sculptures draw from a range of themes and sources, such as King Louis XIV (French, 1638–1715); the figure of entertainer Bob Hope (American, 1903–2003); and an inflatable rabbit, offering a panorama of society. For Koons, stainless steel simulates the economic security of luxurious objects but is a distinctly democratic material rather than silver or gold, materials historically associated with the elite social classes.



Banality (1988)

Executed in porcelain, or polychromed wood, these hyperrealistic works draw from images and icons of popular culture, often combining people and animals with ambiguous sexual undertones. While the *Banality* series also uses common objects and kitsch as in *The New* and *Statuary* series respectively, it also offers a distinct shift in scale. Created by master craftspeople, these works continue to challenge the distinctions between art and commodity, sublime and banal taste, and valuable sculpture and cheap kitsch.



Power of art

Koons advocates art as the most effective vehicle to transform oneself and the world. Through his use of ordinary, commercial, and kitsch objects, Koons hopes to free the viewer from traditional divisions of what constitutes art, taste, and logic to seduce the viewer into a suspension of self-judgment and conceive of a world where everything has the capacity to become a beautiful work of art. Through art, Koons aims to empower people to accept themselves the world, and others in it.

LEFT TO RIGHT
Two Kids, 1986
Stainless steel
23 × 14 ¼ × 14 ¼ in.
Rubell Family Collection,
Miami

Stacked, 1988
Polychromed wood
61 × 53 × 31 in.
The Steven and Alexandra
Cohen Collection

Popeye (2002–present)

Drawing from surrealism's use of collage and assemblage as a way to liberate the artist and viewer from conventional logic, these works extend Koons's experimentation with form and materials. In contrast to other



series in which the choice of media is evident, these sculptures appear to be made of plastic but are actually cast in aluminum, retaining the contours and look of the original plastic readymade. The deceptive imagery in both the paintings and sculptures is complicated by their many layers and unexpected combination of childhood innocence and adult sexuality.

Hulk Elvis (2005–present)

This series of large paintings combines figurative and abstract elements manipulated and collaged into spectacular pictorial



arrangements that create dizzying compositions. Brightly colored images and outlines of the Incredible Hulk cartoon character; the symbol of the American Revolution, the Liberty Bell; and various landscapes are intertwined throughout the paintings' multiple layers of realism and abstraction. These visually complex paintings extend the *Popeye* series in their exuberant presentation of image, color, texture, and detail.

Koons's production techniques

After production problems with the work titled *Kiepenkerl* (1987), Koons no longer felt compelled to use readymade objects. In a significant departure from his earlier work, he began to incorporate combinations of readymade imagery and objects into his work. To create the sculptures in the *Popeye* and *Celebration* series, his studio, which employs approximately 90 people in a 27,500-square-foot studio in New York, inflates ten to twenty toys to find the most iconic shape and makes a copy. Once the details are defined, the copy is sent to his foundries in Germany, Los Angeles, and New York. The *Popeye* sculptures are then painted at the studio while the *Celebration* sculptures' surfaces are finished at the factory.

LEFT TO RIGHT
Caterpillar Ladder, 2003
Polychromed aluminum,
aluminum, and plastic
84 × 44 × 76 in.
Collection of Rachel and
Jean-Pierre Lehmann

Triple Hulk Elvis I, 2007
Oil on canvas
108 × 146 1/8 in.
Collection of William J. Bell

Related programs

Exhibition

Everything's Here: Jeff Koons and his experience of Chicago

June 14–October 26

Drawing primarily from the MCA Collection, this companion exhibition to *Jeff Koons and Artists in Depth* focuses on the art and artists who helped shape Koons during his formative years as a young artist in Chicago. On view on the fourth floor beginning June 14, the exhibition features works by Roger Brown, Jim Nutt, Ed Paschke, Christina Ramberg, and Karl Wirsum, among others. These artists, collectively known as the Chicago imagists, emerged in the late 1960s and created a figurative but stylized art deeply influenced by comics, advertising, street signs, and other commonplace sources.

Workshop

Saturday Shorts: Moldmaking

August 2, 1–4 pm

Take inspiration from the *Jeff Koons* exhibition and transform everyday objects into art.

Make a mold, cast your creation, then bring your artwork home to impress your friends and family. Registration is required—call 312.397.4010 or visit mcachicago.org.

Tours

Curator's Tours

Tuesdays, July 8 and September 16, noon

Hear the inside scoop during this tour with Tricia Van Eck, Curatorial Coordinator and Curator of Artists' Books.

Free daily tours

Tuesdays, 1 and 6 pm

Wednesdays–Fridays, 1 pm

Saturdays and Sundays, noon, 1, 2, and 3 pm

iPod audio tours

Members free, nonmembers \$3

Listen to the artist speak as you stroll through the galleries.

Catalogue

Learn more. Head to the MCA Store to check out the *Jeff Koons* exhibition catalogue or shop online at mcachicago.org.



136 pages

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Nonmembers \$45

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Official Airline of the Museum of Contemporary Art

"Koons's interest in the (social) effectiveness of aesthetic experience is based on a political agenda that in fact is quite common consensus as it goes back to the foremost ambitions of the avant gardes: to make art that communicates social issues and to do so in a non-exclusive way."

—Art historian
Dorothea von
Hantelmann
