The Guardian: The G2 Interview 'Jeff Koons: 'People respond to banal things – they don't accept their own history'', by Emma Brockes, 5th July 2015

Jeff Koons, 2012. Photograph: David Johnson/Corbis Outline

Several years ago, Jeff Koons and his wife, Justine, took a turn around the Palace of Versailles near Paris, where an exhibition of his work had just opened. Koons, who would later see one of his sculptures sell at auction for $58m (£37m) – a record amount for a living artist – thought it would be fun to eavesdrop on the crowd, an assumption that foundered when a security guard patrolling the show offered the following loud critique: "Merde, merde, merde." Koons smiles. "Shit, shit, shit," he says. "He was stirring up the crowd, because he was so upset." What happened? "They moved him." It's a function of the man's opaque and vaguely unnerving manner that one wonders if this is a euphemism.

Over the years, many critics have agreed with the security guard's review of Koons' work, which has been described as "baloney" (the New York Review of Books), imbued with a "deadly smugness" (the Spectator), and full of "cheap, tone-deaf, misogynistic images" that look "dreadful" (this newspaper). Balloon Dog, the 10ft-tall steel sculpture that sold for $58m two years ago, is, depending on your view, either a brilliant and playful portal to the infinite, or a work of utter pointlessness, but either way, Koons is assumed to have profited from a certain credulousness that entered the art world along with all that money. Robert Hughes, the late art critic for Time magazine, loathed Koons' work so much that he described him as having "the slimy assurance, the gross patter about transcendence through art, of a blow-dried Baptist selling swamp acres in Florida". As a result, wrote Hughes, "you can't imagine America's singularly depraved culture without him".

Balloon Dog (Magenta), 1994–2000. Photograph: Erika Ede/©FMGB, Guggenheim Museum Bilbao, 2015

Koons takes all of this with the equanimity of a man whose portfolio is valued at more than $1bn. At 60, he has the abundant hair and laidback manner of The Dude, Jeff Bridges' character in the Big Lebowski, an effect so exaggerated that it comes across, at times, like the drunk trying to walk straight for the policeman. "I love all feelings," says Koons at one point and prefaces many of his observations with the statement "as a human being", as if that fact might be called into doubt. He has been known to refer to his own children as "biological sculptures".

We are in Koons' studio in Manhattan, a huge, temperature-controlled hangar where more than 130 young functionaries execute items on the artist's to-do list, for example: "Seated Metallic Ballerina, finish color boundary." (There is a list on a whiteboard at the front of the room.) Koons' work is highly technical, and very expensive to produce, and he is known to be a micro-manager, particularly when it comes to staging his art. This month, he has a retrospective opening at the Guggenheim in Bilbao, a show first put on in New York at the Whitney and featuring some of his most famous works, including Made in Heaven, the series of sculptures and images of Koons having sex with his ex-wife, Ilona Staller. In preparation for the show, he had enormous mock-ups of the Bilbao museum built in New York.

"Because of the curved walls, I was a little concerned – would the works be able to handle it? And almost everyone who has seen the retrospective in different locations says that Bilbao is the best. The architecture, if you have a small work, scales it up; and if something's really big, it scales down to a comfortable size."

A lot of Koons' works is big; he uses size to defamiliarise everyday objects. In the series Banality, he takes the kind of ornaments you might find in a gift shop and enlarges them out of all proportion. The most famous of these sculptures is Michael Jackson and Bubbles, a grotesquely sentimental trinket that Koons, along with the other items in the series, finds "very beautiful, very seductive. I find beauty in the acceptance of cultural history. I think what's interesting is to see them in museums with other historical artefacts. I had an exhibition in Frankfurt, Germany, in which Michael Jackson was with a sarcophagus from Egypt. It's fantastic. It's like an Egyptian pharaoh. It's a historical context."

Michael Jackson and Bubbles, 1988. Photograph: Erika Ede/©FMGB, Guggenheim Museum Bilbao, 2015

There is an immense joy to be had from looking at much of Koons' work. Outside the Guggenheim in Bilbao, visitors will encounter Puppy, a towering sculpture made of steel and live flowers, which, Koons says, "helps you have a dialogue about the organic and the inorganic. It's really about the issues of the baroque, where everything is negotiated: the different aspects of the eternal through biology; whether you want to serve or be served, love or be loved. All these types of polarities come into play, because Puppy helps set them up."

This kind of theoretical talk is something Koons hopes the work can survive; one of his favourite words in relation to his art is "accessible" and there are, he says, no right or wrong interpretations, no good or bad bases on which to inform an opinion (unless that opinion comes from an art critic, in which case he has theories as to the cynicism of the "gate-keepers"' response). Koons, who attended Maryland Institute College of Art, followed by the Art Institute of Chicago, talks about his art as an extension of the democratic principle – that there are moral dividends to be gained from "participation", an understanding he roots in his modest Pennsylvania background, where his father was an interior decorator and his mother a seamstress.

Puppy outside the Guggenheim Museum, Bilbao, Spain, 2006.
Photograph: Mark Baynes / Rex Features

“Middle-class people,” he says, and a moment later interrupts himself to clarify, “maybe upper-middle-class. We always felt that we were participating in social mobility. When we started out we had a smaller home, then we had a bigger home. We took more extravagant vacations. There was always a sense of mobility.”

He points to a body of work he made in 1986, called Luxury and Degradation. “And my parents had a travel bar in that exhibition. My parents said it was really a symbol of their social mobility: they had so much success that they would fly to the Caribbean and take their liquor bar with them. And in the 60s, that was a sign that you’ve made it. Luxury. But at the same time, I was trying to list the dangers.”

After college, Koons moved to New York, where he supported himself as an artist by working on the membership desk of the Museum of Modern Art and, for five minutes in the 1980s, as a commodities broker on Wall Street. He went bust several times and had to retreat to his parents’ home in Florida for six-month periods – “I remember the first time, thinking: ‘Oh, this is terrible” – but each time returned to New York and started again. Slowly he began to get noticed. One of his first important works, The New, was a series of box-fresh vacuum cleaners suspended in perspex boxes, a commentary on the fetishistic appeal of consumer culture that he would deepen over the years. The fact that his critique of materialism has, since then, itself become a valuable commodity either proves the artist’s point or entirely demolishes the work’s symbolic integrity. Koons himself will not be drawn on the issue of money and those insane sums his work goes for are, he says, in the secondary art market and nothing to do with him.

Ilona on Top (Rosa background), 1990, from made in Heaven. Photograph: © Jeff Koons

One of the most intoxicating works is the 1990 piece Made in Heaven, in which Koons sought to neutralise some of the shame around sex by depicting himself and his then wife, the porn star known as La Ciccolina who later entered the Italian parliament, having sex in various positions. What does he think when he looks at Made in Heaven now?

“When I made it, I was just thinking about the ideas around me. I was involved with banal images. I realised that people respond to banal things; they don’t accept their own history; not participating in acceptance within their own being. I started then to take that into the body. Where do people start to feel guilt and shame and rejection of the self? I wanted to go into Made in Heaven with biology; procreation; looking at nature, and to deal with ideas of the eternal.”

But revisiting it now, doesn’t he also have a human response, which is: “Oh, there’s my ex-wife?”

“No, but that’s – I think of Boucher, domesticated, un-domesticated. I think of all the polarities of the baroque and the rococo.” It’s certainly one way to process the fallout from a nasty divorce.

“My ex-wife and I were standing in there as Everyman and Everywoman. I wanted to present this Jungian, Dionysian way of looking.”

During the custody case for their son Ludwig, Koons destroyed some of the works in Made In Heaven.

“My ex-wife was saying that some of the works were pornographic. And of course my interests were just to protect my son.” Koons has eight children “in total”, he says, with a smile; Ludwig, now an adult; a daughter from a previous relationship, and six children with his second wife, Justine, who used to work with him in the studio. The family divides its time between the city and a farm in Pennsylvania. When Koons is in the city, he is very focused on work and his methodology revolves around the question of control. “One of the reasons I work with technology the way I do is that I can really be assured that the vision I have from the outset is what will be at the end. And that that vision isn’t altered through the process.”

Perhaps this is why some people dislike Koons' work; the way in which it chases an idea of perfection – all those smooth shiny surfaces – can seem to erase the possibility of error and with it some part of what it is to be human. As Milan Kundera put it, "kitsch is a denial of shit" (although Koons prefers the word "banal" to describe his work; he doesn't like the word "kitsch", with its adolescent overtones). Koons of course disagrees and has said that there is plenty of light and shade in his work. Describing Balloon Dog, he says: "It's very mythic. There's a sense of the interior to the piece, which is a bit like a Trojan piece. It's very now – it's like a balloon from a birthday party, and because it's inflated, you imagine the birthday party was recent, not 20 years ago. A normal membrane of a balloon from 20 years ago would be completely deflated. At the same time, there's a mythic and ritualistic quality; you can imagine people going around Balloon Dog in a sort of dance. A tribalistic quality."

I tell Koons that I've seen his art described (in the New Yorker) as "angry" and, for a fleeting moment, he actually looks annoyed.

"Gary," he says. A bearded man at a computer behind us turns around. "Have you ever heard that I'm angry? That I'm motivated by anger?"

"No," says Gary.

What makes him lose it?

"I would say – what makes me angry? I would say just when people don't live to their potential."

But personally; at the studio?

"I don't know. It's pretty calm. I'm constantly looking to try to find things, find flaws in the system before something happens, in order to limit the damage, so that we don't have to spend another three weeks bringing something back to the state it should've been the whole time."

One imagines he must have been angry during the custody case, which he lost and which, he says, "was the only time in my life in which everything that is right was made wrong". But it was less anger, says Koons, than "a sense of – a loss of confidence in humanity".

His art restored that faith and to all those who gaze upon it, Koons would like to convey, "that their own history is perfect. That art can be something that can empower you. I've always called for art where criticality is gone. That you are perfect for that moment, that experience. Art is about what happens inside you, and nothing to do with being something inside that object." It is the idea he strives towards; an elimination of the discomfort one might feel in oneself. "The art as a sense of your own potential as a human being."