

# CHICAGO

## MAGAZINE

### Conversation: Jeff Koons

On the eve of a major show at the MCA, the artist reflects on the Chicago encounter that set his career in motion.

BY RUTH LOPEZ

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Jeff Koons became the most expensive living artist when his giant stainless-steel *Hanging Heart (Magenta, Gold)* sold at auction for \$23.6 million in November 2007. Brash, bold, and big, Koons's oeuvre is a cornucopia of kitsch. Who could forget the life-size porcelain sculpture of Michael Jackson with his pet monkey, or the notorious series of nude images of the artist with his embattled ex-wife? Anticipating the May 31st opening of *Jeff Koons*, a major survey exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Art, we visited with the artist in his factory-like Manhattan studio, where he talked about why he loves Chicago and how he is, flamboyant antics aside, a family man.



Jeff Koons at the MCA

**Q: You have such a strong collector-base here, can you talk a bit about your ties to Chicago?**

**A:** My relationship with Chicago really started when I saw the Jim Nutt show in '74 at the Whitney Museum. I was very involved with developing my own sense of personal iconography. So coming across Nutt's work was such a relief to the work I would normally be seeing in New York and on the East Coast. And I just loved the pop quality. I think Chicago understands what has occurred in art in the 20th century very well.

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**Q: Nutt's work sparked your interest in coming to Chicago?**

**A:** I was studying at Maryland Institute College of Art at the time. So I decided in my last year to use the student mobility program and I went to the

*A look at the career of the kitsch art kings*

School of the Art Institute of Chicago. I loved Ed Paschke's work. After I saw Jim's show, I became aware of the Hairy Who and the Chicago Imagists. On the first night in Chicago, I went to the Ink Well Bar that was across from the old MCA, and this guy came in, this tall man, and I thought, "That has got to be Ed Paschke." I ended up becoming his assistant and I would stretch his canvases and help him in the studio. That's what I remember and that I loved so much about Chicago, those moments in the studio, just talking to him.

**Q: What did Ed teach you?**

**A:** Ed really taught me the politics of being an artist. He shared with me where he got his source material. Ed really revealed to me that everything is already here in the world and you just have to look for it. And Ed taught me to be at the service of your art.

**Q: What did you find when you started looking?**

**A:** What I found as an artist is that the only thing you can do is follow your interests and then focus on those interests and if you do that, things eventually become very metaphysical. I don't believe in some analytical way where you sit down and you say 'I would like to achieve this and to achieve this you have to do that...'

**Q: By metaphysical, do you mean finding the connection between all of your interests?**

**A:** I think the connection finds you.

**Q: What are some reoccurring archetypes in your work?**

**A:** When I was younger I bonded, I think, with my father swimming in the ocean. If I look at old vacation films of us, I see that my dad was always with me out in the water. What gave me a sense of confidence, eventually, was a float that I would wear on my back, it was like an air canister. It gave me such a sense of independence that I think that is why I made *Aqualung* (1985 bronze sculpture of a floating device).

**Q: I can see how that would be an object of security, is that what led you to make aluminum and stainless sculptures based on plastic blow-up toys?**

**A:** I am still working with inflatables. And the inflatables, of course, are metaphors for people, and they are metaphors of life and optimism for me. The most deathlike image I know is of an inflatable that has collapsed—I try not to keep them around. I learned about the readymade through Paschke, not Duchamp... also, my father was an interior decorator so I was always brought up with an aspect of objects displaying themselves.

**Q: You were one of the artists under consideration for Millennium Park. If you were to make a monumental work for Chicago, what would it be?**

**A:** You almost got *Puppy* (a 43-foot canine sculpture made of living plants). We talked about putting up *Building Blocks* (160-feet tall) at one point but we didn't have enough time to do it.

**Q: I read that you once took a job as a stockbroker, mainly to make money to create large-scale pieces.**

**A:** I always enjoyed sales because I saw sales as communication. It is really about connecting with people. I always saw sales as the frontline of morality and everything in the culture. So I embraced sales as a way to be self-sufficient. Then I reached a point where I could do nothing but focus on my work.

**Q: What do you make of the art market and the soaring prices? How long can this last?**

**A:** If artists can make life more exciting, can make people able to expand their intellect and gives them a sense of how expansive human existence can be, then it has value. When people are not getting anything from art that is when the art world will decline. I think that somebody who is really involved with the disciplines doesn't care about these things (the market). I mean, I never cared about money. The last thing I thought about was money. I was brought up to be self-reliant. I have always had a sense of commitment to my community. I employ a 125 people, we have a little under a 100 here at the studio and I also have a farm in Pennsylvania.

**Q: I noticed you support of a number of art programs for kids.**

**A:** Yes, but one of the ways I am involved with children that I am very proud of is that I am on the Board of Directors of the International Centre for Missing and Exploited Children. We are creating a Koons Family Institute that will be a think tank for all the relevant issues which affect children internationally.

**Q: I hate to pry, but clearly this is a result of the custody with your first wife?**

**A:** Yes absolutely, otherwise I would have been more naïve of the issues. I am not allowed to have a relationship with my son, Ludwig, even though I am supposed to be able to, I was never able to get my son returned after he was abducted from the United States to Italy. I became involved [with the Centre] so I wouldn't lose faith in humanity. That's why I made *Celebration* [a series of giant sculptures of toys], to create work that my son could understand. I was trying to communicate to him. I want to help others who are having to go through this ordeal. At the time, I was already financially in a very good position. I lost everything. Everything. And had to rebuild my life completely. Other people don't have the opportunity to rebuild their life.

**Q: Do you often come back to Chicago?**

**A:** I am coming back this weekend just to see the Bulls. My children love basketball. I have four young boys at home but one is just an infant. The three that will be coming to the game—Sean is 6, Kurt is 4, and Blake is 2—they are absolutely thrilled.

PHOTOGRAPH: JIMMY FISHBEIN

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