

GQ

Riley, Daniel: *Jeff Koons Goes to the Moon*

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Coat, \$8,573, by Lanvin. Mock neck, \$420, by Courrèges. Ring (throughout), his own.

Jeff Koons Goes to the Moon

Having conquered this world—or at least become one of our most famous and priciest artists—Jeff Koons is pushing his art beyond the limits of boring old earth.

BY DANIEL RILEY

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When I entered his crowded studio, I recognized him right away. Jeff Koons today looks practically identical to how he did in photos from his first solo show in 1980, when he asked us to accept a fresh-out-of-the-box vacuum cleaner as art. In language Koons might use to describe himself, he has nice hair, nice eyes, and a nice smile—which he deploys at the end of most sentences when any old punctuation would do. As perhaps he intended, it's also hard to look at Koons without flashing on the works he made a decade later with his then wife, Ilona Staller, a porn actress and member of the Italian parliament. In the series, *Made in Heaven*, Koons photographed himself and Staller in flagrante, dick and balls and all. The art world nearly excommunicated him. He and Staller divorced and she took their kid back to Italy and he had to destroy some of the works in order to make a case for custody. Anyway, he still looks like that guy.

"We've never met in the past?" he said, squeezing my hand and flashing his goofy grin. "You have a familiarity...."

His hands were as soft as a cherub's. And I found myself smiling the way one does when one is seen. We hadn't met before. But like any magnetic force, he beckoned me in, then began washing over me with explanations of what I'd be encountering in the many thousands of square feet we might explore. As he led me through the studio, we found the detritus of the world he'd rendered during his 45-year career. Filing cabinets filled with little dime-store figurines that he'd scanned and blown up to enormous scale, to the sculptural proportions of the marble masterpieces in the museums of Europe. Blue gazing balls and stainless-steel rabbits. The floral phantasmagoria of puppies and "split-rockers." It was like being backstage with all the props and set dressings for an interminable musical—*Koons!*—which was simultaneously the highest grossing musical of all time, and also occasionally on the verge of bankruptcy. Computer screens featured three-dimensional CT scans of sculptures in progress. Mock-ups and models for his forthcoming *Moon Phases* project—a sculptural installation of 125 small spherical works that will, yes, go to the moon—dominated one wall. A few studio elves tinkered nearby on a model of one of his most infamous unrealized works, a full-scale, fabricated locomotive train engine suspended from an enormous crane, once considered for installation at the High Line in New York City. Throughout our time together, the chugging of the model locomotive engine and the pierce of the train's whistle were as present as the grin.

Love it all or hate it all or fall somewhere in between (*Koons!* has played all these years to decidedly mixed reviews), he has maintained extraordinary relevance over the decades. Look no further than last week when a small porcelain version of one of Koons's famous balloon dogs wound up shattered at a Miami art fair; the destruction of a work by one of the very few household names in the rarefied art world was treated as push-notification-worthy. The enduring interest extends to collectors, too. "People have and will always continue to want what's new of Jeff's," Sara Friedlander, the deputy chairman of postwar and contemporary art at Christie's, told me. "People are always excited about what is going on in the studio. I mean, the truth is, people pay for it before it's even made."

His studio in New York, housed in a newish space in Hudson Yards, is composed of around 50 painters, sculptors, and technicians. As he led me around, there was some low-level tension—studio hands stiffening almost imperceptibly as Koons darkened their work stations. He is there almost every day, questioning, prodding, pushing forward with his own tireless hunger and rigorous demands for *solving the problem*. What problem? Technical, spiritual. Whose problem? Only his. He makes things "for everyone," but it's not that simple. He creates things that make himself feel happy, but if only that were it. I never saw him yell, never saw him so much as raise his voice. But it was clear that when he asked for someone in his studio to do something they would do it well and immediately. That he expected a prompt answer to each question he posed. That this or that quandary was at least in the process of being solved. In this way, Koons seemed more like a chef in a high-end kitchen than a humble practitioner applying paint to a canvas. "At this point," he told me, "I really have to know that what I'm doing is exactly what I want at the end of the day, because, just in the manufacturing of it, I can't throw it out. There's no mistakes." This was, despite the abundance of children's toys and grandma kitsch, serious fucking business and a high-stakes operation.

I spent three hours with Koons in the studio that first day, pacing around as he sipped from his Yeti (he ingests caffeine all day long, preferably instant coffee), captivated by the work and moved by Koons's generosity of spirit, but ultimately most impressed by his absolute commitment to the Jeff Koons *persona*. That is, the version of Koons who once defined happiness as "a full box of cereal and a full carton of milk." Who described most things, places, people, and experiences as "nice" or "fun" or "great." Who told me that one work we were looking at was about "power, but nostalgia, too." And: "human history." And: "us." It's difficult to poke or prod at any of the explanations, in part because the explanations feel so thoroughly considered—at least as considered as any of the pieces of his that have taken a decade-plus to complete. And yet despite the sheer volume of vocalized wall text, it was difficult to stop Koons in his tracks even when he'd say something like: "The art is the experience you're having with yourself and the essence of your own potential."

I have spent time with lots of people at the height of their craft, in particular actors and athletes in supreme control of their personae, but no one has been so skilled at giving precisely what one intended to give. Every question of mine was met with thoughtful consideration, while practically every response felt rehearsed. Not uninteresting, but often innocuous, platitudinal, banal. Which are, after all, the very subjects—the innocuous, the platitudinal, the banal—that Jeff Koons, perhaps more than any other artist ever, has asked us to accept as art. He told me the reason he works with readymade objects is so he can "have a dialogue about acceptance." A way to demonstrate that everything, as it exists, "is perfect in its own being." The persona, then, is warm, kind, utterly sincere. But it was hard at times to tell if he was pulling my leg with that stuff. His language is familiar to those like *New York Times* critic Roberta Smith, who once described "a slightly nonsensical Koons-speak that casts him as the truest believer in a cult of his own invention." And that made Calvin Tomkins, of *The New Yorker*, declare: "It is possible to argue that no real connection exists between Koons's work and what he says about it." *Vanity Fair* art columnist Nate Freeman put it to me this way: "Maybe that persona is a bit. But it's never *not* his persona—so it's not a bit? But of course it is! But he's completely genuine, completely sincere—so maybe it's all real. But of course it isn't. Because so much of what he says and does is hilarious. Going to the moon is fucking funny! And if Duchamp"—Koons's greatest antecedent—"was anything, he was funny."

I saw a crack in the façade just once that day—and it was related to Duchamp. Koons was describing for me the thing that he was still chasing after all these years. Not just the new "problem" that needed solving but the intended effect of any work of art. Koons told me, as he tells everyone, that all he really wants his work to do is validate and empower the viewer. But then I asked him what the feeling was that he wanted for *himself*, and the talking stopped, and a little mimicry began. The feeling, he said, is something he's achieved again and again, but possibly never more so than when he first set down a pink-and-white inflatable bunny on a mirror on the floor of his East Village apartment. His breakthrough. His first true statement to the world. It is a work that has embedded within it basically everything that would come later (the clean, bright, three-dimensional object in space; the reflection of both object and viewer). And in this little charade in the studio, an imaginary version of the bunny was on the floor before us. Koons approached it from the front, and peered around the edges, gazing into its mirrors, beholding the spectacle of this *new thing*. Then he made a face like the emoji of a mind being blown and looked back down at the imagined inflatable bunny on the floor. *Wow!* his mouth said silently, so as not to disturb those working in the studio. He threw his hands up and out to the side, as he does in so many photos, his signature gesture, a big old miming *Wow!* And then he spoke it, because I think he was really feeling it, undeniably, the thing he's been after all along. The most basic and brazen reaction a work of art can elicit: "WOW!"



Jacket, \$3,775, by Hermès. Pants, \$650, by Courrèges. Socks, \$29, by Falke.

Koons wakes up most mornings in his town house on the Upper East Side. He has lived in the neighborhood for 30 years. He could move back downtown, where he'd be in everyone's business, but he likes the relative obscurity of his block off the park. After he gets out of bed, he strolls past the Old Masters he keeps on his walls, an environment of classical painting he and his wife, Justine Wheeler, have cultivated over the years, in large part for their six children. ("I have a lot of kids," he tells me.) He makes his instant coffee and breakfast—often something other than from a full box of cereal and a full carton of milk. The family driver hauls the kids to school in the Bronx, then returns to pick up Koons and deliver him to the studio for what amounts to something like a ho-hum nine-to-five. The six kids with Wheeler, who range in age from 10 to 21, have been raised between New York and a family farm in Pennsylvania. They play football in Central Park. They get him into new music. ("One of the contemporary artists I really have a lot of respect for is Lil Uzi Vert," he tells me, vibrating with kinship. "He's from Philly. I think he's a great poet.") He cares about objects. He cares about the feeling objects give him. At the end of a weekday, the car picks the kids up, deposits them at home. He might have an engagement at night. On one occasion when we were together, he'd spent the previous evening at a fundraiser for one of his kids' colleges: "I had no idea what I was going to. Another course and another course and another course. They just kept pouring wine! At 11 o'clock I just said, 'I'm sorry! I have to leave!'"

"The art world acts as though to be involved in this dialogue, you have to know something about art history."

The question over whether his work is generation defining, silly, innocuous, or quite exceptionally "bad for art" seems always at the center of any discussion of Koons. His materials often play the loudest part. Over the decades, Koons has broadly shifted from bright readymades (like the original pink bunny rabbit or those gleaming vacuum cleaners) to stainless steel ("I wanted it really intoxicating," he told me, "but only a visual luxury, in this proletarian material. I like that the works could always be melted down for spoons, forks, and pots") to porcelain and polychromed wood (cheap materials, associated with knickknacks on your grandmother's bedside table), and ultimately back to colored stainless steel. "No other artist so lends himself to a caricature of the indecently rich ravening after the vulgarly bright and shiny," Peter Schjeldahl once wrote in *The New Yorker*. Roberta Smith, in a more recent assessment in the *Times*, wrote: "He challenges us: Can shiny be art?" But it is that shininess, as an articulation and reflection of the society in which it exists that makes it more. "It's really the quality of his work, interlocking with economic and social trends, that makes him the signal artist of today's world," Schjeldahl wrote. "If you don't like that, take it up with the world."

"The art world acts as though to be involved in this dialogue, you have to know something about art history," Koons said. "'You should know this, you should know that....' And that's what keeps people out. And it's what keeps the people who act like they know something in power. When you don't need anything—the gates are open! It's only about human experience! Nothing's pre-required. It only has to do with you and your own relationship to yourself and the world."

He always tries to create these feelings and sensations for himself first, and then connect them to other people, he told me. "But it's not popularity for popularity's sake. I actually kind of detest popularity for popularity's sake."

There were two moments during our time together when I saw Koons visibly recoil. One was when we were veering too close to politics. (He said "Trumpian" just once, at a decibel lower than everything else.) And the other was when he invoked his reputation for making what some call "trophy art." He means the way that a sculpture like *Balloon Dog (Orange)*—a work that the painter Pat Lipsky called "another innocuous party sculpture"—might be sought not for its inherent artistic value but as a crass symbol of wealth and power, i.e., I will place that *Balloon Dog* in the courtyard of my palace, next to the head of the lion I shot in the Serengeti, and so *Look on my Works, ye Mighty, and despair!* Indeed, the works of this order—the colored stainless-steel behemoths, in particular—do look spectacular in the courtyards of palaces, as much as they look deranged in a normal person's living room. ("They don't settle down," Scott Rothkopf, the curator of Koons's 2014 Whitney retrospective, has noted.) But in an art fair? On a floating pedestal on the Grand Canal in Venice? Ideal. Same within a billionaire's museum in Los Angeles. Or on a superyacht in the Mediterranean. Or a fan zone at a global sporting event (Koons recently made an enormous dugong, the manatee-like sea mammal that populates the Persian Gulf, for the World Cup in Qatar). Or Versailles, where, in 2008, Koons installed works around the former royal residences and in the gardens. It was a moment come full circle for Koons, given that he had had Versailles in mind when he first installed the floral *Puppy* in Germany, in 1992. "I envisioned Louis XIV visiting it," he said years later, "and thought, 'If Louis lived there, what would he want to see?'"

The Koons *Puppy* made its way to Rockefeller Center in 2000, where it stood for a summer. *New York* critic Jerry Saltz called the installation the art work of the decade, while also regarding the piece as evidence that Koons was a "driven perfectionist in pursuit of unconditional love." Koons rejects his reputation as a perfectionist, but the desire to make work that appeals to a much wider set than most art is undeniable. That summer of *Puppy* in New York, Koons appeared on *Charlie Rose* and described the experience of walking down Fifth Avenue, toward the installation: "What happened to me is I walk down the street and everybody really seems familiar to me. And I feel like I've met all these people before. And I know I haven't. I don't go to a lot of events. But it's this communal experience of feeling like there's been a connection, there's been a communication—and it's been two-way. It's not just that they've seen my work. But... information also has been sent back to me."

When I heard that, the very night after I'd visited Koons's studio, I felt a tingle of seduction. *You have a familiarity....* he'd said to me, as he must say to everyone. I'd seen his work, and he'd sensed it, received the information. Or at least made a very reasonable guess that I, like everyone, had encountered a Koons before.



Jacket, \$3,095, and pants, \$1,195, by Giorgio Armani. Shirt, \$550, by Brunello Cucinelli.

I remember my first time. I was in college, an art world know-nothing in an art-history survey that was making me less embarrassing by the day. We'd traveled from 1350 to 1988, and to the second-to-last-page of the textbook, where *Michael Jackson and Bubbles* stared back at me. In this book where I'd met Caravaggio and Géricault, this felt like an obscene joke. And yet now, upon reflection, having lived a bit of life in the era that that work both reflected and predicted, I would challenge you to name one work in the past 50 years that more accurately and concisely articulates "our times." If you were to—absurd as this is—send an artwork to the moon, wouldn't Michael and Bubbles tell the aliens everything they needed to know?

I saw the artist's proof in person the month the Broad museum opened in LA in 2015 and then visited it again recently. For those unfamiliar with the work, Michael and Bubbles are rendered in white and gold, a lonely man, the most famous man alive at the time of its production, 1988, and that man's best friend, a chimpanzee—the only being Michael apparently trusted and loved, and whom he considered to be his first son. Bubbles toured Japan with Michael, learned to moonwalk. There was no living person the fame-hounding Koons said he wanted to be more than Michael Jackson. He and Bubbles, then, are both worshiped here and disparaged. They are wearing matching jackets, and they are adorned with flowers. Michael's lips are red and his face is white. Whiter than real Michael's face was in 1988, but about as white as it would get. The sculpture is large, and it is in many ways perfect. Poreless. Stolid. Depressing. Hilarious. Dead before death. Embalmed in porcelain and gold leaf, like saints.

It is a paean to celebrity and to the Christ of that time. It is modeled off one of the most famous sculptures on earth: Michelangelo's *Pietà*, which lives near the entrance to St. Peter's, in the Vatican. (The other reference, Koons told me, is the Pyramids of Giza; if you're gonna swing, swing.) The one time I saw the *Pietà* in person, it was a hot, wet July. It was crowded in St. Peter's, muggy and humid around Mary and Jesus. I had strep throat and almost passed out. But the wooziness in the presence of the *Pietà* left with me the impression of a significant "art experience." With Michael and Bubbles, recently, it happened again. Only this time, it was from the blood rush you get from smiling like a maniac. Koons had understood his moment. But he had also understood how much deeper we would fall into our obsessions with celebrity. How much more embarrassing we could get, how much more shameless. He knew that we would meet the work where it was, that the religion, the cult, the devotion, would only grow more fervent. In the Koons, Michael is in the position of Mary, and Bubbles the Christ. Michael would die like a mortal man. Whereas Bubbles would be relocated to an animal sanctuary in Florida—and has lived, might live forever.



Michael Jackson and Bubbles, on display at the Palace of Versailles. Laurent Lecat/Courtesy of Jeff Koons

At one point back in the studio, Koons and I were staring at Leonardo da Vinci. Leonardo da Vinci is the name he has given to one of the 125 “moon phases” in his *Moon Phases* project—a project that will, among other things, deliver 125 small sculptures via SpaceX rocket and Intuitive Machines lander to the lunar surface later this year. Each of the 125 moon phases has three component parts. First is the sculpture that’s going to the moon. Each moon-bound sculpture is small—about an inch in diameter—because, as Koons points out, “it’s very, very expensive to send anything to the moon.” Koons came up with the 125 names for the phases himself, inspired by NASA’s longstanding efforts to share some of human history with the heavens. In addition to Leonardo, there are phases named after some world-historical GOATs (Ramesses II, Shakespeare), some personal heroes (Bernini, Elvis), and some other things Koons felt vital to note to the aliens (e.g., one phase is a gibbous moon called, simply, Atom).

The second component of a *Moon Phases* work is a larger three-dimensional sculpture that the owner keeps in their possession. This sculpture, a little bigger than a basketball, has a rendering of the lunar surface machined onto the sphere and a gemstone that precisely indicates the location of the installation on the real live moon. These spherical sculptures hearken back to one of Koons's breakthrough series, *Equilibrium*, in which he built glass cases to float basketballs in equilibrium tanks. The glass tanks, among the first works he fabricated himself, look a lot like the polycarbonate case of smaller sculptures going to the moon. The basketballs in the "50-50 tanks" look a whole lot like a first quarter moon (Plato, Rosa Parks).

The final component of the *Moon Phases* project is an NFT, and this is where things get very 2023. *Moon Phases* is something Koons had been kicking around for the past three or four years, but having already tested the limits of what his dealers and benefactors might indulge, he'd placed "moon mission" in the cabinet of ideas that might never transpire. Then, in spring 2021, Koons moved on from longtime gallerist David Zwirner and longer-time gallerist Larry Gagosian to Pace, and engaged with the emerging Web3 division there, Pace Verso. The NFT component, which includes unique documentation of one's sculpture on the moon's surface, differs from some other NFT projects from recent years in that there are these other real-world components. One piece on Earth, one on the moon, and one in the metaverse.

When I heard that Koons was doing *Moon Phases*, it just sounded right. Is there any other living artist with the curiosity, resources, and will to take to space so gamely? Whose history of limit pushing and boundary expanding made it feel not so awkward or cynical? Pace Verso head Ariel Hudes told me that the gallery deliberately differentiates itself from the sort of digital art that was recently popularized—little squares in a digital wallet, coveted as speculative assets—with projects customized to each artist, like this one. "Why is *Moon Phases* an NFT project? If you think of the permanence of putting something on the blockchain and the permanence of putting something on the surface of the moon, I think there's a nice mirroring there," Hudes said. In other words: moon surface as original blockchain. But also as museum storage or free port. Collecting something that sits on the moon isn't all that different, at the end of the day, from something that sits in a temperature-controlled cell in Switzerland. Once it's there, it ain't going anywhere. But it's a little tricky to see up close.



Jeff Koons, Moon Phase (Leonardo da Vinci), 2022. Courtesy of Jeff Koons

Koons emerged on the downtown scene in 1977, the terminus of a predestined journey from York, Pennsylvania (a humble home, the origin of a lingering accent), to Baltimore (art school) to Chicago (more art school) and then to the East Village (to which he'd hitchhiked without passing go, he says, apocryphally, after hearing a Patti Smith song). In the subsequent 45 years, Koons became, in roughest chronology, one of the most daring, colorful, enigmatic, prideful, hubristic, corny, offensive, confounding, contented—and ultimately best known and most expensive artists in the industry, the city, the country, and the world. His adult practice, which began in an East Village apartment, has grown to include manufacturers, engineers, metallurgic workshops in Germany, stone fabricators on the outskirts of American cities, and the large studio in New York. But in the beginning it was just a guy, working during the day (first selling memberships at MoMA, then selling commodities on Wall Street), in order to make art at night.

Willem Dafoe, who arrived in New York when Koons did, recalls being out in the East Village at around three in the morning, when his buddy suggested, "Let's go over to my friend's place. He's an interesting guy." This was '78 or '79. They arrived at this apartment, Dafoe says, "and there was a guy there sitting at his kitchen table, and he had these model cars and he was painting them and gluing fake jewels and fur on them." A young Koons, of course. "That's always been such a strong memory, particularly since, well, it wasn't that the work had nothing to do with what his work would be later on—but that it would *absolutely* have something to do with what his work would be. I liked that he had this very jovial manner, very polite, and seemed to work from a sense of pleasure and curiosity, which was always fun to watch."

Dafoe and Koons aren't close friends, but they've seen each other over the years for decades now. "I hate to get involved with I-knew-him-when recollections, but the truth was that what he presented then was very much the same guy as he is now. And that's what interests me." (Dafoe never snagged any early works: "I wasn't that smart," he says with a laugh.)

Early in his career, Koons told me, his intention was to slough off some of the subjective tendencies of his earliest work and to pursue "an objective vocabulary." That is, "to create something that wouldn't have any more meaning to me than it would to you." Working with the readymades was a way to work with things that are in abundance, that are familiar and resonant to everyone. "The type of answers that we're looking for in life," Koons said, "those answers are abundantly around us, and I just think that we need to find ways to decipher it."

The scaling up over the years was a natural progression. If in the beginning, Koons explained, "you're able to kill a hare, and you bring it home for yourself to eat, at a certain point you're going to want to hunt for mammoth." Most artists look to their galleries for institutional attention, high-profile shows, and strong sales. But for Koons, increasingly over the past three decades, the test became simpler: Who would foot the bill for the production costs of these extraordinarily expensive works? Some of these pieces took upwards of 20 years to engineer to Koons's exacting standards. Like the enormous *Play-Doh* sculpture he debuted at his 2014 Whitney retrospective, fabricated in such a way that polychromed aluminum mimicked the dull finish and distinctive texture of a heap of his son's modeling clay. His original *Balloon Dogs*—mirror-polished stainless-steel structures that replicate precisely the distinctive look of inflated latex rubber—famously required such up-front investment that several editions were sold before any were completed. Occasionally, Koons doesn't deliver on time a work that's already been bought and paid for. That puts everyone—artist, gallery, collector, market—in precarious waters. ("Jeff pushes his dealers to the breaking point," one of Koons's former dealers, who helped fund the *Celebration* series that included both the *Play-Doh* and *Balloon Dogs*, once said.)

He has consequently moved from gallery to gallery over the years—including among three of the four so-called mega-galleries: Gagosian, David Zwirner, and Pace, his current home. Pace CEO Marc Glimcher said he first became good friends with Koons in the early '90s, when Koons was looking for financial help for the *Celebration* series. They didn't work together then but always kept the line open. "There's been so much power and energy behind 'Jeff Koons' for so long," Glimcher told me, "but even with someone like that there's a moment that comes for the next chapter. Now it's our turn."

"This idea of having a factory, a studio, just knocking it out—it just doesn't exist. Never has."

Sara Friedlander, from Christie's, was in the room in 2013 when *Balloon Dog (Orange)* sold for over \$58 million and became the most expensive work ever sold by a living artist. "It was explosive, it was global," she recalled, "and I would say that Jeff is really good and smart and strategic about the way he is a part of the market. And that is in many ways part of the work."

But Koons bristles at the perception that his art is excessively associated with money. “There are certain things about my work, and even my background in supporting myself as a commodities broker, that make people think it’s about this concept of commodities, about commerce,” Koons told me. “I mean, my work’s about desire, and it’s about creating objects that are desirable. This idea of having a factory, a studio, just knocking it out—it just doesn’t exist. Never has existed. But there’s this idea that it’s just about money. And if it would just be about money, I sure wouldn’t have all these expenses because all that money is going right back into the production of the pieces. It’s going into the realization of the works. It’s going into creating these works so that they can be experienced, so that they can exist.”

All these years in, Koons is still interested in transforming himself. “In sculpture in particular, reinvention is a really big deal,” Glimcher said. But when he saw Koons’s new works in marble and porcelain for the first time, he thought, “This guy is a fucking genius, at the height of his powers.”

“I would always try within an exhibition to take the idea as far as I could,” Koons told me. “And then I would re-create myself.”



On another day this winter, I met Koons at the stone fabricator where his studio produces his works in marble. The fabricator, Antiquity Stone, is located in an industrial park on the Delaware River, in Pennsylvania. Koons, who heads most weekends with his family to the farm once owned by his grandparents that he rebought as an adult, likes to stop by to check on progress. Today, he drove a loaner Lincoln down from New York because his Mercedes was in the shop. He was more casual than he was at the studio, in a dark sweater and a lightweight Burton jacket. (Another obsession siphoned from his kids: snowboarding.) There were a couple dozen employees—machinists and sculptors and stone specialists. They snapped to with the boss in town.

We approached several stone-milling bays, where extraordinary machines make precise cuts over the course of days, weeks, months, years. If you've ever seen a 3D printer work, it looks like that, but rendering an eight-foot Koons sculpture out of the most luxurious marble on earth. Koons hopped into one of the bays and circled the work in progress. I had seen a version of this sculpture on a computer screen at the studio in New York. The figure is a ballerina, a female in a lace dress, originally a five-inch porcelain tchotchke that the studio scanned and blew up to these staggering proportions. The lace is what appealed to Koons and what has taken a decade to render. And this is where things get particularly interesting. It is not the physical production that takes so long with these things—the six years with the *Balloon Dogs*, the two decades with *Play-Doh*. But rather the time it takes to develop the technology, to assemble the digital file, to gin up the finances, to even get to a place where one could conceivably start physically producing the work. The white light and CT scans can only see so much, and so Koons and the sculptors in his studio, then, had to fill in the rest of *Pink Ballerina's* lace dress as best they could. Here in this bay in this stone mill, all these years later, we saw the fruits of those labors one might reasonably consider superfluous or insane.

“That’s why I use craft to the level that I do, and try to have things as perfect as possible. Just to let people stay lost as long as possible.”

But it is this streak of obsession that I found myself most attracted to in Koons. The lacework of the dress, to hold onto this example, would look the same to an observer if it were just the surface, rather than all the intricacies of the holes and folds, rendered in the stone. “You won’t know that it’s incomplete,” Koons told me. “But I’d know.” The inverse holds true as well: We don’t know that it’s fastidiously accurate all the way through, but he knows. And the knowing is what drives the quest for this perfect mimesis. Back at the studio he’d shown me a piece from the mid-’80s: a stainless-steel cast of a Bob Hope figurine like you’d have found in Times Square. He’d asked the fabricator to maintain every last detail, but when he went to pick it up the felt on the bottom was missing. He asked them what happened to the bottom and they said no one’s gonna look at the bottom. He flipped. “‘Oh, my gosh! The average person may not notice, but what if somebody picks it up to set it on a table?’ It’s about showing respect to the viewer and about maintaining the suspension of disbelief all the way. Let people stay in this realm of abstraction for as long as possible, and not feel let down. That’s why I use craft to the level that I do, and try to have things as perfect as possible. Just to let people stay lost as long as possible.”

You must trust him. You must believe that the bottom of the Bob Hope sculpture is replicated just so, that the stainless steel–balloon knots tie the way that a latex rubber balloon would even in the places you can’t see, that the lace is rendered as it should be deep into the folds, and that the moon phases are indeed on the lunar surface. We take his word for it, because the obsession over craft has been the guiding light all along. Also because it feels good to believe.



A rendering of the lunar lander being used to deposit Koons's art on the moon. Courtesy of Jeff Koons

The only edition of *Pink Ballerina* that's in the wild belongs to Miuccia Prada and the Fondazione Prada in Milan. It took 12 years to complete. As if the sculpture weren't striking enough in its veinless pink Portuguese marble, Koons, as he has for years now with some of his works that hearken back to antiquity, has provided slots in the sculpture in which to place flowers. *Pink Ballerina* is, in this way, the world's most indulgent vase. The subtle pinkness of this marble combined with the colorful flowers denudes the old Roberta Smith question: *Can shiny be art?* Its appeal is obvious, its rigor awesome. It is uncomplicatedly classical.

We approached one of the *Pink Ballerinas* in a still further phase of progress. This one, Koons said, was maybe a few months out from being shipped. The main finisher at Antiquity Stone and a team of four or five local art-school graduates were at work polishing the marble. The pink lace, in its effluvial abundance, was like fragile coral. The artisans, masked up and wearing headphones, worked as steadily as soldiers at boot camp scrubbing the floor with their toothbrushes. It wasn't, of course, that no one had ever produced sculptures of this scale and detail before. They'd been doing it, miraculously, for thousands of years. But the particulars of this challenge—the obsession to render this particular fabric in stone in this particularly roundabout way—was thrilling to see up close. Koons approached the work and ran his fingers along the surface, asking about imperfections and coloration, a vein across the cheek. He is no longer young, but still tireless, ever expanding. Goethe once observed that Titian, in his old age, “depicted only *in abstracto* those materials which he had rendered before concretely: so, for instance, only the *idea* of velvet, not the material itself.” If obsession over detail is a sign of youth, and its opposite, its slippage, a sign of decline, then Koons remains as young as he was with the inflatable bunny on the floor of the apartment that Willem Dafoe visited.

While we stood before *Pink Ballerina*, Koons reached for his phone, as he did many times when we were together, to illustrate a point. The phone—sleek, reflective, culturally totemic as a Koons—had a Verrocchio as its home screen. He scrolled past the text chain with his whole damn family—called “Famdamily”—and dove into the deep recesses of his photo library. Compared to his texts, which rolled in in the magnified font used by Boomers the world over, the photos were gridded tightly, like microfilm. He scrolled through recent family outings (snowboarding), past noteworthy stopovers (to a Real Madrid soccer game, where he’d met Original Ronaldo, O Fenômeno), before arriving at a visit to a museum. When in Madrid, he’d stopped by the Prado, to see what there was to see. Ditto the Louvre, during his time in Paris. They don’t shut it down or clear out the corridors for him—but it’s not like anyone would recognize Leonardo if he were standing next to the *Mona Lisa* anyway. He took a bazillion photos, even in the museums where photos are banned. (*Shhh...*) Three-hundred-and-sixty degrees around some magnificent 18th-century sculpture, up close and backed away. Thirteen ways of looking at a Canova. It was in these moments with Koons that I felt it easiest to forget who I was with. This was not a favorite uncle, showing off his first trip to Europe. But someone much more rarefied. Here, indeed, was the most loved and loathed of all living artists, and perhaps the only person alive with enough money, know-how, and conviction to produce an eight-foot sculpture out of pink Portuguese marble that might stand one day beside its 400-year-old cousins.

I was distracted by the artisans polishing the folds of the lace dress of *Pink Ballerina*, while Koons went on about an unfinished Michelangelo. I was feeling the *Wow* coming on while looking at the Koons when I heard Koons say “Wow” looking at his phone. There it was again, as he scrolled onto the next. *Wow!* Another work. The feeling he’d been chasing since the beginning, and would chase till the end. Despite being a voluble talker, it was sometimes easier to show than to tell. He scrolled to another. “Would you look at that?!” he said, holding up his phone. I bet you know what he said next.

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