

Serpentine Gallery

Teachers' Resources

Jeff Koons: Popeye Series

2 July – 13 September 2009

Teachers' Notes



Jeff Koons
Popeye 2003
Oil on canvas
274.3 x 213.4 cm
Courtesy of the artist
© 2008 Jeff Koons

Jeff Koons: Popeye Series

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These notes are designed to support your visit to the Serpentine Gallery, including planning prior to your visit and suggestions for discussion and activities back at school when you return. They are aimed primarily at Key Stage 3 but include activities that can relate to all key stages, enabling you to develop them to suit your needs and inspire discussion and practical work.

The *Jeff Koons: Popeye Series* Teachers' Notes are also available to download free at www.serpentinegallery.org along with Teachers' Notes for the previous exhibitions:

Luke Fowler, 7 May – 14 June 2009
Rebecca Warren, 10 March – 19 April 2009
Indian Highway, 10 December 2008 – 22 February 2009
Gerhard Richter, 23 September – 23 November 2008
Richard Prince, 26 June – 7 September 2008
Maria Lassnig, 25 April – 8 June 2008
Derek Jarman, 23 February – 13 April 2008
Anthony McCall, 30 November 2007 – 3 February 2008
Matthew Barney, 20 September – 11 November 2007
Hreinn Fridfinnsson, 17 July – 2 September 2007
Paul Chan, 15 May – 1 July 2007
Allora & Calzadilla, 17 – 29 April 2007
Karen Kilimnik, 20 February 9 April 2007
In the darkest hour there may be light, works from Damien Hirst's murderme collection, 25 November 2006 – 28 January 2007
Runa Islam, 25 October – 5 November 2006
China Power Station: Part 1, 8 October – 5 November 2006
Uncertain States of America, 9 September – 15 October 2006
Thomas Demand, 6 June – 20 August 2006
Ellsworth Kelly, 18 March – 21 May 2006
Elmgreen & Dragset, 26 January – 26 February 2006
Ilya and Emilia Kabakov, 19 October 2005 – 8 January 2006
Oliver Payne & Nick Relph, 6 September – 2 October 2005
Rirkrit Tiravanija, 5 July – 21 August 2005
Andreas Slominski, 26 April – 12 June 2005
Tomoko Takahashi, 22 February – 10 April 2005
Monika Sosnowska, 5 December 2004 – 16 January 2005
Glenn Brown, 14 September – 7 November 2004
Gabriel Orozco, 1 July - 30 August 2004
Cy Twombly, 17 April – 13 June 2004
State of Play, 3 February – 28 March 2004
Hiroshi Sugimoto, 18 November 2003 – 18 January 2004
John Currin, 9 September – 2 November 2003
Cindy Sherman, 3 June – 25 August 2003
Takahashi Murakami, 12 November 2002 – 26 January 2003
Kutlug Ataman, 11 February – 9 March 2003

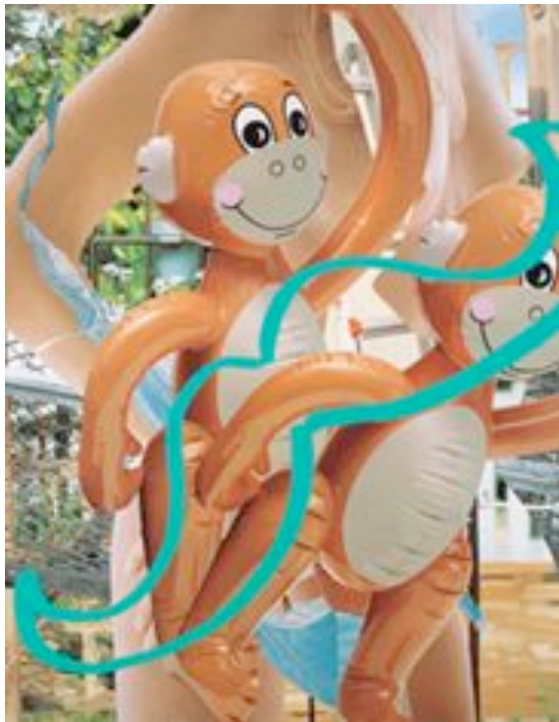
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Background information

The Serpentine Gallery presents an exhibition of the work of the celebrated American artist Jeff Koons, his first major exhibition in a public gallery in England. Working in thematic series since the early 1980s, Koons has explored notions of consumerism, taste, banality, childhood and sexuality. He is known for his meticulously fabricated works that draw on a variety of objects and images from American and consumer culture.

Jeff Koons was born in York, Pennsylvania, USA in 1955. His work has been widely exhibited internationally and his most recent solo exhibitions include presentations at the Château de Versailles, France; Neue Nationalgalerie, Berlin, Germany; Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, USA; and Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, USA all in 2008. Koons lives and works in New York, USA.



Jeff Koons
Monkeys (Ladder) 2003
Oil on canvas
274.3 x 213.4 cm
Courtesy of Gagosian Gallery
© 2009 Jeff Koons

Themes, ideas and questions to explore

1. Painting, Popeye and cartoon imagery



Jeff Koons
Olive Oyl 2003
Oil on canvas
274.3 x 213.4 cm
Courtesy of The Dakis Joannou Collection
© 2009 Jeff Koons

Keywords

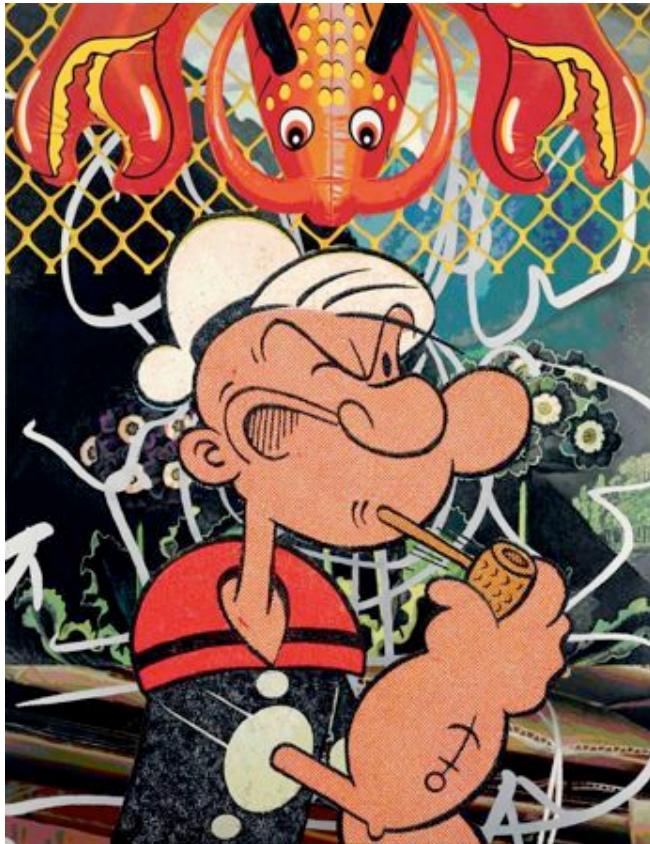
Painting – Pop art – Figurative – Abstract – Surface – Explode – Merge – Layer – Mass Media – Comic strips – Photographs – Magazines – Cartoon figures – Superheroes – *Playboy* – Andy Warhol – Optimism – Self-expression – Change – Transformation – Multiply – Movement – Heroism – Magnified – Images

Cross-curricular links

Art and Design – Media Studies – Creative and Media Diploma – Design Technology

For his exhibition at the Gallery, Koons presents paintings and sculptures from his *Popeye* series, which he began in 2002. The works incorporate some of Koons's signature ideas and motifs, including surreal combinations of everyday objects, cartoon imagery, art-historical references and inflatable children's toys.

The immediately recognisable figures of Popeye and Olive Oyl are central in the series and appear in several prominent works within the exhibition. One of the most iconic American comic-strip characters, Popeye was conceived 80 years



Jeff Koons
Popeye 2003
Oil on canvas
274.3 x 213.4 cm
Courtesy of the artist
© 2008 Jeff Koons

ago this year in 1929 when the Great Depression was taking hold. In Popeye's early years, the cartoon addressed the hardships and injustices of the time and, in this current period of economic recession, he is a transforming character to rediscover and explore. This year, Popeye also has become part of the public domain by rights, alongside many subjects of Pop art.

The paintings combine an archive of popular and mass media images as well as appropriating comic strips, cartoon figures, photographs and references to older art. The images are layered, enlarged, multiplied and fragmented. Chains and fencing found in Koons's sculptures are also found in the paintings in which they create twisted metal grids, lines and screens across the surface. Koons uses glimpses of bikini tops and pin-up models explore further themes of sexuality, desire and mass media in his work.

Discussions

Discuss any connections that you might see between the works and these concepts:

1. Desire and leisure versus function and need
2. Consumerism and the mass-media

How are the specific qualities of Koons's *Popeye* series similar and different to the imagery of the media conveyed in contemporary culture?

Like advertising and media imagery, cartoons also reflect cultural tastes, desires and prejudices. What points of view, lifestyles and values are represented in Koons's work?

What qualities do the paintings share with the sculptures in the exhibition?

Activities

Create an artwork representing your own interpretation of a contemporary cartoon figure, or superhero. Collect and chose source images to make a collage. Source materials can be photocopied. Students should crop their sources and make decisions concerning repetition and scale (documents can be enlarged or reduced using the copy machine). Colour may be added using paint (acrylic or gouache) and coloured pencils. If computer technology is available students may use Photoshop to manipulate images for this project.

Comic books have been around in their present form since the 1930s. Now comics have become a literary genre in their own right. Research comic books past and present and then work in small groups to make your own comic book, using hand drawn, collage and digital images. Your finished work can be photocopied and distributed at school.

2. Readymade and everyday objects



Jeff Koons
Seal Walrus Trashcans 2003-2009
Polychromed aluminum, galvanized steel
170.2 x 76.2 x 91.4 cm
Courtesy of Gagosian Gallery
© 2009 Jeff Koons

Keywords

Sculpture – Tradition – History – Popular Culture – Representation – Everyday object – Readymade – Childhood – Appropriation– Functional – Ordinary – Extraordinary – Desired – Consumerism – Memory – Manufactured – Motif – Metaphor – Transform – Salvador Dali – Marcel Duchamp – Kitsch – Bright – Buoyant.

Cross-curricular links

Art and Design – Media Studies – Creative and Media Diploma – Design Technology

With the *Popeye* series, Koons returns to the ready-made and with its ideas about consumer culture that inform his early work. Beginning in the 1980's he transformed objects such as basketballs, vacuum cleaners, and inflatable toys into works of art, blurring the boundaries between popular culture and high art. The sculptures on show in the exhibition create strange encounters between objects. Koons casts inflatable toys such as turtles, monkeys, dolphins and lobsters and presents them with simple every-day objects such as a chair, ladder or rubbish bins. They are cast in aluminium and their surfaces are painted to bear an uncanny resemblance to the original objects, however unlike the original inflatable toys, the replicas will never deflate. This is a decision made by the artist so that the works are happy and optimistic in tone.

The relationships between the replica ready-mades with unaltered everyday objects vary throughout the exhibition. In some works the interaction between the two counterparts is playful and dance-like. In others the inflatable creatures are stuck, squeezed or constrained.



Jeff Koons
Caterpillar Ladder 2003
Polychromed aluminium, aluminium, plastic
213.4 x 111.8 x 193 cm
Collection of Rachel and Jean-Pierre Lehmann
© 2009 Jeff Koons

Discussions

What is a readymade?

What qualities do we usually associate with inflatable toys?

What qualities do we usually associate with chairs, ladders, fences, rubbish bins, and chains?

What different meanings would the work have if the inflatables had been transformed in to a wooden or clay sculpture?

Discuss Jeff Koons's *Popeye* artworks and the methods that have been used to create a sense of value and importance.

What are the emotional qualities of this work?

2. Art history and popular culture



Jeff Koons
Moustache 2003
Polychromed aluminium, wood
and coated steel chain
260.4 x 53.3 x 191.8 cm
Galerie Jérôme de Noirmont, Paris
© 2009 Jeff Koons

Keywords

History – Irony – Viewpoint – Meaning – Value – Illusion – Popular Culture – Function – Mythology – Universal – Motif – Symbolism – Reference – Value – Perception – Ritual – Allegory – Monumental – Mundane – Contemporary

Cross-curricular links

Art and Design – Media Studies – Creative and Media Diploma – Design Technology – Art History – History

Koons uses motifs and references to art movements and history throughout his work. *Lobster* and the *Moustache* both reference Surrealist artist Salvador Dali, famous for his curled moustache and his sculpture *Lobster Telephone* (1936). The moustache can also be linked to Marcel Duchamp's painting *L.H.O.O.Q.* (1919). This artwork is a reproduction of Leonardo da Vinci's *Mona Lisa* onto which Duchamp drew a moustache and a beard in pencil and appended the title. Besides Duchamp and Dali, Koons appropriates images from Andy Warhol and H.C. Westerman, an American post war printmaker and sculptor.



Jeff Koons
Acrobat 2003–09
Polychromed aluminium,
galvanised steel, wood and straw
228.9 x 148 x 64.8 cm
Bill Bell Collection
© 2009 Jeff Koons

Discussions

Discuss any relationships you might see between Koons's *Popeye* series and the following movements:

- Dada
- Surrealism
- Pop art

What makes things in galleries and museums seem important? How are they displayed?

How do commercials and magazines make us think we need a product?

What mechanisms in popular culture does Koons use to create a sense of value and importance in his sculptures? Does he use precious materials?

Activities

Investigate examples of leisure, luxury and consumerism in the 1950's, 1980's and compare them to contemporary culture in 2009.

Give a selection of everyday, inexpensive items to your students. Assign each student to create the perception that their object is expensive, desirable, or important using any of the identified mechanisms:

- Embellishment (add sequins or paint the object gold)
- Method of display (in a case, behind a barricade, hung on a wall with a label)
- An advertisement (who uses this object, why does everyone have to have it?)
- Through hype and celebrity (stage an event that creates a buzz about the object: have the principal wear or use the object, have all your friends wear it/use it on the same day)

Identify motifs from Dada, Surrealism or Pop art and use them to create a new artwork that focuses on representing contemporary issue or event.

Further information and related links

Jeff Koons: Popeye Series, © 2009 Serpentine Gallery, London; Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König, Cologne; and authors

Jeff Koons Eckhard Schneider, Ingrid Sischy, Katy Siegel, edited by Hans Werner Holzwarth. Taschen, America Llc, 2009

Jeff Koons Art Institute of Chicago, Lynne Warren, edited by Francesco Bonami, Yale University Press 2008

www.serpentinegallery.org

www.jeffkoons.com

Planning a Visit to the Serpentine Gallery

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Transport

The nearest tube stations are South Kensington (1.25 km walk), Knightsbridge (1.25 km walk) or Lancaster Gate (1 km walk)

Bus routes 9, 10, 52, 452, 94 and 148 stop near the Gallery

Group Visit Guidelines

To make your visit as enjoyable as possible, please read the following:

Before your Visit:

- Adult supervision of students under 16 is required at all times, including in the shop. An adult student ratio of 1:5 for under 5's, 1:10 for 5 - 11 year olds, 1:15 for 11 - 16 year olds and 1:20 for 16 - 18 year olds is required.
- We recommend a preliminary planning visit, as for some exhibitions there may be works that you consider unsuitable for your group.

During your Visit:

- **The artworks in the *Jeff Koons: Popeye Series* exhibition are extremely fragile. Please take extra care to follow the Gallery Guidelines at all times:**
 - No running
 - No touching
 - No leaning against walls or plinths
 - No shouting
 - No photography
- Teachers/group leaders and accompanying adults are responsible for their group's behaviour whilst at the Serpentine Gallery.
- Many contemporary artworks are fragile and damage easily. Please make sure that your group understands that this is why they are not allowed to touch the art.
- Lecturing: If your group is larger than 30 please split them into smaller groups in the exhibition space and do not lecture in rooms where talks are already in progress.
- Drawing: If you would like to do some drawing please check with the gallery what materials you will be able to use in the exhibition

Education and Family Events

Education is at the core of the Serpentine Gallery's activities. Through practical, artist led workshops and discussion, talks, events and projects the Education Programme offers a diverse range of innovative ways to engage with modern and contemporary art and architecture for all ages.

Please refer to the Serpentine Gallery Bulletin or www.serpentinegallery.org for information on events and activities taking place as part of the Education Programme during the *Jeff Koons: Popeye Series* exhibition.