

Jeff Koons and Luke Syson Episode 1 Transcript

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LUCAS ZWIRNER: From David Zwirner, this is Dialogues—a podcast about creativity and ideas.

[SOUNDBITE; JEFF KOONS: When we make something, we have an opportunity to be in communication with an individual, to show empathy and to have a dialogue.]

LZ: I'm Lucas Zwirner, Editorial Director of David Zwirner Books. In every episode on the podcast we'll introduce you to a surprising pairing. We're taking the artists we work with at the gallery and putting them in conversation with some of the world's most extraordinary makers and thinkers.

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LZ: Today's pairing: the artist Jeff Koons and the curator Luke Syson. Over the last three decades Jeff has built an unmatched global following as a sculptor, painter, and creative visionary with a singular take on pop culture and everyday objects. No topic is off limits for Jeff: Michael Jackson with Bubbles, his pet chimpanzee; mirror-polished stainless steel balloon animals; forty-foot-tall puppies made of living flora, complete with their own irrigation systems and exquisite porcelain statuary. Jeff's work delights, enchants, and provokes—all at the same time. Welcome, Jeff.

JEFF KOONS: It's great to be here.

LZ: And Luke Syson is here. Luke is a daring, distinguished curator who's overseen collections at three of the greatest, London's greatest, perhaps the world's greatest museums, including the British Museum, the National Gallery, and the Victoria and Albert. Since 2012 he's been the chairman of European Sculpture and Decorative Arts at The Metropolitan Museum in New York. Welcome, Luke.

LUKE SYSON: Thank you, it's very exciting.

LZ: To someone who's really never been to a museum, perhaps never encountered a gallery, never seen your work, maybe, Jeff, you can give it a whirl for us—sort of how you would introduce yourself to someone who maybe doesn't know anything about you or what it means to make the work that you make.

JK: Well, yeah, I'm an artist and I like to work with readymade objects. And the reason I work with objects or images that preexist: it's a way to communicate acceptance, acceptance of the self. And once you learn how to accept yourself you're able to go out into the world and you're able to accept other people. And my work uses objects and images as metaphor to bring about that type of transcendence within our life.

LZ: The work of a curator also not familiar to necessarily so many people—how would you describe that or what you do?

LS: I think that every curator has in their collection, in a sense, a vast family. It's about really championing the objects. It's making them speak to as large and diverse an audience as possible—from scholars to the normal visitor to the museum.

LZ: So on that note, maybe let's talk about your show at The Met. Luke has a show up right now in The Met Breuer building called Like Life: Sculpture, Color, and The Body (1300–Now). The show is up through July 22 and it features two works of Jeff's, two sculptures. Maybe you could tell us a bit about those works and how Jeff fits into the vision for the show and sort of the show in general.

LS: So Like Life is a collaboration with Sheena Wagstaff, chairman of Modern and Contemporary Art at The Met, and it's been unbelievably exciting and unbelievably challenging. We decided early on not to do a chronological survey of colored sculpture, but really to look across time at how artists made works that in a way sit between the experience of high art—elevated on pedestals, monochrome encountered in galleries—and what I guess I've always thought of as more popular or low art in a way—found in perhaps the home but also in church processions, in fairgrounds, in wax museums. More recently artists are taking this kind of counter visual tradition and revisiting it to look at that space that we all have, I think, between art and life. So this is a show which takes historic works from the late Middle Ages, through to around 1900, and puts them with pieces that were made in the last one hundred years, but particularly the last thirty or forty years.

LZ: And how was it finding your work in the context of this show? So two sculptures: Michael Jackson and Bubbles and Buster Keaton. Was that a conversation you had with Luke about which works to include? How did that unfold?

JK: I did have conversations with Luke and Sheena, but I always have loved this dialogue about the history of polychroming and became really fascinated—you know, learning how in the past of course everything was polychromed, and then when they were unearthed, everybody looked at them

David Zwirner

as these very pure sculptures. And then also in time how there was a call for a new classicism in people like Donatello, Riemenschneider. They'd be making works with just using the pure material. I love when the 2-D and the 3-D come together; I think that's really when art's at its most powerful.

LZ: And you've also in a way, through your work, pushed certain technological limits, new technologies, to make new materials.

JK: Technology has always been a wonderful tool, you know, throughout history. Whether somebody is using a new type of drill to be carving marble, or a new type of saw to carve wood. And I tried to use it to be able to communicate trust with the viewer. Steve Jobs did it with an iPhone or a computer to communicate trust. Artists, when we make something, we have an opportunity to be in communication with an individual, to show empathy and to have a dialogue. And I find all art metaphor for that opportunity to communicate.

There are a lot of stories about Steve Jobs putting all the attention, you know, to the inside of the object. I always have done the same thing to the bottom of an object, or something that's never seen. I've used technology in a manner to maintain trust with the viewer. If I'm making a balloon sculpture, I want every twist in that balloon to be authentic. Not kind of a simulation and an idea of a twist, but actually a twist, so that I can maintain that kind of suspension of disbelief that somebody is involved with an abstraction for as long as possible.

The art is never in that technology. You know the art comes from a much more profound place within us, and the gesture we want to make, and it comes from a very old place. My life really changed when I started to realize that art probably accelerates evolution faster than anything else I know. You know, we look at our human history, and we look and we see how we've changed from one species, like from a monkey ape and coming up through. Cultural life, this type of evolution, we can participate and accelerate our evolution. I think Michael Jackson and Bubbles is referencing this. And so when we open ourselves up to our history, it lets us really embrace our potential in a much more accelerated rate.

LS: I think above all what The Met documents is the history of humankind's creative impulse, and I love what you've just said because it hadn't occurred to me that this was a motor, in a sense, for evolution. But actually I think that's a great notion, and certainly if nothing else, a symptom of evolution and perhaps both. I think that's really—it's really interesting.

LZ: So we've come back to Michael Jackson and Bubbles, and I was wondering if you could just tell us a little bit about the piece itself. You said this beautiful thing about that acceleration of evolution being somehow embedded or implicit in this piece.

JK: In 1988 I had an exhibition called Banality and Michael Jackson and Bubbles was one of the pieces from that exhibition. And the body of work was really trying to communicate to the viewer that their own cultural history is perfect, they're perfect. And art can be something that completely empowers you and gives you the essence of your own potential, or it's something which can disempower. And the way it disempowers is by having the viewer feel that they aren't prepared. They don't have the information they should have, that they're not perfect. And so the work was trying to inform them that it's all about this moment forward, and that if they loved the color pink for pink—that's fantastic. If they love the little tchotchke that was on the side of their grandmother's table—that's as meaningful as respecting the pietà. There's no difference, it's about that excitement you have for your own life, because the art is the essence of your potential. And so I knew that I would need kind of spiritual figures there to communicate to people that it's okay. It's okay to go along with banality, because they would feel kind of threatened—"I don't know if I should do this." And so Michael Jackson and Bubbles, he was there as a contemporary Christ figure.

LS: In the Renaissance there was a trope which was, you know, that a great mind of a great connoisseur collector was demonstrated by their ability to recognize the qualities in works of art. And I think a lot of what everybody from Vasari to Winckelmann, to Hegel to Michael Fried—I have to say—is doing is saying here are the rules for looking. And you know, if you don't understand them, I'm sorry, mate, it's not for you.

Whereas I think what your work does, and what a lot of the traditions that your work refers to, are about that breaking down of the barriers between elite and popular. And you're using a medium, which as you say, is both elite and democratic. And that's true of woodcarving as well—it's not just the porcelain.

LZ: How did you come to this idea of the way you want to react is perfectly adequate? It to me speaks to some quite fundamental and deep humanism almost. And so how did that emerge for you personally, that you came to this deeply human-centric way of making objects?

JK: Lucas, it's been my own life experience. I grew up in York, Pennsylvania. My aunt would take me sometimes to the Philadelphia Museum of Art. My father was an interior decorator, so I learned aesthetics from my dad, and my dad would have me sometimes paint paintings because I started taking lessons as a child. But I did not have any connection with art history, and I wasn't prepared to do anything when it came time to go to college, other than to go to art school. And on my first day of art school, we got on a bus and we went to the Baltimore Museum of Art to see the Cone Sisters' collection. And I realized I didn't know anybody. I didn't know Braque, you know, I didn't know Cézanne. You know, I would have known Picasso. But I felt that I survived that moment, and I saw in time people around me just kind of falling to the wayside. And I realized how intimidating art can be. And it should really just be the opposite. So I survived that. And from that moment, I always wanted to have a connection with art, that not only could

David Zwirner

empower myself, but then I could share that with other people.

LS: But Jeff, one thing that's very interesting there is that a lot of people they think, "Right, I've got to learn how to be an elite viewer as quickly as I can." It's like making your accent a little posher. I'm sorry—English metaphor—but I'm also fascinated by how you resisted that. You know, I think one of the things that's really funny about museums is that you know we now have millions of visitors and we're trying to communicate the power and joy of an artist like Mantegna or even Cézanne. And yet actually those artists were making pieces for a tiny number of people. Somehow you feel as if you—at that moment in the '80s—you were saying, you know, "bugger that, I'm going to find a whole different audience. I'm going to communicate much more widely than any of these people have done because I needed it at the right moment. That moment when I began." So was that it? I mean what was going through your head?

JK: You know, I think having kind of a liberal arts background in college. I went to Maryland Institute College of Art and School of the Art Institute of Chicago. But taking some sociology classes, reading a little philosophy, enjoying Dada and Surrealism—I started on this path of, you know, being involved with personal iconography and going inward. And you know, a lot of the paintings that I would make would have been what I dreamt the night before. And so this kind of inward journey, but at a certain point, I believe that I learned how to kind of trust in myself. And the last place I wanted to be was within myself, and I wanted to start to go outward.

LS: So interesting. I think that for me, that journey was kind of the opposite one. I went, I studied at the Courtauld Institute—in those days in a rubber Adam townhouse we were surrounded by the sort of whole ethos and aesthetic of the eighteenth-century Grand Tour delicate plaster work, amazing proportioned rooms. And for me, it was the arrival at The Met to look after decorative arts was part of the journey that I had towards understanding that there are whole categories of art that communicate in very different ways from those painters and sculptors that I've been brought up to revere, that I still revere, but that are only part of the story. And you know, that's why I got interested in the art of the wax museum, or the fairground, or the church procession because I think that actually as a result, you understand also much more than about those revered figures, about Michelangelo, about Bernini, because you understand that they also operated with this kind of tension between the need to communicate broadly and the need to please their fat cardinal patrons.

You know what I love about the Renaissance, which is my main period, is that tension arises between works of art that were meant to, for example, teach the stories of the Bible to the illiterate, and then the piece that only Lorenzo de' Medici was going to understand.

LZ: You know, one of the complications of course is that education is one of the great gifts. It's one of the most amazing experiences. But of course it introduces that voice that says what you're looking at is not high art or it's not good enough. How do you accept the education as it were, the philosophy, the reading, the sociology, and maintain a sort of an ability to challenge that voice and really interact with things on your own terms?

JK: You know, I would say it comes from mentors, and you know of course looking at art history and just speaking about you know, the richness. And for me it's biological. I can look at some of the work that I've made over the years, and I see how important kind of montage has been. And my understanding of my work, and my interest you know, I believe that I'm more involved with a kind of biological montage. And so to feel a connection to Manet, it's not an art-historical connection, it's a biological. It's part of my genes.

But I remember after my Banality show a journalist asking me, "Aren't you afraid that it's going to leave you?" And they were talking about art. And I thought what an odd thing to ask somebody. And so I thought about well what is it that you know that an artist can do? What do I do?

And I realized that the only thing that I do, or think that you can do, is you have your interests and you can focus on those interests, and if you do that it connects you to the metaphysical and to a universal vocabulary. And you realize the abundance of information all around you. And whatever your interests are you realize the connectivity to that. And so I try to keep everything in play. That's the ideal state. Because when you don't make judgments, when you don't have hierarchies, when there's no discrimination, it removes anxiety and fear. And when you remove anxiety and fear, that's how you walk out of Plato's cave. That's how you achieve a higher level of consciousness. For me, beauty is the ability to give it up to something outside this self, to find it greater than the self. To me that's a beauty.

LZ: Is there anything that takes you out of the self, like meditation or exercise or something like that?

LS: I like reality TV.

[LAUGHTER]

JK: That's good. I like everyday life. You know I have a family, and I enjoy family life. I love just the grounding aspect of that, and the pleasure of trying to find stimulating situations for the whole family to do things, whether it's going to a baseball game or going to see something.

David Zwirner

LS: Don't you think it's also about openheartedness? I mean that's what's we've been talking about a lot, and not shying away from experiences or the unfamiliar. I mean, I love Instagram. I love seeing the whole kind of ways in which people present themselves and the things that they love. And like everybody I'm bored with pictures of cappuccino. But I do love, you know, that whole vast opening out the digital world has given us. It's absolutely revolutionary in some of these images that kind of come in and stimulate you. I bought things that dealers have put on their social media things for The Met.

LZ: Listen up everybody on social media.

[LAUGHTER]

LZ: Start posting because it's going to go into The Met. So that's a place where new ideas come in. Is that one source? I mean, you know, it's interesting to think about for someone in your position where new energy, new ideas, outside influences, how they enter your life.

LS: Well again, it's a distinction, isn't it, between maintaining the kind of authority that comes with knowledge and deep research and so on. I don't like the way in which the democratization to some degree has questioned the value of expertise. But at the same time making sure that what we're all involved in is a conversation.

JK: You know the value in any work of art—the Salvator Mundi that went for such a high price—you know the value would be for the excitement that it could give the viewer. And if it does give the viewer that excitement, the stimulation, the idea of any intellectual aspect of contemplation, or whatever it may do—that value walks out of the room with that individual. It's not in that piece. It's just a transponder. The value is really always how it can change our lives.

LS: And if the high price of a work of art becomes the kind of hook that's going to get people to just pay it attention, then that's fine with me as well. I mean we've just done a show at The Met, which is called Relative Values, and it's about how much works of art cost in Germany and the Renaissance. And we've done the valuation in cows—how many cows was a tankard worth, how many cows was a pottery jug worth. And it's a question people ask all the time, and then you obviously follow up with, "Well why?" I mean, "Why was this more valuable than something else?" and "What did we mean by the word valuable?" And then you can go on. But if you have a quite simple question at the beginning, you can complicate it afterwards. And if one of the questions is, "Why doesn't Leonardo cost more than any other painting?" Then it's a good question, actually. You know, how does this artist who I spent so long thinking about, transcend the art world completely? So that you know every image—not every but almost every image—that he made is kind of burned into the public imagination, the collective memory of all of us, globally. I mean it's incredible. And he's an artist who therefore suddenly, not because he wanted to—he was as elitist as they come—but transcends that world in the way that we've just described.

LZ: I think we should introduce cows to the current art market.

[LAUGHTER]

LS: Yeah, more deals in cows would be a good thing. It seems to me.

LZ: Does it feel like, I think, from the outside sometimes it feels like the Renaissance in a way is getting closer to us. In the sense that there are more people more excited to see more Renaissance imagery, more visitors. Is that something that you feel, or is it just our moment now and then a kind of effect of Salvator Mundi among other things?

LS: It's such a great question and I hadn't thought of it. I think that the Renaissance does speak to us more directly, maybe now than other periods in between. It may be because those works do sit at that moment where direct communication and huge artistic ambition were combined. One of the things that was fascinating to me about the Leonardo show at the National Gallery, but also exhibitions like The Sacred Made Real or the late Caravaggio show that we did during my time there, great shows created by others, was that there is a kind of spiritual hunger as well, which I think is really fascinating and worthy of analysis. I don't quite know what's going on there but it's clear that people want it.

LZ: So Renaissance is obviously also well known from these amazing studio practices that developed, as well, a complex number of artists developing large atelier practices. I was hoping you could tell us a little bit about how you manage your studio, how you engage with the various parts of it, and how that works for you, Jeff?

JK: You know, I used to always just make my work by myself and then I started to work with different materials where I would need to have a stand welded. So I would go to a welder and I would have him weld it for me. Then I would get it back and maybe finish it. And I would paint it. But I would go to people that were skilled in specific traditional methods of making things and work with them—one being a foundry. So I became comfortable working with other people, and so I started to enjoy that because I was also participating in kind of a Duchampian dialogue of feeling that if I was

David Zwirner

incorporating, and I was moving material too much myself, I would become influenced by the material. And even though I had a goal of making one type of image or object starting out I would end up with something else. So I enjoyed that distance and feel as though any work that I've ever made I've been in complete control of. In every aspect of the surface or anything about that piece I'm responsible for and I've controlled.

LS: You're not really doing anything that's very different from what Donatello did in the fifteenth century. I mean he had his founders, he experimented with molding glass. He, you know, he carved wood, he modeled clay, and when he needed people he got them in. It makes good sense to me.

JK: I make very few artworks a year also.

LS: Yeah, you're slow.

JK: Because of the care. I mean, there's a lot of effort. There's a lot of man hours into each piece. I mean there are people really working on things. But the actual number of works, it's not a production line.

LZ: Last question, guys, as we wrap up: what's next? I heard inklings from Luke about a piece in The Met's collection that maybe you're interested in, Jeff? And maybe that's a nice natural way to talk about what's next for both of you.

JK: I'm really grateful to The Metropolitan for working with me. I'm working on a new series called the Porcelain series, and the material being used is stainless steel. But using models for these sculptures of porcelain works that range from the eighteenth century up to the beginning of the twentieth century. And the work that The Metropolitan Museum has in their collection is called The Music Lesson and it's from the Chelsea Porcelain factory.

LS: That's right. You're making this over life-size in steel with colored surface using a scan that we've got. We sent the piece down to Baltimore, back to Baltimore again ... It's worth describing it in a bit of detail because this is a piece that was based on a Boucher print as Jeff says, and so it's already an act of translation again into three dimensions and into color. And it shows this couple in a kind of flowery leafy bower. He's teaching her how to play the pipe and I have to say I wondered what had drawn you to it. And then I saw this phallic pipe going between this young girl's lips and I thought, okay I get it.

JK: So the work will be, you know, quite large—over a hundred inches and all in mirror-polished stainless steel. And then exactly where all the colors are on the original model, we're able through scanning practices to capture all that information and then to transfer it on this enlarged stainless steel model.

LS: We're refashioning the British decorative art galleries and this piece will be a star work. Jeff is helping making Chelsea Porcelain sexy again which I'm quite happy with, frankly.

LZ: Well lots to look forward to; a beautiful new presentation in the fall, and a wonderful sounding new piece by Jeff. Guys, thank you so much for being here and for having this conversation, it's been so much fun.

LS: Thank you.

JK: Lucas, thank you.

[END CREDITS]

LZ: Dialogues is produced by David Zwirner. You can find out more about the artists in this series by going to davidzwirner.com/dialogues.

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I'm Lucas Zwirner. Thanks so much for listening. I hope you'll join us again next time.