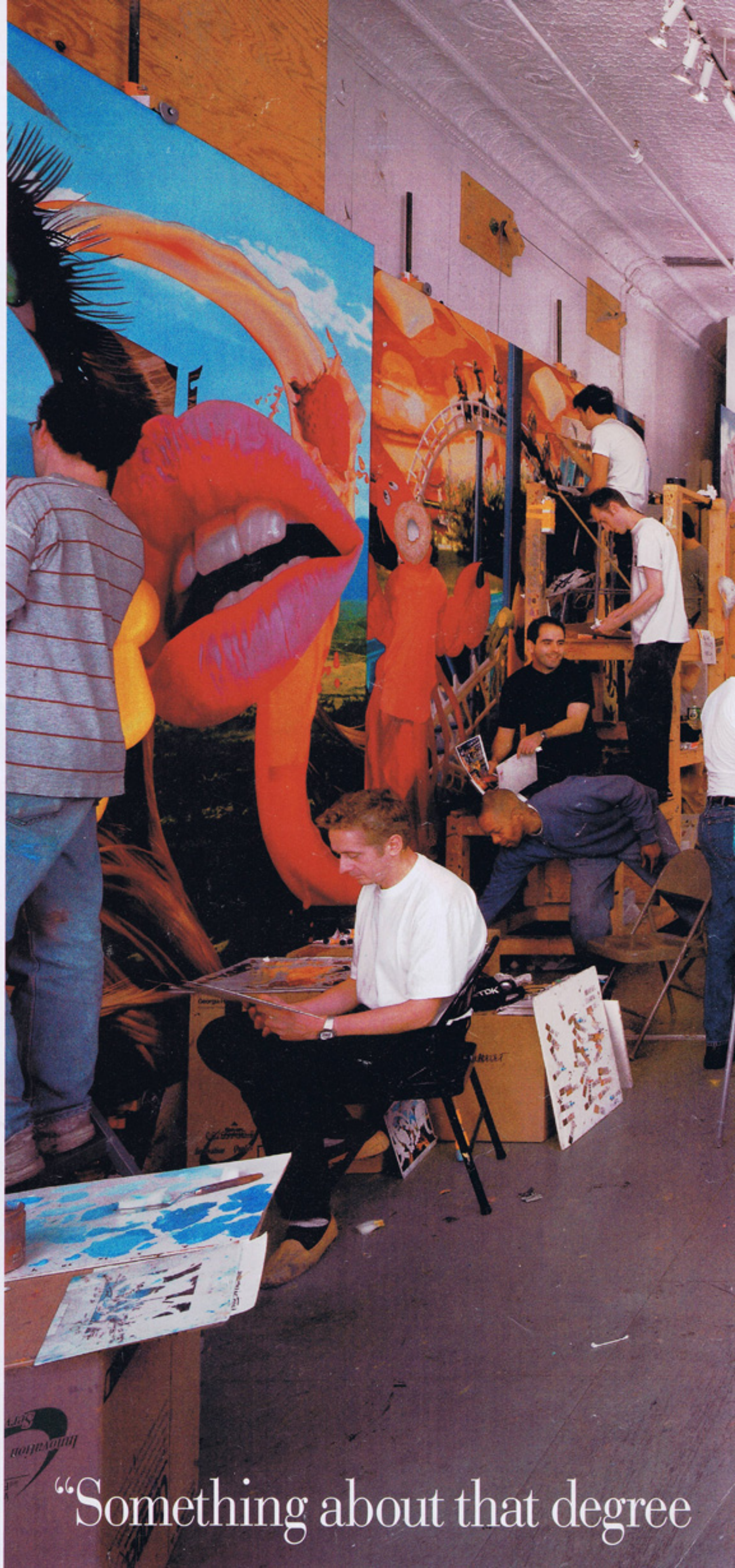


make things better, Koons, whose own wife proved less accommodating, is an expert at casting his own spells.

Part of the magic of Koons's art is the way he melds high and low and keeps the work feeling so alive. He may spend years developing his projects, but by the end you'd never know it, because for all his intensity over the finish of his art, Koons is a master of the light touch. And yet, there's always more with him than meets the eye. The artist's work is packed with an art-historical consciousness, and critics and historians have linked it to Surrealism, Hyperrealism, Pop, Minimalism—you name it, it's all in there—but the results are never didactic or academic. They're as accessible as products in a supermarket. Take his "Celebration" painting *Play-Doh*: it looks as if the whole history of Abstract Expressionism came crashing into Pop art. Think of Willem de Kooning and James Rosenquist producing an heir and you've got it, but you've also got a work that communicates to everybody—a painting, after all, of Play-Doh. Or how about a massive sculpture of a kitten peeking out of a sock? If the imagery sounds obvious, that's part of the point with Koons. He doesn't have the ambivalence, or the cynicism, that comes with postmodern thinking. What he does have is a need to make things that can connect to other people. Like Warhol and Roy Lichtenstein, whom he credits as major inspirations, he has completely integrated the American idea of democracy into his art. To Koons, everything and everyone is worthy of art. His work is the successful result of the more idealistic movements of 20th-century art—he actually *has* made art for everyone. Once, in his brasher days, he said, "I've made what the Beatles would have made if they had made sculpture. Nobody ever said that the Beatles' music was not on a high level, but it appealed to a mass audience. That's what I want to do." The truth is, I've never seen an artist who wanted to reach the general public more than Koons does. This has made him the most popular artist of his generation. It has also made him the most misunderstood.

Jeff Koons was born in 1955 in York, Pennsylvania, an industrial town with a population of some 60,000. During one of the many talks that we had for this article he told me, "My life experience has been through my art." The reverse is also true: through Koons's art one can witness the story of his life. In his telling, his childhood sounds like the living incarnation of a TV version



“Something about that degree