

## “DAMIEN HIRST” AT THE TATE MODERN



“NOTIONS OF THE SUBLIME HAVE NOTHING TO DO WITH IT. THIS IS JUST MONEY IN A VISUAL FORM.”

IN 1966 JOHN LENNON ANNOUNCED THAT The Beatles were more popular than Jesus. Damien Hirst may not yet have achieved this near divine status but ask the average person in the British high street to name two contemporary artists and they'll come up with Hirst and “that” shark, and Tracy Emin and “that” bed. As Hirst says: “Art’s popular. That’s my generation. It wasn’t before... isn’t that an awesome thing?” But just what is it that’s popular and what does he mean by art? A recent article denouncing him as a con man set the cat among the critical pigeons. Critic wins, Hirst wins. There is, after all, no such thing as bad publicity. So what should we to make of this enormous retrospective at Tate Modern, with its pills and medicine cabinets, its spin and spot paintings, its live butterflies, stuffed sharks and outrageously valuable diamond skull?

Column inches have been spent arguing whether Hirst is a good artist. But that is to miss the point. It’s not even the right question. Hirst is a showman, a phenomenon of our times thrown up by a zeitgeist that values celebrity and glitz over intellectual depth and craft. He is a genius at spectacle. It is no coincidence that that other artistic barometer, Andy Warhol, was also a lapsed Catholic. Death, theater and the object as icon are common themes to both. Like Warhol, Hirst has not only permeated the cultural consciousness of our times, he mirrors, manipulates and is a product of it.

Born in 1965, he grew up in Leeds. Unemployed after school he decided to give art school a whirl. He wanted to be a painter but couldn’t hack it. Then he started collecting

objects and making collage. Seeing Saatchi’s advertising campaigns on TV he decided: “I want to make art that does what that does.” Many have complained he is only in it for the money. “Money is important,” he says, “and money can sometimes obscure the art but ultimately the art has got to be more important than the money or I wouldn’t do it.” Yet in the shop, which has virtually been incorporated into the exhibition, you can buy rolls of wallpaper at £250 a throw, a £310 butterfly deckchair or a set of 12 bone china butterfly plates; yours at a snip for £10,500. And those with £36,800 to burn can go for a limited-edition plastic skull in “household gloss.” Art and money have always been bedfellows. The Medicis sponsored Brunelleschi and Michelangelo. So what’s the difference? Well the Medicis employed artists because of their extraordinary vision and skill, because they were the best; but without money Hirst’s work would simply not exist.

Yet he’s always wanted to make serious work. With *A Thousand Years* he momentarily succeeded. I remember seeing it for the first time in 1990. The vitrine with cow’s head, teeming with propagating flies, stank. Here was a living art object that embodied the cycle of life and death. It was disgusting, raw and shocking and still is. There is a directness, a repulsion and attraction that whether Hirst knew it or not plays with notions of the Kantian sublime. It is as iconic a piece as Duchamp’s 1917 urinal. But Duchamp had the wit to give up making art and take up chess, while Hirst has gone on making art that has become ever more vacuous. Having made one medicine cabinet why make so many more?

Less would definitely be more. Fragments of *Paradise* (2008) and *Judgment Day* (2009) with their heavy steel and gold plated frames and rows of cubic zirconia flashing like diamonds are simply crass and vulgar and that is not even to mention his zillion-pound diamond skull, *For the Love of God* (2007). Though that, of course, is the point. As Tom Wolfe wrote in his infamous *The Painted Word*, the rich who bought Jackson Pollock’s paintings were trading money for a little of his boho-spirit. The hedge-fund managers and corporate moguls who hang Hirst’s sparkly works on their walls want to be seen not only as achingly hip but to show the world how much money they have. Notions of the sublime have nothing to do with it. This is just money in a visual form.

At the end of the exhibition a single white dove hangs suspended in a glass vitrine of blue formaldehyde. It might be a metaphor for the Holy Ghost or the fugitive artistic imagination. It is called *The Incomplete Truth* (2006). It seems a fitting title for an artist who once dared look at what was important but who turned away, swapping the difficulties and emotional complexities of real art for the seduction of celebrity and money. ☹

Through September 2, 2012 at Tate Modern, London, [tate.org.uk](http://tate.org.uk)

Sue Hubbard’s new novel, *Girl in White*, based on the life of the painter Paula Modersohn Becker, is due from Cinnamon Press this autumn. [www.cinnamonpress.com](http://www.cinnamonpress.com); [www.suehubbard.com](http://www.suehubbard.com)

Above: Damien Hirst, *The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living*, 1991. © Damien Hirst