

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

Hirst's Art Auction Attracts Plenty of Bidders, Despite Financial Turmoil



Steve Forrest for The New York Times

The head auctioneer calling for bids on Monday, the first day of the auction in London.

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LONDON — Against a backdrop of reeling financial markets and nervous investors, Sotheby's and the British artist Damien Hirst forged ahead with "Beautiful Inside My Head Forever," a highly publicized auction of 223 works, all by Mr. Hirst and all made within the last two years.



Daniel Berehulak/Getty Images

Auctioneers at work in London on Monday at the Sotheby's auction of Damien Hirst works.

In a gamble that could have ramifications for other artists, Mr. Hirst was bypassing his dealers — the Gagosian Gallery, based in the United States, and White Cube, based in London — and taking his work straight to auction with a sale that began here on Monday night and concludes on Tuesday afternoon.

And there were signs that the bet was paying off: the first session's total was \$127.2 million, above the high estimate of \$112 million.

"I woke up this morning in the teeth of the gale of recession," Mr. Hirst's business manager, Frank Dunphy, said after the sale, "but we came out as confident as ever."

Tobias Meyer, worldwide head of contemporary art at Sotheby's, explained the total this way: "Damien Hirst is a global artist that can defy local economies." Jose Mugrabi, a New York dealer, had another take: "Today people believe more in art than the stock market. At least it's something you can enjoy."

While Mr. Hirst risked flooding his own market, he had also spent several months courting potential buyers. Still, he could not anticipate the sale's timing, amid news that Lehman Brothers had filed for bankruptcy and other serious changes on the financial landscape. Sotheby's was said to be taking steps to ensure that the sale did not fall flat, like offering buyers a six-month grace period to pay for purchases.

Jay Jopling, owner of the White Cube gallery, could be seen in the audience bidding on works (and winning at least one, "The Triumvirate," which features anatomical models, for \$3.1 million). Word in the auction world was that Sotheby's had given him an incentive to steer his clients to the sale. Sotheby's declined to comment on any of the financial arrangements.

The headlines had little effect on the scene outside the salesroom here. The street was filled with television camera crews; fans hoping to spot celebrities like Bianca Jagger; and a crowd of collectors, dealers and curiosity seekers waiting for the doors to open. Inside later it was standing room only. But most of the action was on the telephone, with Sotheby's flying in employees from all over the world to handle the bidding.

Over the past last 11 days nearly 20,000 people have flocked to Sotheby's New Bond Street premises to see what looked like a polished retrospective. For sale were variations on all of Mr. Hirst's best-known themes: dead animals, including several sharks, a calf, a zebra and doves, all submerged in formaldehyde; glass cabinets filled with diamonds, cigarette butts and practically everything in between; and paintings and drawings with his signature skulls and dots, swirls and butterflies.

As part of his sales pitch, Mr. Hirst said that he would no longer be making spin or butterfly paintings and that there would be far fewer dead animals and almost no dot paintings.

On Monday, the evening's star was "The Golden Calf," a white bullock preserved in formaldehyde, with hoofs and horns made of 18-carat gold and a gold disc crowning the

head. The work was estimated at \$15.8 million to \$23.6 million and drew three bidders. It went for \$18.6 million to a buyer on the phone.

A work along similar lines, “The Black Sheep With the Golden Horn,” had just two bidders, with the winner paying \$4.7 million, in the middle of its \$3.9 million to \$5.9 million estimate. Three potential buyers vied for “The Kingdom,” another formaldehyde-preserved work, this one a tiger shark. It sold for \$17.2 million, well above its high estimate of \$11.8 million.

(Final prices include the commission paid to Sotheby’s: 25 percent of the first \$20,000, 20 percent of the next \$20,000 to \$500,000 and 12 percent of the rest. Estimates do not reflect commissions.)

Also in the spotlight were Mr. Hirst’s glass-front cabinets, like “Fragments of Paradise,” filled with manufactured diamonds. After a bidding war that included Mr. Jopling, the work went for \$9.3 million, well above its \$2.9 million estimate. The winning bid was taken on the phone by Alina Davey, a Russian-speaking Sotheby’s representative based in London. Another diamond-filled cabinet, “Memories of/Moments With You,” went for \$4.7 million, more than twice its high estimate of \$2.3 million. But “End of the Line,” a cabinet filled with medical supplies, sold for \$2.4 million, less than its low estimate of \$2.9 million.



Steve Forrest for The New York Times

The auction room at Sotheby's during Mr. Hirst's auction. The first session’s total was \$127.2 million, above the high estimate for the entire sale, \$112 million.



Steve Forrest for The New York Times



Peter Macdiarmid/Getty Images

"The Kingdom" by Damien Hirst sold on Monday for \$17.2 million, well above its high estimate.

Skulls were incorporated in several of the pieces. "Beautiful Maat Intense Fetishistic Painting (With Extra Inner Beauty)," a work with the colorful impact of his swirl canvases, featured a skull in its center. It sold for \$868,127, above the high estimate of \$790,000. And "Transience Painting 2" had a skull nestled on a leather armchair with bubbles surrounding it. Priced at a high of \$1.1 million, it sold for \$1.8 million to a bidder on the phone.

Other paintings had butterflies, as well as diamonds, scalpel blades, rosaries, crucifixes and religious medals. These included "Sometimes Life Can Be Really, Really Dark," which brought \$1.3 million, above the high estimate of \$1.1 million.

Mr. Hirst also produced works that resemble stained-glass windows in churches. The round, butterfly-covered "Rose Window, Durham Cathedral" carried a high estimate of \$1.7 million but sold for more: \$2.2 million. Four bidders sought "Calm," a red canvas also using butterflies to create a stained-glass effect. It sold for \$1.2 million, just above its high estimate of \$1.1 million.

Dot paintings were on offer too, in a variety of colors and sizes. "Myristoycholine Iodide," a 6-foot-by-7-foot-11-inch canvas, was estimated at \$990,000 to \$1.3 million. But it went for \$868,126, a sign that perhaps there have been too many dot paintings for sale in the past year.

One of his more macabre works, "Devil Worshiper," a canvas with dead flies, didn't sell. And neither did "Theology, Philosophy, Medicine, Justice," which featured four bullsharks floating in two tanks.

Mr. Dunphy said that while Mr. Hirst wasn't at Sotheby's, he was following the results via phone — while playing snooker.