

ARTINFO

Hirst Among the Masters



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Damien Hirst, "Requiem, White Roses and Butterflies" (2008). Oil on canvas, 150 x 230 cm.

By Judd Tully

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LONDON—While London looks to the opening of its biggest contemporary-art event of the season this week, the **Frieze Art Fair**, top British artist Damien Hirst is taking a step back in time, opening a show of paintings — created all by himself at his Devon studio, without assistants — at the **Wallace Collection** at Hertford House in Manchester Square.

The 19th-century mansion is a kind of **Frick Collection**, assembled by 19th-century industrialist, Sir Richard Wallace and filled with Renaissance-era paintings, sculpture, armor, and porcelain as well as 19th century European art.

Hirst contributed £250,000 (\$396,000) to the Wallace Collection in connection with the show, both to refurbish the two galleries where his work is installed — including £60,000 (\$95,000) to cover the walls in rich, light-blue silk — and to ensure free admission for the public.

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The updated spaces retain the traditional aesthetic, and Hirst's 25 works, including two triptychs, are installed accordingly, heavily framed and covered with glass, hanging from chains attached to picture rails.

Ranging in date from 2006 to 2008, the somber still lifes, all with inky blue backgrounds, depict in various combinations skulls, iguanas, a chunky wristwatch, shark jaws, a beetle, and a glass of water.

There are also a number of dark yet hardly ominous landscapes, with titles such as *Woman of the Woods* and *Witness at the Birth of Medusa*. But the palette is so limited, like an underexposed photograph, that the images are somewhat resistant to interpretation. *White Roses and Butterflies*, one of the more striking paintings — and many are not striking at all — has lyrical qualities; the butterflies are not realistic, as in Hirst's more familiar, shop-manufactured style, but rely solely on illusion.

There's not a single medicine cabinet or pill box in sight.

The paintings were first shown from April 25 to September 20 of this year at the **Pinchuk Art Foundation** in Kiev under the title "Requiem," and an undisclosed number of them were acquired by the billionaire oligarch, who famously paid more than \$10 million at auction for a **Peter Doig** painting, *The White Canoe* (1991), in 2007. Hirst owns the rest. Prices for the new works have not been published, but one knowledgeable source said the larger paintings were going for in the area of \$3 million.

A exhibition of more recent — and more colorful — paintings will be open at both **White Cube** venues on November 25.

On hand at this morning's preview was the London artist and 2003 **Turner Prize** winner **Grayson Perry**, dressed in drag. When asked about the work, he said, "The fight for the last original brush stroke was lost long ago," before being mobbed by a posse of eight paparazzi with motor-driven cameras.

Hirst himself was also in attendance, answering questions about his new departure as a solo practitioner at one of the round-table interviews held during the preview.

Sporting tinted aviator-style glasses and a dark T-shirt, and with a black jacket draped behind him, Hirst spoke generously, telling his interrogators, "I've always had a romance with paintings, and I've always drawn."

He said that he was getting closer to painting even as far back as when he completed his early ambitious sculpture *Contemplating a Self-Portrait (as a Pharmacist)* (1996). "I got to that point and kept backing off," he said.

Asked about the recent switch, Hirst said, "It's like being in U2 and not selling T-shirts."

He seemed delighted with his new direction and with downsizing his mammoth production studios (though he said many of his employees have been kept busy framing the new works). "Painting is brilliant," he said. "It makes sense of your life. And you don't have to talk."

An avid art collector with three Francis Bacon paintings (from 1933, 1942, and 1953) to his name, Hirst admitted "nicking" the dark background connecting the new works from the '53 work, of a man in the sea. But he mentioned other influences as well. "I love **Bacon**, I love **Goya**, I love **Soutine** and **de Kooning**," he said. "They're similar kind of painters, kind of messy, go-for-it artists. Oh, and **Rembrandt**."

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Asked about his choice of the Wallace as a venue for the new work, Hirst volunteered that the museum was close to his office and that he often took his kids there to look at the “old weapons and stuff” while he looked at paintings, though private London dealer Ivor Braka is said to have played a matchmaker role as well. The only other living artist to exhibit at the storied Wallace Collection is **Lucian Freud**, in 2004.

“I’m always showing stuff in odd places,” he added, bringing to mind his first museum show, at an archaeological museum in Naples, Italy, in 2004. “I mean, Jeff Koons did that great thing in Versailles.”

So maybe there’s an element of keeping up with the Joneses? Or the Koonses?

Hirst also explained that he wanted the paintings hung just like other works at the Wallace, and that the only addition was special lighting, “which is a bit more contemporary. I didn’t want them to look like they were anywhere else.”

The artist was also asked, somewhat off topic, about rumors that he had objected to “Sold Out” as the title originally proposed for the current “Pop Life” exhibition at **Tate Modern**, where his work occupies its own room, leading to its being changed. He replied only that it was a five-year-old concept and that “you couldn’t tell if you’d ‘sold out’ or if you couldn’t get a ticket.”

As for the market, Hirst spoke generally, saying that it hasn’t settled down as yet from its rough ride last fall following his historic auction of new works at Sotheby’s.

Asked if he made the switch to the easel because it’s easier to sell paintings than dead sharks, he said, “I’m in a lucky position, because I don’t need to make sales. I’ve always sold pretty much whatever I’ve made.”

The exhibition opens to the public tomorrow and runs through January 24.

Judd Tully is Editor at Large of Art+Auction.