

## GAGOSIAN GALLERY

### Diamond-studded skull smiles on Asian art market

AFP

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A diamond-studded baby's skull by British artist Damien Hirst stares out across a brand new gallery in Hong Kong, smiling over Asia's rising demand for exorbitantly expensive works of art.

It is the first time the work's controversial creator has exhibited in Asia, a sure sign that the epicentre of the world's art scene is shifting east - following the money.

Entitled "For Heaven's Sake", the work is a platinum cast of a human baby skull with more than 16,000 diamonds embedded in it. It is the first time the work has gone on display anywhere.

"Diamonds are about perfection and clarity and wealth and sex and death and immortality," the artist said in Hong Kong ahead of the "Forgotten Promises" exhibition, which opens on Tuesday.

"They are a symbol of everything that's eternal, but then they have a dark side as well."

The infant, believed to have been aged around 40 weeks, has been dead a long time. The skull itself was part of a nineteenth century pathology collection owned by the artist and still sits in his studio.

The work is on display in the city's new Gagosian Gallery alongside other Hirst pieces including a naked man cast in gold who has apparently flayed himself with surgical

shears and a scalpel, his skin draped over an arm. A well-placed fig leaf protects his modesty.

Another potentially controversial piece on display is a 22 carat gold model of a baby's skeleton, with the addition of angel wings.

Precisely detailed oil paintings of butterflies, a favoured symbol for the artist which he says represent the beauty and fragility of life, adorn the gallery's walls.

The butterfly paintings are based on photographs taken from science collections and were painted by the artist's staff, not Hirst himself.

There are 32 exhibits in the show and all are for sale, although prices are not being publicly revealed. Hirst has on occasion been the world's most expensive living artist, and the asking price for a 2007 skull work of his, "For the Love of God", was pounds 50 million (now \$79 million).

That piece was eventually bought in, but some of those at the Hong Kong show have already been sold, with "For Heaven's Sake" being put on reserve for an undisclosed sum.

"Damien sees the baby's skull as a very positive work," Jude Tyrrell, director of Hirst's company Science Ltd, told AFP.

"Skulls have appeared as a motif in works of art for thousands of years. There's nothing sinister about it.

"We don't know much about the skull itself or where it came from originally. Damien collects all sorts of curios, a bit like the Victorians. Who knows what he might use next?"

The opening of the Gagosian Gallery puts Hong Kong firmly on the art map, fuelled by Asia's ever-growing number of multi-millionaires.

"This is our first gallery in Asia," Gagosian director Millicent Wilner, told AFP. "There is a lot of interest and enthusiasm for art here. Asia is a hugely important and growing market for us.

"Art is a market and, like all markets, it's driven by money."

Auctioneers Sotheby's Hong Kong took in more than \$680 million in 2010, 16 percent of the firm's global sales - a figure that has gone up steadily every year and has trebled since 2004.

"Last year was an all time high for us," deputy chairman of Sotheby's Asia Daryl Wickstrom told AFP. "Asia, and China in particular, is a hugely important aspect of the growth of our market.

"There are now a lot of high net worth and ultra-high net worth individuals in Asia who are finding their way into the art market, both for the enjoyment of the object and as an investment.

"Obviously, to collect expensive works of art, the first requirement is a sufficient bank balance."

But, Wickstrom added, the number of ultra-wealthy individuals is also driving up prices.

The highest price paid for a piece in Hong Kong was over \$30 million in 2010 for a Qianlong period vase.

It was bought by collector Dr Alice Cheng, who paid more than five times the top estimate, helping push Sotheby's autumn sale total to a record HK\$3.09 billion (\$396 million).

"The more active participants you have in an auction, the higher the price goes," Wickstrom said. "There's now a lot of competition in the sales room and we have seen a significant escalation in prices."