

## GAGOSIAN GALLERY

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#### Damien Hirst's Spots Return to Fill 11 Galleries



Damien Hirst with one of his spot paintings at Gagosian Gallery in central London.

By CAROL VOGEL

LONDON — Just as the financial markets were heading for disaster in 2008, the British artist Damien Hirst snubbed his dealers and persuaded Sotheby's here to sell 223 primarily new artworks. There were dead animals — sharks, zebras, piglets and even a calf — floating in giant glass tanks of formaldehyde; cabinets filled with diamonds; and cigarette butts. And paintings galore: spin paintings, spot paintings, paintings with butterflies pinned under glass.

More than 21,000 people flocked to Sotheby's to see the preview exhibition. The two-day sale in September, conducted against the backdrop of the unfolding world financial crisis, brought in a total of \$200.7 million.

Right before that auction Mr. Hirst proclaimed the end of those abstract canvases of candy-color dots. He was also going to stop making spin and butterfly paintings, as well as installations with dead animals. To some it was a clever now-or-never sales pitch, but Mr. Hirst insists that wasn't the case.

"I'd moved on," he explained on a recent afternoon sitting in an upstairs office at Gagosian's Britannia Street gallery. "At the time of the auction I'd gotten to the point where I'd definitely done enough."

But now, a typical Hirstian change of heart. He started producing spot paintings again, and — as happens every few years — this 46-year-old artist is staging yet another spectacle. This time he has persuaded the gallery owner Larry Gagosian to let him take over all 11 of his galleries — the two locations in London; three in New York; one each in Paris, Rome, Hong Kong, Athens, Geneva and Beverly Hills, Calif. — to hold a retrospective of his spot paintings.

The exhibition, which runs from Jan. 12 through Feb. 18, can't help conjuring up a cliché or two: seeing spots, connect-the-spots, to cite the most obvious. And like so many things Mr. Hirst has done, the spot show will no doubt be accompanied by a hailstorm of criticism.

“They are the last of my work to catch on,” he said of the spot paintings. “Someone once came up to me and said, ‘Why do you make those stupid spots, they’re dumb, an insult to painting.’ ” But for Mr. Hirst and Mr. Gagosian, this is serious business.

“It’s like one show in multiple locations,” Mr. Gagosian said in a telephone interview. “These paintings have entered popular culture. You see them in advertisements, on clothes, on cars. They’ve become part of our visual vocabulary.” (In 2003 Mr. Hirst even painted a 220-seat boat that crossed the Thames from Tate Britain to Tate Modern and was decorated with spots in 35 colors.)

The Gagosian exhibition will include about 200 works, spanning 20 years, from collections in 20 countries. Loans are coming from museums and collectors around the world. Less than one-third of the show will be for sale.

While officials at the gallery say it is too early to discuss prices, comparable works at auction have fetched anywhere from about \$100,000 to upwards of \$1.8 million, depending on the date, size, design and condition. The show will be followed by a full retrospective at Tate Modern, to open on April 4.

On a recent afternoon Mr. Hirst was holed up in an office at the Britannia Street gallery in the Kings Cross section of London, where white cardboard models of all 11 Gagosian galleries were laid out on tables, with miniature reproductions of each canvas hanging on the models’ walls.

“This show was something I’ve always wanted to do,” said Mr. Hirst, who was wearing his usual uniform of blue jeans and a hoodie. “I am hoping that each gallery will have its own personality. Madison Avenue has more of an old-master feel, so we’re putting the earliest ones there.”

Mr. Hirst said he got the idea for the show one day on a visit to New York, when he was staring at a wall at the entrance to the Madison Avenue gallery, where it listed the exhibitions on view at all of Gagosian’s locations. “I suddenly thought, ‘Oh My God, it could be like a museum retrospective if I did it in all nine galleries worldwide.’ ” (Since then Mr. Gagosian has opened two more.)

The idea for the spot paintings, Mr. Hirst said, most likely came subconsciously from his father, who was a car salesman in Leeds, in northern England, and painted the door of their house with blue spots.

“He got a bowl and cut out a circle, masked it out and then sprayed the spots,” Mr. Hirst said. “I used to tell people I lived at the house that had the white door with blue spots.”

Mr. Hirst started the spot series in 1986. “At the time I was doing sort of collages that were a bit like Nicholas de Staël or Hans Hoffmann paintings and I was resolving a lot of formal problems with color,” he said. “What made me keep doing them is they always looked great. The idea was that it was an endless series. It’s a conceptual idea rather than reality.”

The earliest spot paintings were done directly on the wall, he added, “so they looked like a giant machine had painted them.”

“I was sort of trying to deny that there was an artist, so there was this kind of infinitely happy paintings,” Mr. Hirst said. But over the years his idea has gone through many transformations. He went through a phase where he wanted to make sure the viewer would know the paintings were man-made.

“I used to leave holes in the middle of the circles, so they weren’t perfect,” he said. “I’d give some only one coat, so you could see the white through the canvas, and on some there’d be marks and drips and scratches, so they were a bit wonky. I would have wars with my assistants who’d want to make them too

perfect, but gradually over the years I changed my mind about that. Now I like the way they look when they're almost perfect."

Of the hundreds of spot canvases, Mr. Hirst painted only five himself. "When I worked out how to do it, I sold one painting for, like, 50 quid and then used the money to employ other people to paint them," he said, explaining that he tells his staff he wants the colors to be random. One time an assistant painted five yellow spots in a row. "I told him those aren't random," Mr. Hirst recalled. "And we had a big fight. Now I realize he was right, and I was wrong."

Another assistant could be credited with sending the artist back to spots. "He showed me that he could paint really small things," Mr. Hirst said, "and I said, 'Wow!' It was like a whole new beginning." And the spots began again, this time getting smaller and smaller.

At the moment there is one painting that will not be ready in time for the exhibition. Mr. Hirst has enlisted two assistants to create a canvas of two million tiny spots, each about one millimeter in diameter. He estimates that it will take two people nine years to make.

"It's not the kind of thing you can churn out," he said. "One person can only paint for 15 minutes at a time before your eyes go a bit weird."

To some the idea of looking at galleries filled with nothing but canvases with spots on them sounds mind-numbingly monotonous. But not, as you would assume, to the artist.

"They're quite hard things to look at," he said. "Superficially they're happy paintings, but then there is this underlying uneasiness. You lose your boundaries because they are hard to focus on. Do you focus on the grid or the individual spots or the painting as a whole? Once you start really looking, you get lost."