

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

THE INDEPENDENT

Still dotty about Damien Hirst

As Damien Hirst's Spot Paintings go on display at 11 Gagosian galleries worldwide, Adrian Hamilton visits the two London shows and finds real pleasure in their playfulness

By Adrian Hamilton



You don't understand. This is a really monumental project," exclaims Stefan Ratibor, director of Gagosian in London. As indeed it is.

At the behest of Damien Hirst himself, all 11 Gagosian galleries around the globe are simultaneously showing a selection of his Spot Paintings – a theme he's pursued for quarter of a century and one which David Hockney clearly had in mind when he implicitly accused his younger contemporary of using his assistants to do most of the work. Hirst has teasingly offered a personally signed and dedicated spot print to anyone prepared to fly to every location. The print could well prove the most personal, and certainly the most authored, of all the works.

Hirst's answer to this is to admit cheerfully that, yes, he uses his studio staff to do a lot of the work, because he found the actual effort of painting "bored" him but then that is all part of the artistic tradition. Which is typical of the artist's rumbustious relations with his critics, but hardly helpful when he is trying, as he seems this time, to be making a grand statement about a major aspect of his work.

Just how many Spot Paintings Hirst has produced is anybody's guess. He likes to keep a lot back in his private holdings to release when the market is right. But we're talking hundreds and hundreds. The Gagosian calls its multi-shows *The Complete Spot Paintings 1986-2011* and the total number on display at their three galleries in New York, two in London and the others in Los Angeles, Paris, Rome, Athens, Geneva and Hong Kong is around 300. They range from the huge canvas to the tiny one, from paintings of one or even half-a-spot to a giant canvas (shown in Manhattan) with 25,781 one-millimetre spots, all of them (at least according to the gallery) different from each other. There are round canvases, square ones, rhomboid and every other shape one learned at school and each is precisely painted.

The original intention of this world unveiling was, apparently, to show the works bought by private collectors and public galleries in each region as an imperial display of the reach and fame of Damien Hirst as international superstar. As it has turned out, it has become more a selection of different types and sizes. This at least gives the individual galleries a more characterful selection in preparation for a catalogue raisonné that had been intended to accompany the shows' openings but is now expected by the time they close.

Hirst has done this sort of thing before, of course, with his butterfly themes, his skulls, his print series and his spin paintings, producing them in myriads, then publishing them in books and producing them in mass-marketed mugs, tea towels and cuff links.

Given the terrible seriousness with which the gallery takes him, there is a terrible temptation to view it all as a Dadaist performance and to think that the one person who should have taken up the offer to visit every site should be the ghost of Jacques Tati, wandering the brightly light, cavernous spaces of white walls and spaced objects in a vision of the universality of a modern art without context, without place and without soul.

And yet it must also be said that visiting the two London galleries at least is a visual pleasure. Gagosian's airy premises near King's Cross has a fair selection of periods and types, as well as all his *Controlled Substances*, in which each of the pictures has an accompanying colour-coded key that reveals its title. The Davies Street gallery, meanwhile, has contrasted its single room on the smaller pictures from the 1990s in which a half, one or two spots painted in household gloss hold the canvas. However they reproduce on paper, faced as real paintings, they have a reality that is quite compulsive.

The question posed by Hirst is not really one of authenticity. Artists have always used assistants, laying down concepts or compositions for their pupils and assistants to complete. Contemporary artists have long since rejected concepts of personal creation for ideas of mass production, recycled imagery and synthetic materials. Spot Paintings are hardly a new idea, or original to Hirst. You need look no further than Gilbert and George's recent series of *Postcard Pictures* and its mammoth accompanying two-volume catalogue to see that. The fact that Hirst is quite so cavalier in his approach to originality is no reason to dismiss his very considerable talents as a conceptualist and, more recently, as a painter. Nor should his ambition be held against him. You only have to pop round to the Leonardo show to find an artist who wanted to encompass everything, including perfection. Hirst has never aspired to that, or not that we know of at any rate.

The difficulty lies rather with the relationship of his art to the viewer. The nearest thing to Hirst's spots in contemporary art is Gerhard Richter's colour paintings of a decade or two before Hirst. They have the same impetus, to take formal colour blocks and to play around with their combinations until every avenue has been explored and every limit reached. But in Richter's case, there is the sense even in his most free-thinking work, of a rhythm and balance that is saying something. It may be partly Richter's genius with the brush or his innate sense of composition. But you feel the artist talking to you. With Hirst you sense an artist playing with an idea as an exercise in itself.

We will have to await the full retrospective at Tate Modern in April to judge. I suspect he will emerge, as he should, a central figure of his particular period, seeing the ideas of the Sixties generation and taking them to their logical conclusion, commercial as much as artistic. His Spot Paintings are part of that process if ultimately, I suspect, leading him nowhere very special. But they are entertaining and, in the Davies Street gallery at least, quite sweet in a 1950s way.

*Damien Hirst: The Complete Spot Paintings 1986-2011, Gagosian Galleries, London
(www.gagosian.com) to 18 February*