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What Damien Hirst did next

Sharks, skulls and, now, shipwrecks. After almost 10 years, the artist's latest project is his most grandiose yet

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'Sun Disc', from the 'Treasures' show Photographed by Christoph Gerigk © Damien Hirst and Science Ltd. All rights reserved, DACS 2017

Talking to Damien Hirst about his latest project is to be plunged into a strange, swirling world of shifting realities. Hirst's career has often resembled a competition with himself. How can he top his own record of provocation and subversion? Of success and infamy?

Treasures from the Wreck of the Unbelievable, a vast exhibition that opens in Venice on April 9, is his most ambitious undertaking yet. For the show, 189 works will be distributed across two expansive Venetian museums belonging to the French collector François Pinault, the Palazzo Grassi and the Punta della Dogana.

These details are confirmed. Everything else, including the story behind this monumental show, is harder to pin down. Hirst has done his best to avoid the media attention that would usually preface an undertaking of such scale, and instead invited me to witness the preparations for Treasures over an extended period and to interview him throughout the process.

This task has been complicated by the fact that Hirst sees ambiguity as an essential element in art. What is Treasures and what does it mean, I ask during the first of these discussions. “I like that you just don’t know, on any level,” he replies. “The thing that makes art is that it’s much closer to religion . . . It locks into belief in some way.” He cites examples. A painting by Van Gogh may seem more meaningful if the viewer believes it is the last the artist painted. Anything attributed to Picasso is considered valuable. “That’s the problem of art and the power of art,” Hirst says.

He is loath to tell people what to expect of the Venice exhibition because he would prefer it to be “a voyage of discovery”, a sudden drop down a rabbit hole into an alternate universe. The pieces — the titular treasures — are extraordinary and befuddling, depicting mythical beings and fabulous creatures. More confusing still, some are tarnished or coral-encrusted and were only recently retrieved from the seabed.

My first glimpse of key works that will be in the show came during a deep-sea dive off the coast of an east African country (I was asked to keep the exact location confidential). A sphinx reclined in the sand, butterflyfish sheltering in her lee. I hovered, transfixed, until the professional divers motioned that we should swim on. Although they carried twin tanks of nitrox, my single cylinder of air determined our dive limit and there was much more to see.

At depth, the spectrum shrinks to blues and greens, so when the lead diver swept the beam of his torch across the surface of a large coral head, a blaze of scarlet-fringed anemones at first held my attention. Then, slowly, I understood. The coral head wasn’t a natural form.

The figure stood tall — my gauge recorded three metres or more from massive head to sturdy base. He held something, as if in offering, but there was nothing supplicating in his demeanour. One of the divers mimed an action: drumming. This made sense, in so far as anything did. The statue depicted a drummer, the object his drum. Yet Hirst’s tale of how the drummer and other treasures that form the core of his Venice show came to rest in the Indian Ocean changes with every telling, as fluid as the undersea environment.

One version goes like this. In the first or second century AD, a massive ship called the Apistos foundered in these waters, strewing its cargo of artworks assembled by the collector Cif Amotan II, also known as Aulus Calidius Amotan, to furnish a temple to the sun. Hirst sometimes expands the narrative to explain his own involvement: the wreck was discovered by chance nine years ago; initial explorations turned up Roman coinage in sufficient quantities to spark the interest of archaeologists; Hirst came on board as the project’s main financier. The exhibition marks the first chance for the public to see this hoard.

Historians agree that during the period Hirst ascribes to Amotan, traders plied routes between Egypt and destinations at least as far south as Rhapta on the south-east African coast, transporting commodities such as grain and other foodstuffs, raw materials and luxury goods including frankincense and myrrh.

The Deipnosophistae, or Sophists at Dinner, a sprawling, 15-volume series of discourses written in the early third century by Athenaeus, a Greek from Naucratis in Egypt, describes one vessel built to transport grain and powered by “20 banks of rowers” and another commissioned by King

Ptolemy with twice the manpower and a hull of 420 feet — 128 metres — almost double the length of Sir Francis Drake's 16th-century galleon, the Golden Hind.

The sources attesting to Amotan are at best obscure and any links with the legendary Apistos look tenuous. I say "legendary" because such references as you will find describe the ship as myth, not history. I put this to Hirst. "Myth or fact," he replied. "Whatever you choose to believe."

You can choose to believe, with confidence, that Hirst started working on Treasures in 2008. He funded the elaborate series of marine expeditions that I eventually joined. I observed the raising of the sphinx, the drummer and other treasures including a lion and, close by, a female figure. These will be reunited in Venice, one of a pair of so-called "Lion Women of Asit Mayor", who lead the beasts on chains.

The crew had a nickname for the ship that served as the base for the expeditions — "the Baking Tray". The heat was remorseless and this was a working vessel, anchored far from shore, more barge than cruiser, groaning loudly under its load of cranes and without much shade or fresh water beyond supplies for drinking and rinsing diving gear and the treasures themselves.

Storms brewed quickly, stirring up the ocean and sending the decks tilting at crazy angles. When this happened, it became simultaneously easier to grasp why so many wrecks lie in these waters and harder to comprehend the bravery of the early mariners who plotted this trade route using only the evidence of their eyes and knowledge of the winds.

The smaller craft that ferried us to and from the Baking Tray benefited from modern navigational equipment. The shuttle usually operated during the hours of darkness, adding an element of jeopardy to the scramble over sharp submerged rocks studded with sea urchins that each embarkation and arrival at the beach entailed. Work had to be conducted in secrecy. Many smaller artefacts destined for Venice, including a stern Medusa's head, are fashioned from gold.

Neither Hirst nor representatives from his holding company Science will give any accounting for the operation, but the scale and duration of the work — across at least three summers — suggest it must have run into the millions. Ships like the Baking Tray cost about £20,000 a day to run, excluding the wages and living expenses of the crew, the professional divers and other members of the team.

Hirst is fascinated by wealth and by the metal that underpins and represents it: gold. "There is always that scene in the movie where you open a suitcase and it shines on your face. It's an amazing material and it brings out the best and the worst in people." He pauses. "Probably the worst."

The publicity surrounding the two-day auction of 244 pieces of Hirst's own work in September 2008, reportedly netting him £111m, created the equivalent of the suitcase moment. Hirst received a deluge of requests for money.

"It got really mental," he remembers. "I got one letter from a guy who said him and his wife bought a house together and now the house is worth half what they paid for it and they had fallen out and tried to split up but they can't split up because of the house and please could they have

money for the house, would I buy it for the original price and wait for it to go up and weird shit like that.”

As the Sotheby's sale commenced, the investment bank Lehman Brothers tottered and fell. The timing solidified Hirst's reputation as a magus who could weave his own realities, growing richer as value drained from global financial markets. He did so by flouting conventional wisdom. Galleries normally handle the dirty business of selling and carefully regulate the flow of artists' work to maintain prices. Hirst sold direct, flooding the market with his work. He has never subscribed to the notion that commerce is the enemy of artistic integrity and often explores related themes.

His 2007 piece “For the Love of God”, a platinum skull studded with diamonds, was priced at £50m, generating fierce debate over its value, as art and on the market. A key piece he made for the Sotheby's sale was “The Golden Calf”, a bull with golden hooves and a disc of gold between his gilded horns, embalmed in a gold vitrine. The reference comes from the book of Exodus. After Moses set out to receive the Ten Commandments, the Israelites, deprived of his leadership, resorted to worshipping a false idol, a calf fashioned from molten gold.

Treasures reprises and broadens the theme of false idols and muses on the fallibility of collectors. Amotan's supposed hoard includes not only pieces hailed as originals — drawn from a dizzying spread of continents and traditions, pre-Columbian works from South and Mesoamerica alongside Egyptian, Greek and Roman statuary — but also “fakes” and “copies”.

Of course any fake created in the first or second century would have matured by degrees into a curiosity and eventually an antiquity, acquiring significant value. It's an idea that clearly delights Hirst, who for several years amused himself by buying fake Picassos on eBay, amassing more than 100 and inflating the prices of even the crudest of copies by doing so.

He has been a collector almost as long as he has been an artist, buying the work of his art school contemporaries while still a struggling student. His voluminous collection is now being shown in rotation at the London exhibition space he constructed for the purpose, Newport Street Gallery. I ask him what compels collectors and he at first gives a jaundiced answer: “It's like controlling the world . . . I mean a lot of collectors are lacking something so they've got to fulfil it.”

This sparks a memory. Aged 17, Hirst, living in a north London squat, grew concerned that he hadn't heard his elderly neighbour's television for several days. When he broke into the neighbour's flat to check on him, he discovered 60 years' worth of detritus, newspapers, love letters, “a bag with every toothpaste tube he'd ever used in there, so he collected waste as well and then bags of money like 50ps, 2ps, 10ps, all sorts of stuff”.

The neighbour had been rehoused and the local council soon sent workmen to clear the flat. “They shovelled every single thing out into the garden and took it away in skips so in three days there were empty rooms again and it was gone,” says Hirst. “When I think of an art exhibition or anything like that, you can put your whole life into a room and it can go like that.”

Hirst made some of his earliest artworks using items he took from his neighbour's flat before the clearance team arrived. His tale of Amotan still borrows some of its textures from his erstwhile

neighbour. Amotan spends a lifetime amassing his hoard only to lose it in a moment. “He was reaching beyond his life,” Hirst says. He is referring to Amotan but Hirst gives a similar explanation for the neighbour’s hoarding. “As an art collector or as an artist that’s what you do: you reach beyond your life as far as you can into the future.” He adds: “Amotan reminds me of myself.”

There are indeed biographical parallels despite the gap of 1,700-1,800 years between the period in which Amotan’s narrative is purportedly located and Hirst’s own birthdate of June 1965. At one point, Hirst hands me a photocopied document, a fragment of the Dinner Conversations of Apollonius of Samos, a supposed source that proves impossible to verify. The text describes Amotan as a freedman, a former slave, and like the better-known freedman Trimalchio from the Latin literary masterpiece *Satyricon*, ridiculous in his efforts to flaunt his new wealth.

Hirst had a scratchy start to life that led him into petty crime before he found salvation, and near-overnight success, in art. As his star rose, Hirst sauntered across British national consciousness, always mouthy and often drunk, whether on alcohol or his own success. He has now been sober for nine years but his instinct for the grandiose appears intact. “Someone said to me, ‘Would you like to be immortalised through your art?’,” he recalls. “And you think, ‘Well, yeah, but I’d rather just be immortalised through me.’”

Since that isn’t possible, he’s pursuing the first option. As he does so, he recognises that he is opening himself up not only to the possibility of acclaim but spectacular failure — a fate literally worse than death for an artist whose fears of mortality are allayed by the notion that his work, and his name, will endure. “You can try to get your art into all the great collections of the world but, then, if the next head of the museum doesn’t rate it or the one after that or the one after that, it could all be taken away and you could disappear without a trace,” Hirst says.

He continues to circle back to this notion, forcing himself to contemplate extinction and then recoiling. One of his most famous works, “The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living”, a tiger shark preserved in formaldehyde, in 1991 already signalled his conflicted attitudes, to dying and to the sea, which simultaneously attracts and repels him. When I suggest he might join me on the diving expedition, he answers by producing grisly photographs of the autopsy of a shark-bite victim.

Leaning against the wall of his London office is a contrasting image, one of Hirst’s own “fact” paintings, based on a lyrical underwater photograph of a snorkeller with tropical fish and corals. “I’ve always loved treasure, from when I was a kid watching Jacques Cousteau,” he recalls. “I’ve got houses in Mexico, and I found things from fishing boats like bits of coral and pottery that looked amazing. I then thought of putting some things in the bottom of the sea and leaving them there so they accumulated coral.”

His favourite among the objects this produced was a plate twisted and filled by coral. “You can’t use the plate anymore but it’s a beautiful object so I loved it more. It’s like the action of the world on things.”

The process of retrieving the objects might have inflicted serious damage on them. Lifting the bronze lion from the sea floor to the Baking Tray took four nail-biting hours. Divers attached flotation devices, carefully distributing the anticipated stress of water and ropes, and several times restarting the manoeuvre until satisfied with the arrangement. From the deck of the Baking Tray, none of this was visible, just a churning of water until the floats broke surface. Finally the bronze shimmered into view, at first in glimpses as if a school of fish had risen to feed, then resolving into a recognisable shape as the hoist swung it high into the air. At that same instant, a wave crashed into the Baking Tray and the lion arced towards the hull. Next to me, Rungwe Kingdon winced.

Kingdon, on hand to protect and preserve the retrieved pieces, is the owner — with his wife Claude Koenig — of Pangolin Editions, a foundry based in Gloucestershire, near two of Hirst's studios, that has cast many of Hirst's sculptures as well as work by other artists including Sarah Lucas and Don Brown. Antony Gormley's giant "Angel of the North" first spread her wings in the Pangolin workshops.

Once the lion landed on the deck, Kingdon sprinted for the hose to rinse away salt. Then he walked around the statue in silence for several minutes, occasionally stroking beards, his own and the lion's. "Magnificent, isn't he?" he muttered finally.

Like the rest of the pieces I saw on the Baking Tray or in the waters below it, the lion would be transported to Pangolin for more detailed attention. A trip to the foundry and Hirst's studios last year provided a preview of what visitors to Venice may expect but the experience also reminded me of the context in which the exhibition will unfurl, of Hirst's own notoriety. It is not only his willingness to engage with the business side of art that attracts criticism but the scale on which he makes art and the way in which he does it.

Pangolin and the larger of Hirst's nearby studios produce fine art at volume. The school of thought that understands art only as a form of craft rendered by the artist's own hands will never accept what comes out of these hangars as art. At Pangolin banks of technicians sit at computer screens modelling virtual shapes that 3D printers will transform into moulds. In Hirst's studios multiple assistants paint and pickle to his instructions. This leads to accusations that modern art has sold its soul, yet ironically these methods of production fall neatly into art historical traditions.

Artists have always embraced technology to realise their visions. Pangolin's printed moulds are used to create the wax casts that give shape to bronzes, a technique deployed as early as the Chalcolithic period. During the Renaissance, Leonardo da Vinci, a great inventor as well as one of the greatest artists of all time, learnt to paint and sculpt in the workshop of another artist, Andrea del Verrocchio, turning out art in Verrocchio's name.

At the time, nobody challenged the authenticity of this process or the art it produced. These days, in an age that no longer believes anything and can synthesise everything, we yearn for authenticity but struggle to define or recognise it. Hirst has always demonstrated that art is about ideas as well as aesthetics; that art is fabrication, a lie that by provoking us to think may bring us closer to the truth. Even so, for a while he confined himself to painting in a small studio in his garden, telling the BBC in 2009 that he would no longer undertake the large-scale installations that require teams to build.

He changed his mind but his continuing quest for the authentic may help to explain how the works are presented, some bristling with spiny outcrops and coralline fingers, others smooth and perfect.

In addition to the bronzes and gold and gilt, there are marbles and stones of different tones and textures. Quite a few items include faces or motifs that are startlingly modern. A series of female torsos in granite and marble evoke Barbie and the doll's anatomical impossibilities. They also recall the wasp-waisted forms of early Cycladic art. Archeologists have long been divided about whether Cycladic female figures represent goddesses or are merely children's toys, the Barbies of 2800 to 2000 BC.

Visitors to Venice will be invited to make their own decisions. Hirst likes to recall: "That great sketch by Tommy Cooper where he comes on stage with a painting and a violin and he goes, 'This Stradivarius and this Rembrandt were left to me in my grandfather's will.' And he goes, 'Unfortunately Rembrandt couldn't make violins and Stradivarius couldn't paint', and he puts the violin through the painting."

Hirst has no interest in passing off fake Picassos or copied Rembrandts, but in questioning where value resides. Is provenance the only guarantor or might the stories and ideas that attach to a work be at least as significant? This is the riddle posed by Amotan's sphinx — and to which she is Hirst's answer. Treasures "taps into a desire for belief, for a connection with the past", he says. "What's unknown is how it will be perceived, but maybe I am worrying more than is necessary, really, because people are willing to believe. I think they want to believe."