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Why Damien Hirst is seeing dots in his new work on view in Beverly Hills

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Damien Hirst with one of his new "Veil Paintings" at Gagolian gallery in Beverly Hills. "A veil is a barrier, a curtain between two things," Hirst says. "It's solid yet invisible and reveals and yet obscures the truth, the thing that we are searching for." (Kirk McKoy / Los Angeles Times)

Damien Hirst is dialing it back a bit. The British artist known for shocking, grandiose gestures that tend to provoke a love-it-or-hate-it response — think of those animals in formaldehyde, or his 2017 exhibition in Venice, Italy, a shipwreck fantasy featuring the sculptural remains of fictional, ancient civilizations — has returned to the humble canvas.

His first Los Angeles exhibition since 2002 has opened at Gagolian in Beverly Hills. The “Veil Paintings” exhibition features his poppy, pointillistic, candy-colored abstract works.

Unlike the Venice exhibition, which took about a decade to produce, the 24 oils-on-canvas in the new show were all created during the last year, and none has been shown publicly before. The work marks Hirst’s return to simpler-in-scope painting, but these are not quiet works.

“For me, they’re all just a massive celebration,” Hirst said in this edited conversation. “I had a lot of fun with the colors, they’re exciting, they make me feel really good when I look at them.”

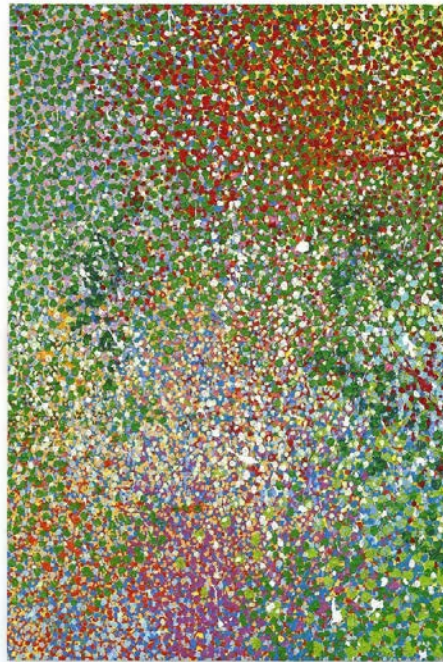
The new show is a departure from last spring’s “Treasures From the Wreck of the Unbelievable.” What triggered the shift back to painting?

Whenever I do something, if I go deeply into something, I always try to sort of swing back the other way. Like whenever I’ve made butterfly paintings, I immediately go and make fly paintings. And I think maybe with “Treasures,” I kind of went and made all these sculptures and this big illusion and immediately thought: “the equal and opposite is also true,” and went back to

something basic. Probably because it involved so many other people, and I think I just felt a need to get rid of everybody and be on my own [in the studio].

Was going back to basics also a response to critics of “Treasures,” some of whom said the show was too extravagant in scale and expense?

Venice was like 10 years work, but I’ve always done [more immediate] paintings. I remember John Lennon said, when someone asked him, “What do you do after you’ve cut your hair?” He said, “You just grow it.” It’s a bit like that. You grow your hair, you cut your hair. You work on complicated things, you simplify, you complicate, you simplify it.



One of Damien Hirst's new "Veil Paintings" at Gagosian in Beverly Hills. Kirk McKoy / Los Angeles Times

The work in the new show, you’ve said, is inspired by Post-Impressionist Pierre Bonnard?

Yeah. They have that sort of feeling, of that color — it’s not natural color from life. I think if you look at a detail of a Bonnard, the colors, they start to excite you like a Rothko painting, something spiritual if you believe in that. So I kind of mixed the two.

I saw a show, when I was student, at the Centre Pompidou in Paris, of Bonnard and de Kooning. It was a really good pairing. I was in my early 20s. I think I just got a really great hit from the color. Color is just a powerful, uplifting thing. I think art should always be hopeful and make you feel good.

Your relationship with social media — particularly Instagram — has changed this year. It’s gotten more personal, more autobiographical. Why?

I had sort of left my Instagram up to other people and didn’t see it as a tool to communicate or to show work. I didn’t really look at it very often. But when I started looking at it, I started noticing

they were advertising my restaurant and things like that, and it all seemed kind of stupid. I thought: I have 100 images of my work, and I just started writing little pieces about them, and I thought I'd see what happened if I started putting those [online].

Also, my son is big on Instagram, and he was giving me a bit of a kick saying, "Dad, you should do something with your Instagram." He's 17. He's a fingerboarder — mini skateboards. But I like the direct thing that's happening now, where I'm talking about myself and my work, just keeping it simple and tight. And hopefully that's what people wanna hear about rather than what's going on in my restaurant.

The "Spot Paintings," the "Visual Candy" works, the "Veil Paintings" and now "Colour Space," 250 dotted works debuting later this month in Britain — what is it about dots?

Wow. I don't know. I mean, I've always liked Op Art, like Bridget Riley, Larry Poons. I've always liked paintings that are exciting to the eye. I suppose dots come out of that. It's a surface that moves.



A detail from one of Damien Hirst's new "Veil Paintings" at Gagosian in Beverly Hills. Kirk McKoy / Los Angeles Times

Your work tends to provoke strong reactions — particularly from animal rights activists. What's your response to that?

I think I create a lot of reactions, some positive, some negative. But I don't kill animals for art or anything like that. As an artist you have to be really careful. Whenever I use animals or butterflies, I always make sure that they're all [handled] in the correct way and there's nothing dangerous. Same as when we use diamonds, we make sure they're not conflict diamonds. That's just normal things you have to do in the world today.

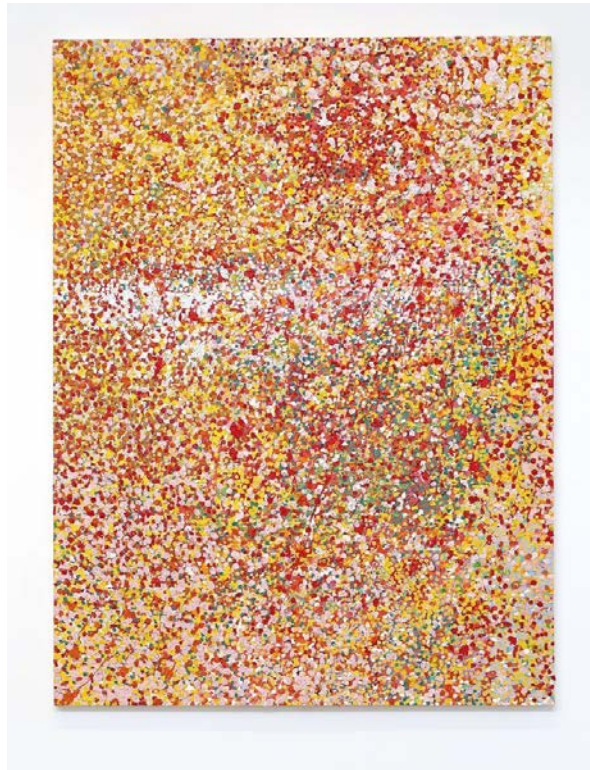
But I think mixed feelings are good. There's a lot of questions, aren't there, about animals. That's why I use animals in art in the first place. You wanna make art that is alive. You can imagine a time in the future when maybe everyone's vegetarian. All the pieces that I've made in formaldehyde, I now scan them. I'm looking at ways to make things 3-D that aren't animals, but look exactly like animals, from the older works. In case we get to a point in the future where you can't use meat.

Are you making new works incorporating animals?

I'm working with the Mexican government at the minute to maybe make a formaldehyde piece of an extinct animal, a porpoise, it's like a dolphin, to auction for charity. To highlight the plight of these animals.

How often are you in L.A.?

I'm in L.A. quite a lot — often doing kid things. I have a 12-year-old and a 17-year-old who likes to skate. My other [younger] son used to want to do Disneyland, and now it's Six Flags. We come out twice a year. I like Soho House, the Ivy restaurant. I do the museums, maybe a concert at Disney Hall. I saw the Alejandro Iñárritu VR piece at LACMA — it's great, really intense.



One of Damien Hirst's new "Veil Paintings" at Gagosian in Beverly Hills. Kirk McKoy / Los Angeles Times

Was there a reason for debuting this particular show in L.A.?

L.A. is just very open to painting. It just felt right. For me, the paintings seem to be about sunlight on flowers on a sunny day. And L.A. is perfect for that.

Who inspires you these days?

The whole world inspires me. My kids. Anyone making great art. There's a New York painter I really like called Sadie Laska; Sarah Lucas from England, she makes art from found objects. In L.A. I like Jonas Wood, Alex Israel. Mark Bradford I've met, a lovely guy, I really like the paintings. Paul McCarthy I love.

What's next?

Ironically, it's quite funny because a lot of people say I'm more interested in money than art. So I thought of making an artwork where I actually try to create money from art. They'd be like an 8-by-10 note, with very small dots on it over the whole surface. A bit like the new dot paintings I'm doing. They'd be handmade, all unique. I'd sign the back and they'd all have individual titles, maybe put a hologram on it and make it like a note in a currency.

I mean, a print actually works like a currency. If you make 100 prints and they all sell out and people trade them, it kind of works like a currency. So I've been thinking about that. Especially with all this bitcoin frenzy going on, it's nice to go back to something tangible.

Might that just inflame those critics who say you're more interested in money than art?

Not really. I've always been interested in money and art and how they connect. I think about money like you think about love or you think about death: They're very big, huge things you have to deal with in life, they're important. But I believe that art is more important than money. It rises above.



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