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Damien Hirst's Post-Venice, Post-Truth World

The artist worked in secret on his first love, painting, for his new show. This is the anti-Venice, he says.

Adam Popescu



Damien Hirst, 52, is preparing for his new show of paintings at Gagosian Gallery in Beverly Hills, Calif., his first in the Los Angeles area since 2012. Credit Nathanael Turner for The New York Times

LOS ANGELES — In army green camouflage and black sweats and with two heavy gold chains swinging with each step of his Nikes, Damien Hirst was in an unusually quiet mood.

Sipping from a can of Diet Coke at the Gagosian Gallery in Beverly Hills, his jeweled fingers shining, the artist craned to watch as his last nine-foot canvas was installed. Mr. Hirst is used to directing a legion of assistants, but on this day he was pensive.

After so many years relying on others, every one of the works in his new series of “Veil Paintings” was done by his hand and his alone, he said. Twenty-four huge oil works in splashes of blood red, electric blue and rich gold are his homage to the glorious color harmonies by the post-Impressionist Pierre Bonnard. Their meaning?

“I make it up after the fact,” Mr. Hirst said. “I don’t even know what this kind of work is. They make me happy, they feel good to look at, they sort of confuse me.” Maybe the public is too busy

trying to pin down one meaning, he mused. Maybe there is none. “Truth’s quite hard to find these days.”

“Art that doesn’t contain lies isn’t really a great piece of art,” he continued. “I don’t mind lying, but I don’t want to deceive people.”

Yet isn’t that what he’s done time and again since he burst onto the scene in the early 1990s?

Last year, his rediscovered sunken “treasures” in Venice — 189 artworks and artifacts, purported to be the possessions of a second-century collector and produced in editions of three — netted over \$330 million, stirring the pot for dissent. With such a loose interpretation of what is and isn’t real, and a recent Netflix mockumentary about the adventure furthering that narrative, outrage and applause have followed. Beyond Mr. Hirst’s heaps of money and rococo persona, his relationship to truth with a capital “T” might be his biggest draw. That’s why there remains an air of anticipation around this show — his first in the Los Angeles area since 2012 — despite its modest scale.

Mr. Hirst said he completed this series in the down time leading up to the two Venice exhibitions, “Treasures from the Wreck of the Unbelievable,” as most of the craft he displayed there was outsourced, giving him time to work in secret on his first love: painting.



From left, “Veil of Love’s Pleasure” (2017) and “Veil of Eternal Happiness” (2017). Every work in his new series was done by his hand alone, he said. Credit Nathanael Turner for The New York Times

With his oeuvre ranging from pointillism to cadavers as sculpture — the infamous shark in formaldehyde, shocking in 1992, was inspired by the film “Jaws,” he said — much of it was made by an army of helpers. Was that the impetus for this different show?

Mr. Hirst says no. Help is common, he points out, from Michelangelo to the modern day. “Whether you use lots of assistants or do it on your own,” he said, “as long as the result is what you want, it doesn’t matter to me.”

It might to collectors. This year’s personal touch could bump a value thinned after years of flooding. Representatives from Gagosian Gallery say the entire series has sold.

“If they’re all sold, it’s a testament to the fan base of Damien,” said Adam Lindemann, a New York collector who owns a handful of the artist’s work and said he doesn’t intend to sell. “People believe in him and follow him, those collectors aren’t just market conscious. They’re not buying as speculation.”

Asked about the Venice show when it debuted last year, Eli Broad, the philanthropist and museum founder, remarked that it was “kind of hokey.” Recently he called Mr. Hirst “an innovative artist who always moves in new directions.” The Broad would not comment on whether it had purchased any of the new work to add to its collection.



“Veil of Miracles” (2017) is one of 24 huge oil works in splashes of blood red, electric blue, rich gold — Mr. Hirst’s homage to the color harmonies of Pierre Bonnard. Credit Nathanael Turner for The New York Times

The public, however, still responds. At last week’s opening, A-listers from film and the arts stood in a line stretching around the block to get in.

Mr. Gagossian, who has represented Mr. Hirst for three decades (Mr. Hirst left him in 2012 but returned in 2016), said the series sold so quickly, he may have underpriced the paintings. “He’s never shown work like this, so we agreed on pricing that we thought was correct. They went from half a million for the smallest, \$1.7 million for the larger ones.”

This isn’t quite a new style. Mr. Hirst did similar paintings in the early 1990s, but color was frowned upon back then, the artist recalled, and he “didn’t have the courage at the time” to embark on such a large scale so early on. These paintings he pumped out of his London studio over 12-hour work days while his team of carpenters, architects and electricians ensured that Venice remained on schedule. This is the anti-Venice, Mr. Hirst said, adding, “I won’t be rushing to do something like that again.”

“I just had a gap,” he continued. “My work for Venice stopped about a year before it opened. In a way that was a stroll compared to this.”

Another series of paintings, this one from 2016 and created by his team, will be shown later this month at Houghton Hall in England. They are an extension of his famous Spot Paintings.



"Veil of Love's Pleasure" (2017). Credit Nathanael Turner for The New York Times

Mr. Hirst, 52, said he feels "a bit old" at times but claimed he's not interested in outdoing himself. A decade spent sinking and exhuming treasures — he sunk tens of millions of dollars into the Venice project — caused him to "stop thinking and do something totally visual."

Venice was a tumultuous period. Separated from the mother of his three children, the fashion designer Maia Norman, and recently involved with Katie Keight, a model, Mr. Hirst is 11 years clean from smoke, drink, drugs, ever aware of the hourglass. "I've got all of those addict sort of behaviors," he said, including being a workaholic. "I loved all that, and it screws you up and screws with your relationship and your family. I stopped all that."

"You've only got so many 10 years in your life, don't you?" he went on, recalling Venice's toll. "My son said to me, in Venice, 'Dad, you don't need to do this.'"

Despite his wild success, Mr. Hirst still sees himself as an outsider in what he calls a "stuffy" scene in which people "look their nose down" at him for breaking rules. Like many powerful men, he retains a deep desire to be accepted by the working class world he arose from — in his case, a postwar industrial Leeds of poverty and broken homes. Growing up without money, and then being known for it as much as the work, still stings.

"When I grew up, I never thought I'd get paid doing a job I enjoyed," he said. "I thought, oh, I'll probably make art, little things on the weekend. That was what I was looking forward to."

Once known for trouble, even sticking a piece of chicken into the opening of his penis in a restaurant, for shock value, and getting sued for it, he has visibly mellowed. Maybe it's a result of therapy, he mused, which he attends once a week. "A lot of people when they meet me, they think I'm O.K. in the end, 'I like that guy.' I think that surprises people. I have no idea what I do when I meet people for the first time."

Mr. Gagosian understands the shift. "He's sober, which makes communication a lot more reliable," he said. "He's healthy, he's into yoga. He likes to tease people, but there's not a mean bone in him. He's endearing, he's always been that way, even when he wasn't sober. He was fun when he was drinking, too. Too much fun for his own good."