

## GAGOSIAN



### Damien Hirst at Newport Street Gallery: glimmers of hope amid death and decay

*The British artist puts on show of his own early work at his London gallery — with distinct contemporary echoes*

Jan Dalley



© Prudence Cuming Associates

In 1991, Damien Hirst had his picture taken with a severed human head. A youthful-looking Hirst — the British artist was 26 at the time — is grinning wickedly at the camera, his own face snuggled up close beside the pudgy, bald, grumpy-looking face of the cadaver. The corpse’s eyes are squeezed tight shut, his mouth lightly sneering — it’s as if Hirst was mugging for a cheery family snap with a wearily disapproving elderly uncle.

“With Dead Head” (1991) is on display at Hirst’s Newport Street gallery in his latest show, *End of a Century* — emphasising, if we needed it, that this artist is unafraid to look death in the face. Or, indeed, cuddle up close to it.

The exhibition displays a slice of Hirst’s work and preoccupations up to the year 2000, as the title suggests. The 1990s were Hirst’s bad-boy years, a time of flamboyance and excess, of rapidly growing fame, of spiralling prices. But also a time gripped by the intimations of mortality that fuelled so much of his art from the beginning.

The now famous *Freeze* exhibition in London, curated by Hirst in 1988, had launched the Young British Artists into the mainstream of the art world for the next decade, and assured his own place in the limelight almost before there was much work to merit it. In 1990 the artist's association with Charles Saatchi began when the collector first saw "A Thousand Years", an installation featuring another severed head, this one once attached to a cow, gory, flayed and bleeding, in a huge glass box full of flies and maggots, which themselves flirt with death at the whim of a whirring electrical.



*Damien Hirst's '100 Years' (1991) at Newport Street Gallery © AFP via Getty Images*

The version in this show is modestly renamed "A Hundred Years", and is — we realise with something of a shock — the only work that contains a complete life cycle within itself, or even speaks of birth or renewal. The feeding, breeding, dying of the insects is perpetual, and they keep coming, rising, falling, as the puddle of cow's blood theatrically congeals to sticky-looking blackened goo.

Just about everywhere else, death is just death, for this artist. The high white walls of Hirst's Newport Street gallery, opened some five years ago to display his own extensive collection, host dozens of his cabinet works — shelf after shelf stocked with empty pill bottles and medicine packets, or with individual pills and capsules, colourful as candy, or with row on row of tortured-looking cigarette butts.

In one of the wall texts that run through the show, quotes from the artist himself, he declares "Pills are hope". What he means, though, is that pills are false hope: all these bottles and packages are empty, the husks of human beings' pathetic attempts to defy death. The contents of our medicine cabinets live on after us, mockingly, like some wonky posthumous self-portrait.



*'Prototype for Infinity' (1998) © AFP via Getty Images*

Just as poignant, though with a steelier edge, are the racks of medical instruments — extended to an installation of a dentist's chair and equipment. Hirst's fascination here is surely with pain: each of these sharp, hard, brutal things carries no sense of healing or balm or even comfort — each did something painful to someone, probably on their way to the inevitable end.

There can hardly be anyone who does not associate Hirst with formaldehyde. Mainly because of what is probably still his best-known work, "The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living" — aka the pickled shark — made in 1991. It was followed in 1993, at the Venice Biennale, by the cross-cut cow and calf, "Mother and Child Divided" — to my mind, one of the artist's most touching and powerful works.

None of these mighty pieces feature in this show, although Newport Street's museum-sized lobby boasts a splendid sawn-in-three pickled shark. But formaldehyde is a running theme. Small, early pickled works include a plucked and trussed chicken, squished into an uncomfortably tight box, a pair of flayed (but cleaned) bull's heads gazing towards each other as if in gloomy astonishment, and "Two Similar Swimming Forms in Infinite Flight (Broken)", from 1993. This has a pair of baby sharks, preserved in their small cases and attached to a sort of low metal hoop, like a roundabout from a toddlers' playground, as if they are swimming round and round forever, caught in time — until a piece breaks.

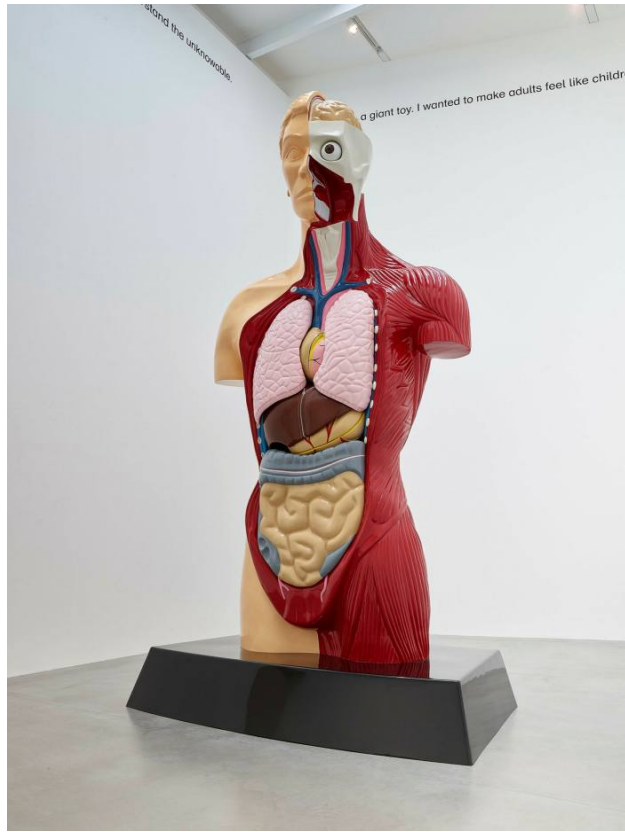
The show also celebrates the stuff itself. On a wall, Hirst explains his obsession with formaldehyde: it has "that kind of tragedy that things are falling apart, that kind of arrested decay, but not quite". Another attempt, then, to defy death and its relentless processes of putrefaction. The enigmatically titled "Loss of Memory" (1991) is a large floor-standing glass box packed with large plastic tubs of formaldehyde, as well as syringes, goggles and masks, discarded surgical gloves. The paraphernalia of death, itself protected from decay. Preservatives preserved: and containing nothing but the idea, the abstract fact, of death.



*Damien Hirst with medicine cabinets at his new show © Prudence Cuming Associates*

Just occasionally, Hirst strays into something lighter, more playfully metaphorical. “What Goes Up Must Come Down”, from 1994, is neat little installation: a hair dryer propped in an open perspex box so that it blows upwards a stream of air on which a single pingpong ball perpetually bounces and dances, never falling — until the switch is turned off, presumably. After such immersion in images of mortality, it’s not hard to work out the significance of this, an image of the fragility of life.

Hirst has laughed at himself, and us, about this piece (“a cheap trick”) but in the context of this body of work it almost comes as a relief: whimsical, yes, but a flight of the imagination in a groundswell of rather dogged, in-yer-face, inescapable imagery. The brashest example of this is Hirst’s once controversial giant garishly painted bronze called “Hymn” (1999), a bully-boy of a figure five-times life-size, an anatomical model with half its head and the whole of its bodily front flayed open to reveal lungs, heart, tripe and all. It’s a replica of an educational model made for children; the manufacturers of the toy, and its designer, provided just one of the many lively lawsuits Hirst has faced down in his career.



*'Hymn' (1999) © Prudence Cuming Associates*

During this decade, Hirst also started to create his famous spot and spin paintings. These feature here rather less: there is one huge wall of spots (“They are what they are. Perfectly dumb paintings that feel absolutely right”) with a bit of skippy background, just for fans — a display of dinner plates, and another rack of hanging saucepans, in spot-painting colours. And a single mighty spin painting from 1996, with its motor, has a title too long to quote, but containing phrases from the artist’s critics: “not art, over simplistic, kid’s stuff, visual comedy . . .”. But also the words “sensational, inarguably beautiful”.

That title, like this show itself, encapsulates the extremes of reaction to this always up-and-down, patchy, clever, to-the-extremes, infuriating but compelling artist. There is much, much more to his oeuvre than the particular slice chosen for this show, but, as it is, it can’t help but have powerful resonance for the Covid era. (One work, “Waster” from 1997, is a glass case simply stuffed with discarded PPE.) It’s a slight relief to walk out into a cool street after rattling around in Hirst’s deathly obsessions, pummelled by their weird force. Yet in the catalogue he proclaims something close to optimism. “Religion, love, art and science,” he writes, are life’s four important things, “all just tools to help you find a path through the darkness”.

“Of them all, science seems to be the one right now. Like religion, it provides the glimmer of hope that maybe it will be all right in the end.”

