

GAGOSIAN



Living with Damien Hirst and friends

Robert Tibbles was an early collector of the Young British Artists — now he is preparing to sell many of his acquisitions

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Caption (TNR 9 Italicized)

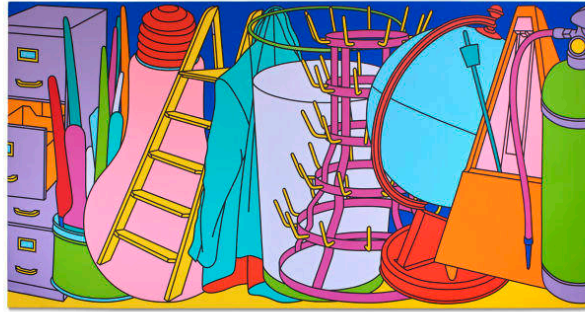
Everyone likes to say that they discovered an artist before they were famous, but in the case of the London bond salesman Robert Tibbles, the claim is true. Back in the 1980s, the late art dealer Karsten Schubert introduced Tibbles to the work of an art student called Damien Hirst. Alongside Charles Saatchi, Tibbles then became one of the now-superstar artist's first buyers.

So began an intense, 15-year collecting spree, mostly of works by Hirst and other Young British Artists. These now dominate Tibbles's Victorian ground-floor flat in London's leafy Kensington, where an early Hirst spot painting, "Antipyrylazo III" (1994), has loomed almost too large over the living room fireplace since Tibbles bought it in the year it was made.

Hanging nearby is another early purchase — Hirst's degree-show medicine cabinet "Bodies" (1989) — a work that demonstrates Tibbles's aptitude for picking the right time in the art market as well as the debt markets. He bought the cabinet for £600 (again, in the year it was made) and now, as Tibbles prepares to sell much of his YBA collection at auction at Phillips in London, the cabinet is valued between £1.2m and £1.8m.

"There's no question that the medicine cabinet and other works were not liked or understood by many of my friends. But I've always thought that [Hirst] has such a clever way of looking at

things and there's been a change of attitude towards him since. Truthfully, though, most of the status of any artwork is now in its price," Tibbles says, with a frankness that is rare in the art collecting community.



Michael Craig-Martin's 'Full' (2000)

Hirst himself has fond memories of the banker. "I remember Robert very well, he was so excited by the art. It was in the days when I installed my own work in people's houses, so I went round and met him and he made me tea," the artist tells me.

Hirst also notes that, unlike other early buyers of the cabinets, Tibbles held on to his work for a long time. "Robert is a proper collector and I'm really touched he kept and lived with my work for all those years," he says.

Indeed, unlike in his day job, Tibbles says he did not buy art with investment in mind. "It was more a case of keeping an eye [on prices] because I had to be able to afford the works. You have to be prepared for the fact that art doesn't really do anything [in terms of generating income] until you sell it," he says.



Damien Hirst's 'Bodies' (1989), left, and his spot painting 'Antipyrilazo III' (1994)

He certainly bought the works to live with. Other paintings for sale next month include Julian Opie's "Imagine you are driving (4)" (1997, £20,000-£30,000), a vast, tantalising road to

nowhere, which seems to touch the pillows of the bed that Tibbles shares with his partner of 21 years. Two other large-scale works, by the YBA tutor Michael Craig-Martin, rather overwhelm the hallway and living room and have a personal resonance for Tibbles, who now counts the artist among his friends.

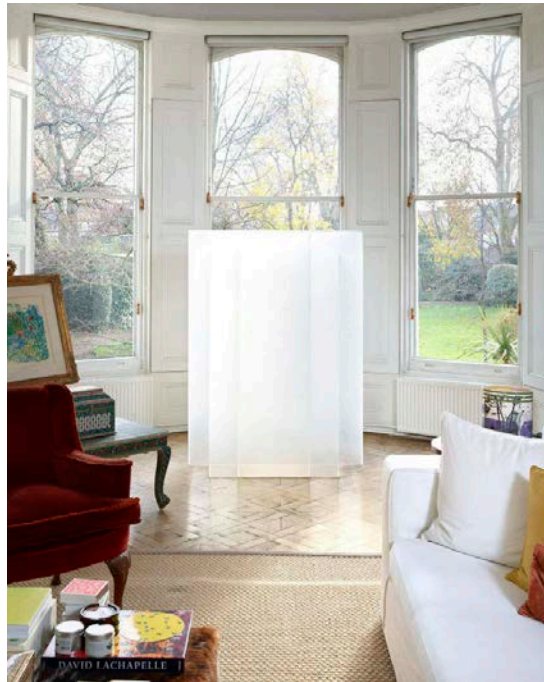
Specialists at Phillips believe that one of these, “Full” (2000), which combines elements from important artists such as Jasper Johns and Marcel Duchamp, will beat the artist’s current auction record of £140,000 (£175,000 with fees), though they have estimated the painting conservatively at between £80,000 and £120,000.

Several of the works that Tibbles is selling seem to reflect a part of his life. In particular, a large Gilbert & George double portrait, “City Fairies” (1991, £120,000-£180,000), spoke to him as a gay man working in an alpha-male world, he says. “Until I was about 40, it wasn’t something I talked much about. But things are changing and we’re lucky to be out of the period when gay men in the City pretended to have a girlfriend in New York,” Tibbles says.

He is also full of stories about the artists he has met since buying their work. Of the huge Hirst spot painting, estimated to sell between £900,000 and £1.2m, Tibbles says the artist told him that each of its 2,050 little circles is hand-painted in a different colour. “I haven’t managed to prove him wrong yet,” the collector adds.

The personal nature of the collection prompts the question of why he is now selling it. On this, Tibbles is unusually reticent, but there are clues in the facts that he turns 60 this year and is having a rethink career-wise too. He started out at the US brokerage firm PaineWebber in London in 1993 and stayed on when the bank was bought by UBS in 2000. In 2014, as UBS went through a major downsizing exercise, they “let me go”, Tibbles says.

He then went to work at Santander, where he stayed until the end of 2019. “The industry has changed, yields are low as there’s a reduced appetite for risk. Fund managers aren’t having much fun any more,” he says. But, he hints, it’s more of a pause, both in terms of his work and art buying. “I feel like a leaf in the wind, but in a good way. I’ve had such a lovely time with these works but the collection is complete and it’s got to the stage when I’ve started noticing other things,” he says, without elaborating on where else his interests may lie.



Marcus Taylor's 'Untitled (Abstract Elevations #4)' (1993)

That may, of course, depend on how much he makes from the works — dubbed the “Cool Britannia collection” by the auction house — when they come to market on February 13 and 14 (their total combined estimate is about £4m). Many of the artists on offer, not least Hirst, have had their ups and downs on the market in recent years, while the YBAs’ cheeky exuberance can seem a little anachronistic in more sombre times. But Tibbles’s early entrée adds to their value, which means it is likely to be all upside financially. “I’m lucky,” he says. “I had 10-plus years of collecting before it all went nuts.”