

## GAGOSIAN

# The Guardian

### Damien Hirst review – just when you thought it was safe to go back in the water

*Newport Street Gallery, London: Shark tanks, cow's heads, feasting flies and pill bottles ...  
Hirst's death-obsessed early work hits home just as hard now disease is all around us*

Jonathan Jones



*Art with bite ... Myth Explored, Explained, Exploded, 1993. Photograph: Yui Mok/PA*

There was widespread disgust a couple of years ago when Damien Hirst unveiled paintings consisting of thousands of butterflies trapped in acrylic. All I can say is, if you share that revulsion at the use of dead animals to make art, you may want to avoid this spectacular survey of his early work.

It begins with a shark sliced in sections, each preserved in its own tank of formaldehyde. But that's nothing, even if you've noticed this appears to be a juvenile tiger shark, killed before it could breed. I say appears – the gallery just calls it a “shark”. The double freezer in the next room is where things really get creepy. Peer inside and dead eyes stare back at you from a closely packed heap of severed cows' heads. Like a frightened child, I had to ask a staff member if they are real. They are. A small herd has been slaughtered just for this. What passing-bells for these who die as cattle?

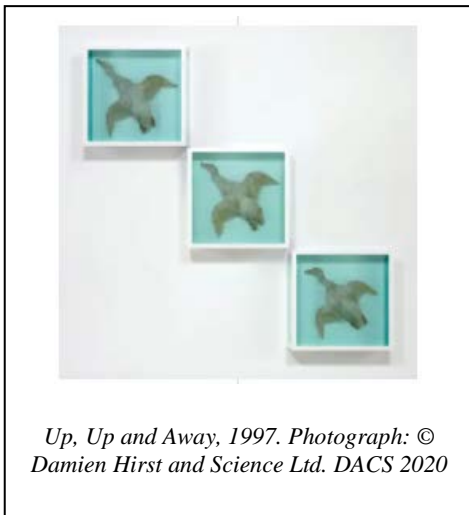
The most emetic work here is also the most appallingly funny. This 1997 piece preserves an entire butcher's stall in formaldehyde. There are strings of sausages, cutlets, chops, hams, and more surreal cuts. The glass and formaldehyde made it seem as if my face was reflected in a pig's arse. The 23-year-old meats look chemically white and obscene. Underneath is a jaunty painted sign that says “Shut Up and Eat Your Fucking Dinner.”



*Meat of the matter ... Hirst's 1997 butcher's shop. Photograph: Yui Mok/PA*

Nothing marks the passage of time since Damien Hirst was a young artist so much as our changed attitudes to meat. Obviously the concept of animal rights existed back in the 1990s, kids. But somehow not in art. When Hirst leapt to notoriety for putting animals in vitrines there was hilarity and outrage – the Sun sent a reporter to the Saatchi Gallery with a bag of chips to go with his pickled fishes, the critic Robert Hughes said a real man would have caught the sharks himself – but not much moral or political protest.

Now Hirst can look back on his youth, it seems, with a certain serenity. He owns a huge collection of his own art, and has curated it in an immensely entertaining trip down memory lane. But what makes him think we need Britpop nostalgia from a time when the Tories had been in power forever and a frightening new disease sparked an urgent sense of mortality?



*Up, Up and Away, 1997. Photograph: © Damien Hirst and Science Ltd. DACS 2020*

Wait, I get it. The dead animals in this exhibition may seem to date it but the terror of death that pulses here is all too 2020. Around the walls are cases arrayed with medicines including Retrovir, the first drug approved in the US for HIV, reflecting the medical crisis that intensified art in the early 1990s. If Hirst was updating his medical supplies he might add dexamethasone and remdesivir, which President Trump received for his Covid.

This fascination with healing proves that Hirst, who this year released his own NHS rainbow, is no psychopath. There are two dead men's heads in this show but they only appear in photographs. Here's young Hirst, a student in Leeds, laughing next to a severed head in the city morgue. But in reality he never did pickle his grandmother. Hirst does not think human beings are meat. He thinks other animals are.

The philosophy on display here is classical humanism with a side order of Cartesian dualism. Like the French thinker Descartes, Hirst believes we are fundamentally different from other

creatures. That is because we have consciousness – above all, the consciousness of death. There's a huge piece, half sculpture and half painting, that lays out a puke-making collection of cigarette butts. Hirst, in one of the meditations written up throughout the show, points out, in case you're thick, that smoking is about death.



*Lethal brilliance ... A Hundred Years. Photograph: Ray Tang/Rex/Shutterstock*

Lest you don't give your mortality much thought and Covid-19 is just something that's happening to other people, Hirst's classic art keeps screaming the fragility of all organic matter. And finally, here's what the cow heads are for: food for flies. The daunting installation *A Hundred Years* is more or less identical to its better known companion *A Thousand Years*. A big, black-framed, transparent tank is divided in two, with a small aperture between them. In the first, myriads of flies are born and buzz about. In the second, they can feast on a bloody cow's head as it deliciously rots – but they risk being frazzled by an insect-o-cutor. Generations of flies will pass as world history is trapped in this enclosed allegory. The tray under the glowing blue insect killer was already full.

So many lives, so many deaths. And us, looking at a vibrating array of dark dots, a blue light, a pool of purple thickening gore. *A Hundred Years* should be in a museum for ever. Perhaps everything else by its inventor will be forgotten. But this is more lethally brilliant than anything by Marcel Duchamp.

The exhibition's only weakness is its inclusion of Hirst's vacuous paintings. Dots and spun splashes that make me shrug. He is not a painter, but a metaphysician. It's fair to say Hirst looks here like a prophet. Suspend your ethical doubts and eat his art.