

## GAGOSIAN

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### **Damien Hirst on painting cherry blossom: ‘It’s taken me until I’m 55 to please my mum’**

*The former hell-raising, hard-partying YBA known for slicing animals in half is now painting trees in bloom. Has he lost his edge? And why is his hair blue?*

Chloë Ashby



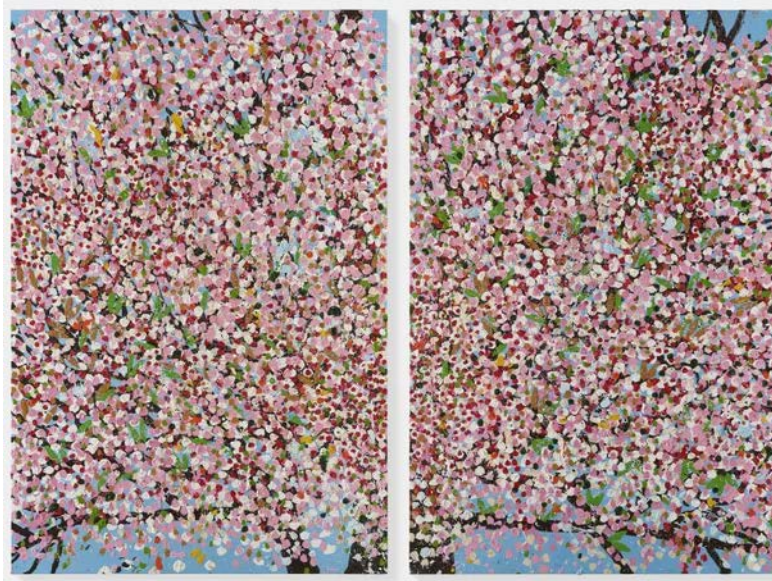
*A bit wiser and more patient ... Damien Hirst. Photograph: Ed Alcock/The Guardian*

The first thing that hits me when I see Damien Hirst’s Cherry Blossoms isn’t the scale (monumental) or the palette (psychedelic) but the paint itself. It’s thick, sticky and a little bit nasty. Creamy-white and dusty-pink daubs swirl from the surface like meringue kisses, fragile and sugary sweet. Others are more chewy, like dried gum. Then there are the viscous splats of mustard-yellow and brown, which are toe deep and remind me of something I side-stepped on the pavement this morning.

“I think the idea of being a painter has always appealed to me,” says Hirst, who is more famous for what we might call his non-canvas work. “I suppose it’s that old story of Turner being strapped to a mast during a storm so he could paint it – it’s a romantic thing.”

Hirst has, of course, wielded a brush before, but it wasn’t until he’d finished coordinating his 2017 extravaganza Treasures from the Wreck of the Unbelievable – which was a decade in the making, required an army of assistants and filled two museums in Venice – that he started to crave time alone in the studio. “I like being by myself if I know what I’m doing,” he says. “With this, I worked out the whole series, then there were three years of intense painting.” It’s as if he’d known lockdown was coming.

Hirst was invited to show his Cherry Blossoms at the Fondation Cartier in Paris in 2019. General director Hervé Chandès stumbled upon a couple of his new paintings on Instagram and swiftly engineered a studio visit. The exhibition – Hirst’s debut in a French museum – was supposed to take place last June, then this spring, and now it’s just opened. The artist and I chat on the Fondation’s top floor, where I find him signing posters. He’s dressed for the occasion in a pale pink suit, his close-cropped hair dyed sky blue. As I take a seat, he tells me his girlfriend was getting blond highlights and the hairdresser had some blue dye, so he did it on a whim. “I thought about going pink but decided it might be too much with the Cherry Blossoms.” Too much? Those are two words I never thought I’d hear from the original enfant terrible of the Young British Artists.



*‘Whenever anything became a bit laboured, I’d just chuck paint on top’ ... Renewal Blossom, 2018. Photograph: © Damien Hirst and Science Ltd*

Out of 107 paintings, 30 are on display. The first space I enter overlooks a garden, with floor-to-ceiling glass windows letting in natural light and engaging Hirst’s artificial trees in conversation with real ones swaying in the summer breeze. On the ground floor, different-sized canvases take a wide-angle view of branches in bloom, while in the basement every image is a closeup. Throughout, the works toggle between figuration and abstraction. “From afar I wanted them to look like trees,” says Hirst, “and up close I wanted them to disappear and fall into crazy amounts of paint. Whenever anything became a bit laboured, I’d just chuck paint on top.”

He applied it with sticks and brushes – “whatever I had at hand” – and often from the other end of his studio. “I’d go really far back and throw it. And I’d have paintings either side as well, so when I was working on one, I was getting paint on another.” The foundation’s white walls and cement floors might be squeaky clean, but in London it’s another matter: “I’ve got to scrape my windows soon, I think, otherwise I’ll be working in a pitch-black room.”

It’s a surprising approach, given that Hirst has for the past 20 years been sticking to a precise grid with his Spot Paintings, which look machine-made. “I wanted that series to be bright and celebratory,” he says. “I didn’t want anybody to be able to criticise it – that’s where the grid came in. I realised it was difficult to criticise a grid.”

It was also about taking control of colour and exploring his love of minimalism: “I’ve loved it for years, but there’s something wrong with it. You kind of want the circles to collapse and break down.” He says the loose and uninhibited Cherry Blossoms feel more “him” right now. “It’s a different kind of painting, a different kind of chaos.”



*Not a dead shark in sight ... Hirst's studio. Photograph: © Damien Hirst and Science Ltd*

The Cherry Blossoms are bound to be a hit with Hirst’s mum. “When I was making the animals in formaldehyde, she said, ‘Oh, there’s enough horror in the world, can’t you do paintings of flowers?’ And I think, my God, it’s taken me until I’m 55 before I can please her.”

But they’re more than paintings of flowers. They are exuberant and life-affirming but also excessive and messy. As Hirst says, some people think cherry blossoms are about life and others think they’re about death. “They bring together the past, present and future, everything we love and everything we hate. Even though there are no dead sharks to be seen, I still find them an assault on the senses. I still find them aggressive and violent.” He adds: “In the first few paintings, I laid out a set of pinks and a set of whites. After that, they became a riot.”



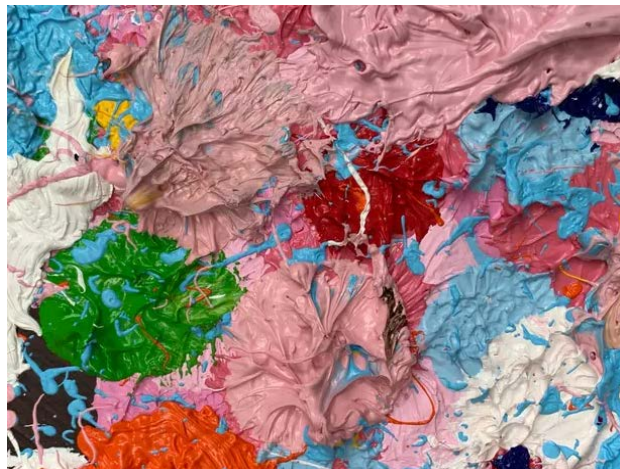
*‘They’re an assault on the senses’: Hirst with his blossoms Photograph: Ed Alcock/The Guardian*

The subject matter springs in part from a memory of Hirst’s mum painting a cherry tree in blossom when he was three or four: he remembers thinking the blobs looked easy enough to replicate. It’s also a continuation of the entirely abstract Veil Paintings he showed in Los Angeles in 2018: he tried to create a sense of depth and ended up seeing gardens in the shimmering dabs of paint.

Hirst's painterly ability has been questioned in the past, but when you're portraying imperfect nature you can allow yourself some wriggle room. My favourites here are the canvases given room to breathe, the summer sky providing some reprieve from the frothy blossom and tangled branches. The largest work is 5.5 metres tall and 7.3 metres wide (18ft x 24ft), comprises four panels and has a whole wall to itself. My eye snags on a putty-like splat, then glides along a skinny branch before getting caught on a fleck of bright white. Elsewhere, a diptych brings together two halves of a flowering tree, its trunk bisected. Remind you of anything?

Hirst's habit of chopping things in half persists, but he's dialled down the shock factor. "All my favourite art, if I look back at any artist, is like a map of a person's life," he says. "You start off crazy and wild, then you slow down and become more stable."

I'm reminded of something he said earlier about never liking the term "YBA" because he knew that one day it would be replaced by "OAP". I ask if he's mellowed and, after thinking for a moment, he says he's a bit wiser and more patient.



*Hirst applied paint with sticks and brushes – 'whatever I had at hand'. Photograph: © Damien Hirst and Science Ltd*

"I guess in the beginning," he says, "with the drinking and the partying and the drugs, I felt immortal. I thought: 'This is going to last for ever, nothing can stop me.' Then – boom – it kind of hits you and you think: 'That's not where I am any more.' But I've still got that streak of wanting to change the world and wanting to reinvent myself."

I tell Hirst he is sounding quite reflective, and he says he always has been. He talks about lockdown and feeling blessed to have been able to go to his studio every day. The Cherry Blossoms were conceived before the pandemic, but he is certain that his need to find some positivity spurred the project on.

"I suppose I was tentative because it's a bit unexpected for me. I thought people would say: 'You're painting flowers? What's going on?' Then when Covid hit, I felt strongly that it was the right thing to do. As I've got older, I've got more confident – or maybe I've lost my edge. Who knows?" Does that worry him? "Not at all. I just want to check out what happens next."