



Damien Hirst

In a survey show of the artist at Tate Modern, Hirst's trademark repetitions soon become apparent

BY JENNIFER HIGGIE IN REVIEWS | 01 JUN 12



Featured in
Issue 148



A Thousand Years, 1990

Despite its materials and mood-swings, Damien Hirst's survey show at Tate Modern is about as wild as a morgue – one that has expanded to accommodate not only human bodies but those of the animal and plant kingdoms, as well as the corpses of a few once-good ideas. In the first gallery the brightly painted *Boxes* (1988) and a row of glossy saucepans (*8 Pans*, 1987), both made while Hirst was still at Goldsmiths College of Art, share the space with a black and white snapshot of the 16-year-old artist grinning beside the severed head of an old man (*With Dead Head*, 1991), an image that, depending on your perspective, either lends a certain weird levity to the proceedings or foreshadows the different shapes of gloom to come.

Hirst's trademark repetitions soon become apparent. There's a lot in this show that is round or round-ish: pots, dots, diamonds, spinning paintings, flies, pills, balls and tightly coiled cigarette butts – a seemingly endless variation on a theme of full stops that refuses to put a stop to anything, least of all itself. While illness is intimated in the rows of surgical implements and drugs that form endless patterns in cold, elegant cabinets, death – the ultimate full-stop – is undoubtedly the star. There's a large vitrine that contains a life-cycle of maggots, flies and a bloody cow's head that faintly infects the air with the smell of rotting flesh (*A Thousand Years*, 1990). Elsewhere is the famous dead shark (*The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living*, 1991), its furious face as wizened as an ageing rock star's; a couple of melancholy sheep (*Away from the Flock*, 1994, and *Black Sheep*, 2007); a cow and a calf both separated and split in two (*Mother and Child Divided*, 1993/2007); and a gallery of dying butterflies excreting their tiny gestural pupae on swathes of white canvas (*In and Out of Love [White Paintings and Live Butterflies]*, 1991). Dead things are very dead here, despite Hirst's attempt to raise them to the heights of symbol or metaphor, signifier or whatever. Bluntness is part of his point – he wants us to literally encounter mortality – but it doesn't reveal an awful lot. We die? Living things have insides? For all his theatrics, Hirst remains a curiously literal artist: his instinct is, generally speaking, to take something and either cut it in two or suspend it in formaldehyde or put it on a shelf or repeat it endlessly, much of the time for no better reason I can think of than to worship at the altar of Mammon.

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Nonetheless, the exhibition is elegantly put together and – despite the fact that a lot of the works here no longer need air – individual pieces are given a lot of space to breathe by curator Ann Gallagher, who has judiciously edited out works such as the execrable skull paintings Hirst showed at The Wallace Collection in 2009. But ultimately it's all terribly lifeless, which, considering that so much has died to support Hirst's vision perhaps shouldn't be surprising. Ironically, the mind-numbingly dreary dot paintings that Hirst and now his assistants have been churning out for 25 years are the only things that show no sign of giving up the ghost.

Taken together, Hirst's work declares that life is sort of amazing, if a little repetitious, but death – although sort of amazing too – really sucks, but nature is as scary and as beautiful and as pointless and as doomed as we all are, but possibly – just possibly – God exists. This is all borne of the intermingling of terror and cliché (a combination which ensures its longevity), but Hirst has never granted it sustained scrutiny. It needn't have been this way. Early on in his career, he showed a restless kind of promise. For example, *The Acquired Inability to Escape* (1991) – a huge vitrine inhabited only by an office desk, chair and an ashtray – combines his talent as a wordsmith (which, given the titles of the more recent works such as *The Anatomy of an Angel*, 2008, he has lost) with his ability to indicate complex feelings in a simple way (*A Thousand Years* is the best example of this). But around the mid-1990s Hirst became so distracted by his own undeniably brilliant entrepreneurial abilities that he forgot to do the work that might have allowed his ideas to develop into anything significant.

It goes without saying that myriad artists before Hirst have tackled similar preoccupations (i.e. life, death, representation and religion) and sent them soaring to great, complex, strange and wonderful heights. Hirst, in fact, references many of them – from Francis Bacon and Paul Thek to Haim Steinbach and, of course, Jeff Koons – but on the whole he does little with their influence beyond rehashing it in a way that is as easily digested as it is diluted.

In Hirst's more recent work, it's impossible to ignore the distant hum of that great life-force, money; it grows to a deafening roar in the Turbine Hall, where the diamond-encrusted skull, *For the Love of God* (2007), is being exhibited for a month, crown-jewels-like, in a closely guarded room, and in the final galleries, which are wallpapered with the cover of the auction catalogue from the 2008 Sotheby's sale that made Hirst the world's richest living artist. The corpses of butterflies, variously and gruesomely arranged to evoke stained-glass windows (*Doorways to the Kingdom of Heaven*, 2007), made me think of the kind of places I'm not that familiar with, such as oligarchs' boudoirs. In the midst of it all is the dreadful aforementioned angel, who averts her gaze so we can scrutinize the horror that has befallen her: her skin has been peeled back to reveal her marble innards. The sculpture sums up Hirst's fundamental delusion: he seems to assume that by revealing something's guts you can glimpse its heart.

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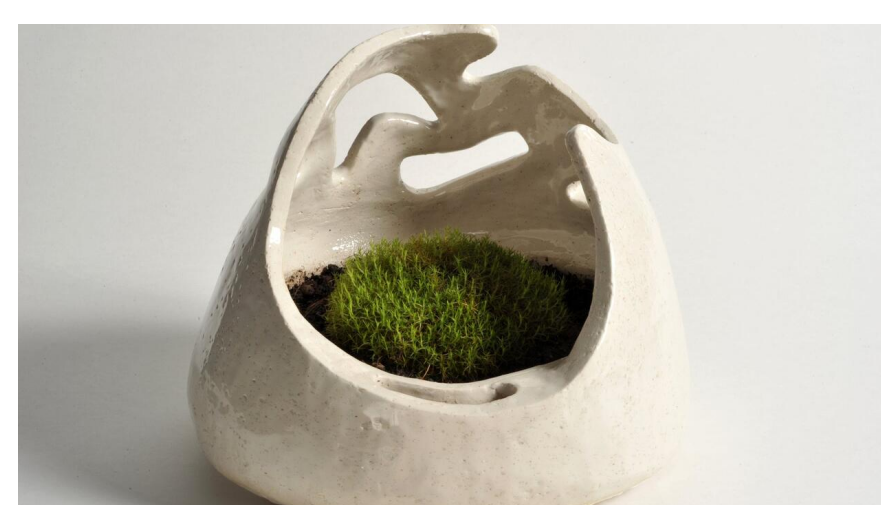
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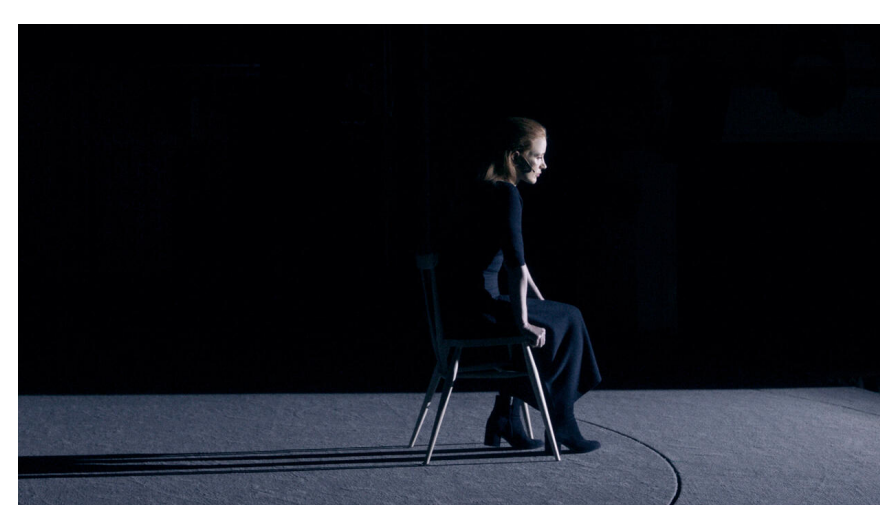
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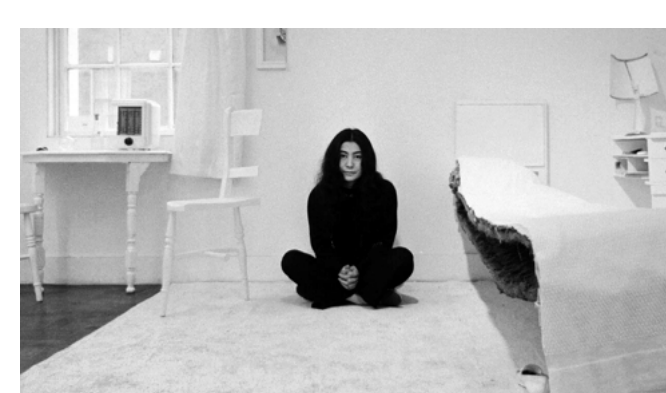
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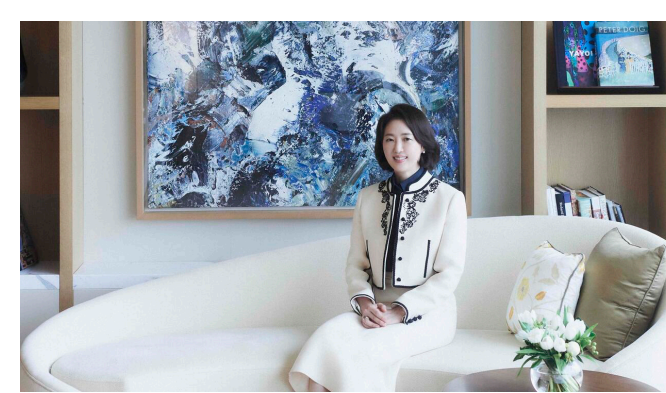
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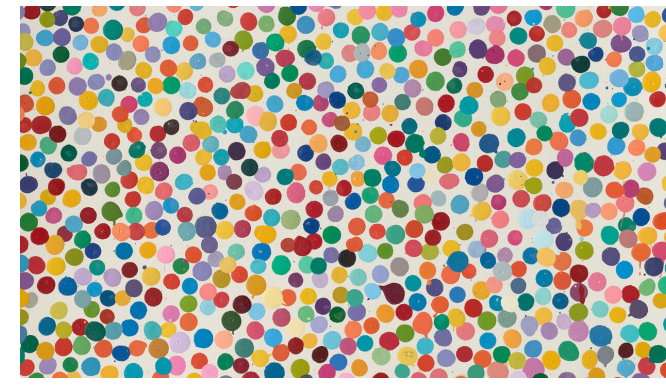
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