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Comment:
Beyond Belief

Trend-setting art in this supposedly post-Christian culture is sometimes shockingly religious. In May 2007 an exhibition of new work by Damien Hirst opened at the White Cube gallery in London entitled 'Beyond Belief'. The centrepiece, 'For The Love of God', a *memento mori*, surrounded by unprecedented security arrangements, is an 18th- century human skull recreated in platinum, encrusted with 8,601 diamonds weighing a total of 1,106.18 carats, only the teeth remaining of the original. The most expensive work of art ever created — £15 millions worth of diamonds — Hirst expects to sell it for £50 million.

Born in Bristol in 1965, Damien Hirst grew up in Leeds. His stepfather left when he was twelve. He does not know who his real father is. He had a delinquent youth, shoplifting and so on. His mother, Mary, significantly enough as it turned out, was a lapsed Catholic. She cut up his punk bondage trousers and, even more imaginatively, heated one of his Sex Pistols vinyl records on the cooker to turn it into a fruit bowl. She encouraged his drawing. One of his two A-levels was an 'E' in Art. The first time he applied he was refused admission to art college in Leeds. The same thing happened when he moved to London. In between he worked on building sites, but, perhaps more significantly, in a mortuary. He had serious drug and alcohol problems. Now married with three young sons, he lives at their remote farmhouse in Devon. He is restoring an early 19th-century gothic manor house in Gloucestershire, to be the family home and the site eventually of works that he intends never to sell. He has many interests outside art. He had a short-lived partnership in a London restaurant with the chain-smoking celebrity chef Marco Pierre White. He helps to run a seafood restaurant that he opened in the seaside resort of Ilfracombe.

Famously, the Baghdad-born advertising agency tycoon ('Labour isn't Working') turned millionaire art collector, Charles Saatchi, bought 'A Thousand Years', as soon as he saw it: a real-life installation—maggots hatching inside a white box, turning into flies, then feeding on a bloody, severed cow's head on the floor of a claustrophobic glass vitrine. Most of the flies are electrocuted; enough survive to continue the cycle.

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'Away from the Flock' is a lamb sliced in half and preserved in two formaldehyde-filled tanks. 'The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living', a 22-ton 'installation', is, or was, a 14-foot tiger shark, caught on commission off Queensland, immersed in a formaldehyde-filled vitrine. Wanted by the Tate, the Tory Shadow Minister for the Arts even tabling a question in the House of Commons to ask if the government would ensure it stayed in Britain, the shark has deteriorated. Back in the mid-1990s, Virginia Bottomley, then Heritage Secretary in John Major's administration, hailed Hirst as 'a pioneer of the British art movement'. (Sheep farmers were pleased he had raised interest in British lamb.)

The nature and volume of work that Hirst produces needs something like a Renaissance studio, with a team of assistants. The creative act he takes to be the conception, not the execution: as the one with the idea, he is the artist. He kept a respectful distance, in the open air, while workmen in protective clothing replaced the shark.

Many of the most recent creations are, however, twists on familiar Catholic themes. 'God' is a cabinet of pharmaceutical products. 'The Wrath of God' is another shark in formaldehyde. But 'The Stations of the Cross', twelve photographs depicting the final moments of Jesus Christ; 'The Virgin Mother', a massive statue of a pregnant woman, with layers removed from one side to expose the foetus; 'The Sacred Heart of Jesus', a bull's heart, pierced with assorted needles, in formaldehyde; 'The Blood of Christ', thousands of paracetamol tablets racked up on gleaming shelves,—these are parodistic variations on distinctively Catholic devotions, mischievous, grotesque, perhaps even obscene.

Damien Hirst's most unsettling works surely owe a good deal to his lapsed Catholic mother's wayward and perhaps even somewhat wacky imagination. The price tags certainly owe everything to Frank Dunphy, Hirst's agent, manager and friend. Dunphy, as it happens, was born and brought up in Portrane, a nondescript village in County Dublin. His mother, a Tipperary woman, was a member of Cumann na mBan, the women's wing of the Old IRA. He was schooled by Christian Brothers. Now aged 69 Dunphy recalls having Irish, Latin and arithmetic 'beaten into us, basically'. Like every good Irish boy of his generation he remains an expert in pre-Vatican II ceremonies and devotions. This inheritance, as he says, 'comes in awful handy' when Hirst has a theological problem: 'When he starts up with the religious questions regarding his work, I have the answers' (interviewed by Sean O'Hagan, *The Observer* 01.07.07). Beyond belief there is always belonging. Beyond belief in Catholic doctrine there is the savage power of derelict religion.

Fergus Kerr OP

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