

Damien Hirst

Gets (Photo)Realistic

The artist got sick of 'making Damien Hirsts.'

He explains how he found the cure

BY KELLY DEVINE THOMAS

On a morning prior to the opening of Damien Hirst's first all-paintings exhibition at Gagosian Gallery in New York last March, one of his assistants, a young girl in a red apron, lay on her stomach finishing off a pink pill in a pharmaceutical painting. Another assistant painted a black asterisk on a canvas, reproducing the logo of the antianxiety drug Ativan. Open Heineken bottles—one sporting a white glove puppet—sat on a worktable next to an unopened carton of orange juice. Hirst, the most famous of the Young British Artists, who will turn 40 next month, was nowhere to be found. His publicist had lost track of him.

By mid-afternoon a disheveled, unshaven Hirst had arrived at the gallery and was being interviewed by the BBC while assistants worked on his canvases, which were in varying states of completion. Hirst's photorealist paintings—the first by the typically conceptual artist—of addicts, surgical instruments, morgues and autopsies, credit cards, crystals, and the aftermath of suicide bombings sold out before the opening of the exhibition, according to the gallery, for sums ranging from \$250,000 to \$2 million. The top-end primary prices nearly match the auction-record \$2.2 million paid for one of his medicine cabinets last fall and exceed his record at auction for a work on canvas, the \$848,000 fetched for one of his symmetrical spot paintings of uniformly colored polka dots.

During the past three years, Hirst has produced 30 paintings, which, like the output of other artistic maestros, were not actually painted by him but rather by a team of assistants.

"I love the idea of ending up with a show that looks like a career, like a lifetime's work," Hirst told *ARTnews*. "I didn't want to show a small amount of paintings and for it to be precious or something because the images are like throwaway images to start with. I wanted it to look like a barrage of images."

Hirst—whose last exhibition at Gagosian, five years ago, featured spectacles like gynecological tables submerged in fish tanks and a 6-ton, 20-foot-tall anatomical model of a man—says that he turned his focus to painting in part

because "I was getting sick of myself." Asked what he was sick of, Hirst replied, "Putting boxes around things. Making Damien Hirsts. I mean, I'm always going to make Damien Hirsts because I'm Damien Hirst. But I was starting to think there was a Damien Hirst before we started or something."

Wearing a black shirt with a skull on it, Hirst was somewhat distracted by the unfinished state of some of his works. "Normally we have three weeks of installation," he explains. "We have huge cranes and teams of people. And now we just have a couple of guys and some screws. I think a painting is an amazing thing. You turn it like that—he motions depth—"and it disappears."

While Hirst is a compulsive draftsman—Abrams recently published *From the Cradle to the Grave: Selected Drawings*, a \$330 limited-edition book of Hirst's sketches, which the artist says are a "good way to try things out without having many cost implications"—his recent paintings are based on found images. Some canvases relate to his earlier works: a sliced brain on a surgical table, for example, is reminiscent of his sliced animals in formaldehyde. Others are renditions of images Hirst has collected over the years, some from newspaper clippings, such as *Football Hooligan*, which depicts a young man with a bloody face.

The paintings "say something and deny it at the same time," says Hirst. "The focus is complicated. In *Football Hooligan*, for instance, you don't know if he's a victim or a perpetrator. You get involved by the shock of it, but you don't know whether to feel sorry for him or hate him." In another example, Hirst used a British antidrug ad as the inspiration for *The Devastating Impact of Crack Cocaine*, which chronicles the progression of addiction as reflected in a woman's face.

"I think the paintings raise more questions than answers," says Hirst.

"I think all of the images are quite complicated in terms of blame.

That's why I called the show 'The Elusive Truth.'" He points to *Suicide Bomber (Aftermath)*, which depicts a man standing beside a blown-up car with a cigar on its hood. "It's about what's right and what's wrong," he says of the painting.

"Who's to blame? It's like the world's fucked up, but whose fault is it?"

Hirst's foray into painting coincides with other recent changes in his life,



such as his sale at Sotheby's last year of items he had designed for his now-defunct Pharmacy restaurant, which made a total of \$20 million, nearly four times its low estimate. "I gave up drinking and taking drugs recently, and after you do that, you kind of have the feeling that you've wasted a lot of time," says Hirst.

The money he reaped from a 2003 exhibition at London's White Cube, featuring paintings affixed with black flies and butterflies and vitrines containing bovine remains, Hirst says, enabled him and his London dealer, Jay Jopling, to pay a reported \$15 million to buy back a dozen of his early works from British advertising executive Charles Saatchi, a major supporter of Hirst's since the artist left Goldsmiths College in 1989.

"I was very lucky because he wanted to sell, and everybody worries if Charles Saatchi is going to sell their work," says Hirst. "It's great to have a show with Charles in the beginning and do all that, but then you do know that he's going to sell it in the end. I think a lot of artists have been damaged because he just sells it for anything he can get, and it affects their prices and their market."

Aside from the works he sold to Hirst, Saatchi also recently sold *The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living*, the 14-foot tiger shark that Hirst submerged and preserved in a tank in 1991, to hedge-fund billionaire Steven Cohen for close to \$12 million.

In painting, Hirst says, he found that he tends to eliminate "some sort of expression. In a Francis Bacon painting or something like that, you're struck by the painting first of all, and then you get involved in the image. I want you to be struck by the image first, and then get involved in the painting. I'm trying to edit out anything where you see the painting before you see the image."

On this particular afternoon, Hirst's eye was drawn to *Suicide Bomb Aftermath (Baghdad)*, a large painting of a man being carried from a blown-up building. He spoke of being dissatisfied with the work, of wanting to reposition some of the figures and "work up the depths of it" before the show opened.

"Paint's great," says Hirst. "It's like magic. You've got something that's two-dimensional, but it's a whole world. I got sick of thinking painting is dead." ■

Kelly Devine Thomas is senior writer of ARTnews.



***Suicide Bomb Aftermath (Baghdad)*, 2004–5, from the show the artist titled "The Elusive Truth."**



***Autopsy with Sliced Human Brain*, 2004, recalls Hirst's fascination with sliced animals.**