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## Damien Hirst at Gagosian

By now, everyone who reads newspapers probably knows that Damien Hirst's work is said to display a canny understanding of life and death. But does it really? Hirst is now a phenomenon whose reputation is so gargantuan that it's almost impossible to see beyond it, for good or ill, and to clear-sightedly judge the art he makes. This recent show, his first in New York since 1996, was itself gigantesque: occupying all the galleries in Gagosian's mammoth Chelsea space, it included 13 vitrine pieces, 12 spot paintings, 5 sculptures, and one multi-part print—all of them large and lavishly produced. Perhaps because there was so much to look at, it was hard to sort the wheat from the chaff. But for the most part, these new pieces seemed a pallid reminder of the smart, austere, rigorously conceptual pieces that won Hirst his reputation in the first place.

Before reviewing the new show, it's worth reconsidering that reputation. Popularly, Hirst won it with work that put animal corpses—the ultimate readymade—in glass vitrines, where they were preserved in chemical fluid or left to rot. He frequently upped the ante by hinting that he'd like to use human carcasses as well. But what really proved his artistic chops, I think, were his fauna-free installations—like the wall-cabinet vitrines holding pill bottles, empty seashells or stubbed-out cigarette butts. For a 1992 New York installation titled *Pharmacy*, he turned the gallery into a dispensary lined with medication-filled vitrines; bowls of honey at the room's center drew random insects to immolate themselves against a nearby bug zapper. At the opening, it became clear that the gallery was itself a vitrine and that we, like the insects, had been attracted by a different honey—Hirst's growing fame. (He brilliantly brought this piece into real life by creating the London bar/restaurant Pharmacy.)

All this work, one way or another, did seem to be about mortality—the inevitability of death and the desire to escape foreknowledge of it by whatever illusions art (or drugs, fame, smoking or drink) might afford. Whether one liked it or not, it was usually esthetically elegant, impressively spare and conceptually clear. But it also had an ironic—and irritating—undertone: even as Hirst gleefully rubbed the audience's collective nose in the certainty of its own demise, his PR machinery was working overtime to make his own name eternal.

In Hirst's first Gagosian show, in 1996, this disjuncture worked quite nicely, for the show's overall theme was that of a fun house filled with curiosities like cut-up animals, colorful spin paintings and a floating beach ball, with Hirst as celebrity ringmaster. The centerpiece, instead of a honeypot, was a huge Oldenburgian ashtray filled with cigarette butts and matchboxes from The Groucho, Hirst's London club.

But the disjuncture became more pronounced in this latest show, called "Theories, Models, Methods, Approaches, Assumptions, Results, and Findings," perhaps because its organizing principle purported to be science. This time, Hirst's sculptural mediums included anatomical models, skeletons, skulls, medical instruments and examination chairs, as well as other objects that he has frequently employed, such as packaged drugs, ping-pong balls and cigarette butts. Two pieces used living fish, schools of which inhabited water-filled vitrines. Another vitrine housed a Madame Tussaud-like animatronic man in a labcoat, whose hand—when it worked—eerily twiddled a microscope knob.

However, the entire show hung together far less clearly than its overall theme would imply. Some pieces were very successful, like a beautiful wall-mounted display cabinet whose shallow steel shelves offered a colorful grid, created by rows of oversized, handmade pills. But others seemed jejune, particularly a bisected vitrine containing two sheet-covered "corpses" on dissection tables littered with grubby saws, cutlery and food scraps. This was called *Adam and Eve banished from the Garden*, but was it really about the ultimate fate of all flesh, or just a semi-sensational gross-out? Much of the work seemed overwhelmed by its own production values. Take the Brobdignagian *Hymn*—a cast bronze, brightly painted, 20-foot-tall rendition of that "living man" children's toy whose body is cut away to reveal its innards. Regarding the sculpture, the main thing one marveled at was how much it must have cost to ship it here from England.

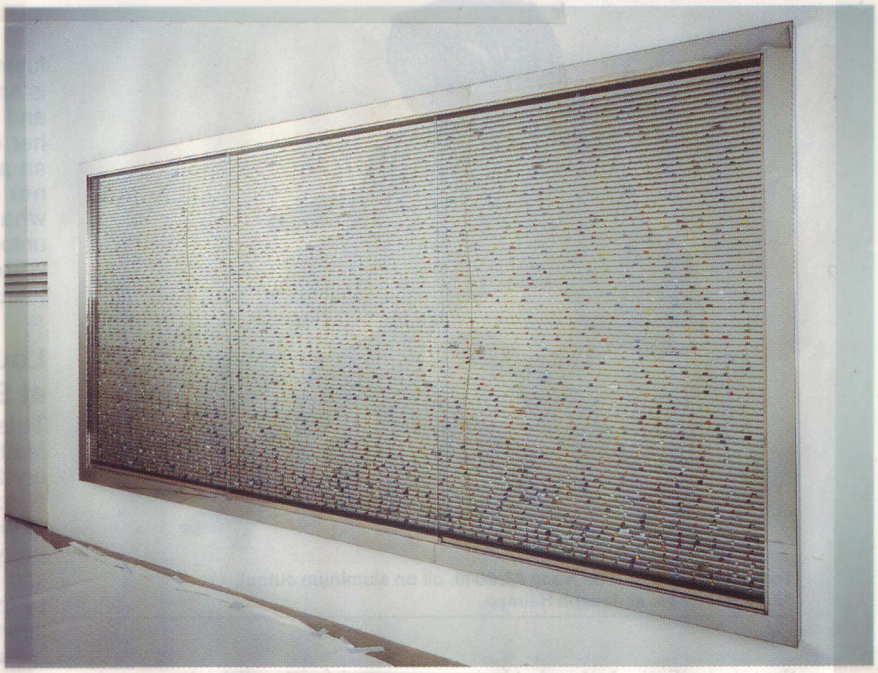
The show's arrangement did not help to clarify Hirst's themes. Every room held an example of almost every sort of work, with the strongest link being a simple visual gambit: the minimalist grid. The entire space was papered with a turquoise-on-ivory design that resembled blown-up sheets of graph paper. Stylishly retro-pop spot paintings featured grids of pastel-colored dots. The vitrines

themselves were further grid variants.

The show's central piece brought this geometry into three dimensions: in the middle of the largest room, standing in for that old honey pot or ashtray, sat a cube-like white box whose top bristled with the steel blades of upturned knives. Above them a white beach ball was kept aloft by an air pump. Initially, this piece seemed to reprise a familiar Hirst theme—the propensity to remove oneself from pain with drugs. But it also summoned up another thought: that after a long spell of eschewing solo exhibitions, this British art star might well be greeted here with the knives out. Like many of the other pieces in the show, perhaps its true theme was Hirst's own career and reputation.

*Concentrating on a Self-Portrait as a Pharmacist* seemed to bear out this assessment. Here, a large vitrine held a smaller one, which housed a sketchily painted self-portrait of Hirst wearing a lab coat. This art work—a deliberately pathetic Sunday-painter effort—stood on an easel draped with said coat. Beneath it appeared a paint-spattered pair of shoes—further relics of the artist's presence. Other studio detritus, such as brushes, paint tubes, paint-splotched palettes and a butt-filled ashtray, punctuated the larger surrounding vitrine. The piece suggested that art, like science, offers an alluring yet impermanent palliative. But to appreciate this work, which seemed hastily thrown together, one also had to be disposed to regard Hirst quite sentimentally, as a fallible authority.

As the show's catalogue points out, Hirst has a London office, semi-ironically called "Science," which handles his non-art career involvements. There's nothing wrong with that. But perhaps it would behoove us to look at what this show really offered: less an insight into the human condition than a window into the amazing science of entrepreneurialism and self-promotion. —*Carol Kino*



**Damien Hirst: *The Void*, 2000, stainless steel and glass cabinet with resin, metal and plaster pills, 93 by 185½ by 4½ inches; at Gagosian.**