

Death, Dots & Dollars



Damien Hirst turned himself into a pop culture phenomenon, and along the way became the world's richest artist.

Photo: Ben Stansall/Getty Images

The Physical Impossibility
of Death in the Mind of
Someone Living

by JASON EDWARD KAUFMAN

Have you heard the one about the artist who put a 13-foot tiger shark in a glass tank of formaldehyde? Of course you have, and you know it's no joke. That pickled man-eater is one of the most recognized icons of contemporary culture, and the man who created it more than two decades ago, British enfant terrible Damien Hirst, has become a bold-faced name and possibly the best-known artist alive.

At 48, he may also be the richest. Three years ago, *The Sunday Times* pegged his assets at £235 million (\$342 million), probably an underestimate for an artist who sells works for six figures apiece—some have approached \$20 million—and whose production teams crank them out in quantity. ▸



Photo: Alex Schmidt/Getty Images

Some critics say he's the new Warhol, but others label him a shock jock more interested in making headlines and money than meaningful art. *The Evening Standard's* Brian Sewell gutted the shark, declaring it "no more interesting than a stuffed pike over a pub door," and *Time* magazine's Robert Hughes dubbed it "the world's most over-rated marine organism."

But how's this for return on investment? British advertising mogul Charles Saatchi paid £50,000 (approximately \$80,000) for the shark in 1992 and in 2004 sold it to Connecticut hedge funder Steven Cohen for \$12 million. No wonder the beast menaces the cover of a recent book on the excesses of the contemporary art market, aptly titled "The \$12 Million Stuffed Shark."

What's the fascination? How does a biological specimen become a landmark in the history of art? The answer has to do with the art world's tendency to interpret images, objects and gestures as symbols or metaphors for ideas.

Hirst has described the shark as "a thing to describe a feeling" about fear of death and the unknown. His work "challenges contemporary belief systems, and dissects the tensions and uncertainties at the heart of human experience," according to his website. Put more simply, he invents surprising objects that resonate with the themes of death, religion and money—topics of interest to everyone.

His signature pieces are animal carcasses suspended in preservative-filled aquariums: sharks, sheep, cows, pigs, birds and other creatures, sometimes sawn in half to reveal their internal organs, sometimes trussed-up in mock crucifixions or with the attributes of saints. "Natural History," he calls the series, which he envisions as "a zoo of dead animals."

"Science," he says, "is the new religion for many people," and he's used it to give a new twist to the age-old Christian theme of "vanitas," the notion that beauty, riches and glory are fleeting and what matters is judgment before God. Painters used to convey this idea by depicting flowers, piles of money and military trophies alongside clocks, snuffed candles and skulls. Hirst, who was brought up Catholic until he was 12 and says he does not believe in "the big fella," abandoned such subtleties and presented corpses in formaldehyde.

"Every artwork that's ever interested me is about death," he says, though his riffs on mortality are not always gruesome. He also makes glass medicine cabinets with shelves lined with pharmaceuticals or cigarette stubs, and canvases covered with kaleidoscopic patterns of dead butterflies. But his most potent images have a grisly edge. In one vitrine maggots devour a rotting cow's head, hatch into flies and buzz into an electric bug zapper—a gory life cycle he titles "A Thousand Years." ▸

The Black Sheep with Golden Horns (Divided)



Photo: Matthew Lloyd/Getty Images

Hirst's dance with death has proved enormously lucrative, but he's canny enough to know that not every collector wants the grim reaper looming over the couch. So he also churns out decorative grids of polka dots and colorful abstractions dripped onto rotating canvases. He claims these "Spot" and "Spin" paintings are parts of endless series that conceptually point to immortality, but mainly they are cash cows that extend his brand and sell for astonishing prices.

An entrepreneur par excellence, Hirst shows with mega-dealers Jay Jopling of London's White Cube and Larry Gagosian, proprietor of the unrivalled multinational powerhouse gallery. He's had scores of one-man shows, most recently an exhibit of hundreds of "Spot" paintings that filled all 11 Gagosian venues around the world, and a career survey at Tate Modern in London that drew nearly half a million visitors. He has a business manager and a company that markets prints, T-shirts and other branded merchandise.

On the side, he's directed a music video for the punk band Blur and a film version of a Samuel Beckett play, but he tends to undertake projects with big payouts. Take his partnership in a Notting Hill restaurant that he designed to look like a drug store. When Pharmacy closed in 2003, Sotheby's auctioned off the artworks, fixtures and tableware for £12 million (\$19 million).

Like many of his peers, including Jeff Koons, Takashi Murakami and a few others who have followed in Warhol's footsteps, Hirst rarely makes his artworks himself. Instead, he comes up with an idea and farms out production. His fabrication company, Science Ltd, in 2009 had 160 employees manning workshops in England and Mexico, where he has a vacation home. When he puts his hand to canvas the results are not pretty. A few years ago, an exhibit of his photo-based paintings was slaughtered more mercilessly than the animals in his tanks. One critic said he paints like "a not-very-promising, first-year art student," but investors snapped up the pictures regardless. ➤

Urea-13C



Photo: Peter Macdarmid/Getty Images

The Golden Calf

Hirst thumbs his nose not only at critics, but also at the market that's made him rich. He has lambasted Saatchi, whose patronage was crucial to his early success. "I'm not Charles Saatchi's barrel-organ monkey. He only recognizes art with his wallet," the artist protested. He's also snubbed the dealers that promote his work, selling directly to collectors and cutting out the middleman.

Typically artists contract with dealers who keep a hefty percentage of sales, then buyers re-sell at auction often for huge profits that the artist never sees. Hirst decided to bypass the galleries and go straight to auction with 233 of his works. September 15, 2008, was not an auspicious evening for Sotheby's London to begin the two-day sale: Earlier that day Lehman Brothers had collapsed, ushering in the great recession. But despite the impending downturn and the glut of product flooding the market, 97 percent of the lots sold, grossing a breathtaking £111 million (\$177 million). "The Golden Calf," a steer fitted with 18-carat gold horns and hooves in a tank of formaldehyde, sold for £10.3 million (\$16.33 million) to an anonymous bidder. Reports claimed that Hirst and his dealers propped up the sale, but no artist had ever pulled off such a coup and none is likely ever to repeat it.

That year, for the second time, Hirst topped *Art Review* magazine's list of the most powerful people in the contemporary art world. But from 2008 to 2009, his auction sales plunged from \$270 million to \$19 million, with prices falling precipitously. By 2011, he'd dropped to 64 in *Art Review*'s rankings. ▸



Photo: Peter Macdiarmid/Getty Images

The Anatomy of an Angel

Not that there's any chance of his market drying up. Major European and American collectors from Miuccia Prada to Eli Broad have bet that the Hirst brand will weather the storm. New York collector and dealer Alberto Mugrabi, whose family has invested in hundreds of Warhols, owns more than 100 Hirsts. Russian oligarchs and Middle Eastern royals have entered the Hirst market. And his popular appeal remains strong. He was commissioned for the 2012 Olympics in London to make a giant abstract red-white-and-blue British flag that covered the stadium floor for the Closing Ceremony.

Not bad for a kid raised by a single mother of modest means in northern England, before working construction in London and heading to Goldsmiths College to study fine art. He organized an exhibition with fellow classmates that launched the careers of the rising generation known as the Young British Artists. By 1995 his headline-grabbing animal carcasses had won him the Tate Britain's prestigious Turner Prize and gained fame as a drug-and-alcohol-crazed wild man. His binging resulted in blackouts and scandals, including legal trouble for dropping his pants in a Dublin restaurant. "I turned into a babbling wreck," he admitted, and his work suffered. "A lot of people think they make better art when they're drunk, but they don't," he acknowledged after giving up smoking and drinking in 2002.

Now he's become an establishment figure, but he still laces his interviews with expletives and scorns dealers and collectors in foul-mouthed rants. He knows there's something obscene about the focus on money in the art world, and he's made money itself a theme of his work. ▷

For the Love of God



Photo: Handout/Getty Images



Photo: Dave M. Benett/Getty Images

Pharmacy (detail)

In 2007—a year in which a 10-foot long “Medicine Cabinet” arrayed with thousands of pills sold to the Emir of Qatar for \$19.2 million—Hirst baited billionaires by creating a dazzling platinum skull carpeted with more than 8,000 diamonds. He ironically titled it “For the Love of God.” Created by jewelers Bentley & Skinner, the materials alone were worth £40 million, but with an asking price of £50 million (\$80 million) the diamond skull remains unsold, owned by a consortium that includes Hirst and his British dealer. ▸

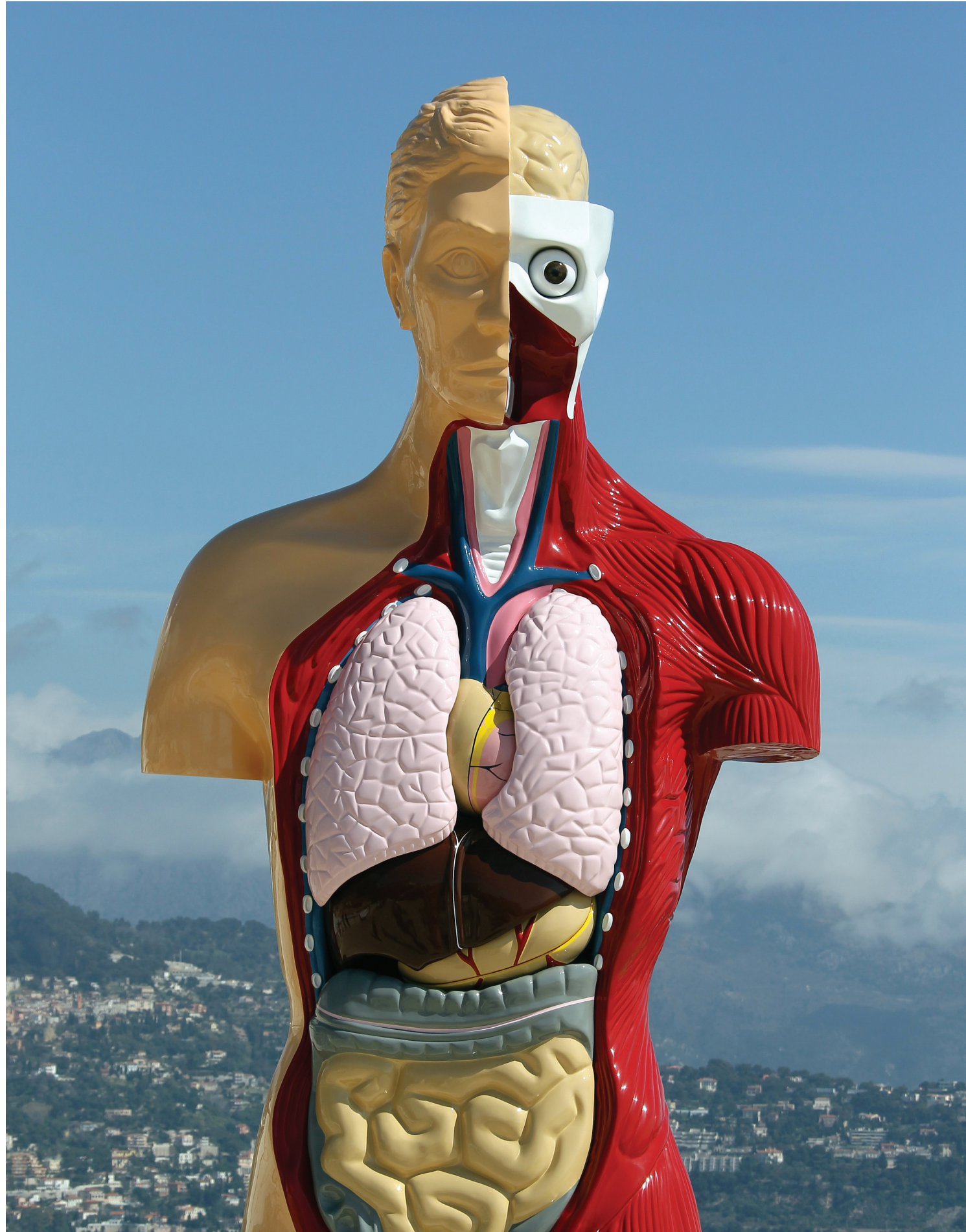


Photo: Valery Hache/Getty Images



Photo: Oli Scarff/Getty Images

The Collector (detail)

Despite his contempt for consumer culture, Hirst himself is a major collector, with work by Francis Bacon, Tracey Emin, Jeff Koons, Richard Prince, Andy Warhol and younger artists worth hundreds of millions of pounds. He plans to open a museum of his own in London and another in Toddington Manor, a mansion he bought in the Cotswolds. He also has homes in London and Devon and winters on the Pacific coast of Mexico.

Meanwhile, Hirst's personal life is in transition. His girlfriend, California-born fashion designer Maia Norman, with whom he has three sons, left him this summer after 20 years. They never married so the separation is unlikely to dent his bank account, but it may remind him that love, like other worldly pleasures, is ephemeral. Better to contemplate death. ♦