

DAMIEN HIRST

Tate Modern

4 April–9 September 2012

It is always difficult to be at odds with the prevailing view, but to my mind the kind of work produced by Damien Hirst, so often about the 'concept' rather than the making, has had the most pernicious consequences for art in this country. It is all very well for his defenders to say that Rafael and Rubens used assistants to bring their ideas to completion, but the reason they used assistants was to save time: they could have done the work themselves, they had the craft and the training. By contrast, the stuff that Hirst claims for his own hand is barely competent. Meanwhile, at our art schools, all too often students who wish to develop their skills in drawing or painting are required instead to work with what are grandly called *objets trouvés* because what matters is not the execution but the idea. It is just so much easier to make 'art' with pre-existing objects rather than construct things oneself. Of course, you have to blame Duchamp for the start of this, but no-one has matched Hirst for the shameless (and successful) vulgarity with which he has presented stuff to the public — not least the unspeakable diamond-encrusted skull given its own special room in this exhibition — and the influence that has followed.

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Do the serious people in charge of Tate Modern genuinely consider that his work deserves a major show set alongside Picasso and the British modernists of the 20th century, let alone that it should take this prime space for the duration of the Olympic games in what is trumpeted as 'the first major Damien Hirst exhibition in the UK'? It really doesn't matter how elegantly you present this work, how well it sits in the space: to borrow a phrase from the last US presidential election, 'it's still lipstick on a pig'. Nor does it matter how long you make the title of a piece — quasi-metaphysical expressions do not turn a piece of taxidermy into something that illuminates the human condition. And the killing of living creatures as exquisite as butterflies to make an exhibit is really pretty vile. I suspect, in fact, that Hirst is well aware of this, and that the titles are self-parodying.

Frank Minns,

Landscape gardener, London.

DOI: 10.3399/bjgp12X654704

After the ball is over

*'The tumult and the shouting dies
The Captains and the Kings depart ...'*
Rudyard Kipling (1865–1936)

So will the glorious, heart-warming success inspire a generation? And if so which generation? One abiding lesson from watching numerous interviews with those who did and did not win medals is that these people are Not Like Us. Laura Trott talking about the taste of lactic acid in her mouth, or Alistair Brownlee dismissing his brother's near-collapse at the end of the triathlon are startling examples, but it's true for all of them. Their willingness to suffer voluntarily and devote whole chunks of their lives to such goals sets them apart. Then we pay them and that makes them even more different. As my friend said, who attended the Barcelona Olympics of 1992, where the high point was watching Linford Christie win the 100 metres gold medal, we should look on them as modern day gladiators whom we pay to compete for us. We need heroes, and it is entirely justifiable that we should pay to enable them to fulfil their desires, but as a model for the rest of us it's as distant as flying to the moon. The rest of us need to participate in exercise that is fun, sociable, cheap, and for many of us profoundly non-competitive.

David Jewell,

GP and non-competitive cyclist, swimmer, and sculler, Bristol.

DOI: 10.3399/bjgp12X654795

Damien Hirst, Pharmacy, 1992. Glass, faced particleboard, painted MDF, beech, ramin, wooden dowels, aluminium, pharmaceutical packaging, desks, office chairs, foot stools, apothecary bottles, coloured water, insect-o-cutor, medical text books, stationary, bowls, resin, honey, and honey.
Dimensions variable, Tate. Photographed by Prudence Cuming Associates.

