The most successful living artist

Have you ever thought, 'I wish I could be an artist'? Don't give up hope. Damien Hirst nearly failed his Art A Level at school and his work now sells for millions.

Controversial British painter Damien Hirst, who is often mentioned in the same breath as Jackson Pollock and Andy Warhol, has been confirmed as the most successful artist alive, thanks to a huge increase in the prices paid for his work recently. The forty-something from Leeds changed the face of contemporary art in the nineteen nineties with his *Natural History* series, in which dead animals are preserved in formaldehyde and displayed in glass cases.

The first of these, his four-metre shark entitled *The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living*, recently fetched an incredible £6.5 million when it was sold to an American collector. [1] After that came a string of similarly provocative works, which included a pickled lamb in *Away from the Flock*, as well as dissected cows and rotting animal carcasses.

[2] In 2003, he was labelled a 'sadist' by some animal rights activists, who objected strongly to his *Amazing Revelations*, a triangular collage made of thousands of dismembered butterfly wings. Earlier, in 1994, *Away from the Flock* became the focus of attention when Mark Bridger, an artist from Oxford, poured black ink into the tank containing the dead lamb. However, Bridger claimed he was contributing to the artwork, not protesting against it and he renamed it *Black Sheep*. It cost £1,000 to remove the ink.

The considerable controversy surrounding Damien Hirst's work inevitably raises the question of whether or not it constitutes art. [3] Charles Saatchi, former advertising mogul and a formidable collector of YBA works, describes Hirst as 'a genius', and former arts minister Virginia Bottomley has called him 'a pioneer of the British art movement'. He also enjoys the support of stars such as David Beckham and former *Friends* actress Courteney Cox, who are both proud owners of his work.

However, others have been equally swift to condemn the artist. When Hirst won the prestigious Turner prize in 1995, Conservative politician Norman Tebbit, writing in *The Sun* newspaper, asked: 'Have they gone stark raving mad?' [4] But there are also many people within the art world who have attacked and ridiculed the artist, accusing him of producing work which is exaggerated and silly.

[5] He, too, has used the word 'silly' to describe his spin paintings, a series of works created by dropping paint onto a spinning canvas. 'You do turn round after a few years and look at your stuff and you think it's embarrassing,' he confessed at an exhibition in 2005. 'Certainly everything you make is not a masterpiece.'

He also freely admits to using assistants to do most of his spot-paintings, which consist of rows of randomly coloured dots. Of the 500 or more such works produced, he is said to have painted only five himself, the rest being attributed to assistants like Rachel Howard, his 'best ever' spot-painter. [6] And indeed, there is nothing new about artists getting others to do some of the work for them: Rembrandt, for example, had very large workshops with pupils to help him, and they had to pay for the privilege.

In recent years Hirst has branched out and taken on new challenges. He has made short films, opened a restaurant, set up a publishing company and even recorded a pop music single with Fat Les, a group he formed with Blur bassist Alex James. [7] But of course, it's his art for which he will be best remembered. Whether his memory will live on as long as that of Pollock, Warhol or even Rembrandt, only time will tell. In the meantime, his paintings continue to sell.

A Indeed, the tabloid press is one of Hirst's strongest critics.
B Entitled 'Vindaloo', it reached number two in the UK charts in 1998.
C The work caused a sensation when it was first shown in 1992 and quickly became a symbol for the circle known as the Young British Artists, or YBAs.
D For some, there is absolutely no doubt.
E In defence of this practice he is quoted as saying, 'But then architects don't build their own houses.'
F *Mother and Child Divided*, a cow and calf cut in half, certainly fits this description.
G Predictably, the artist has come in for criticism for his use of real animals.
H Surprisingly enough, though, Hirst seems to agree with some of this criticism.

Reacting to the text

Do you think Damien Hirst's work constitutes art? Why/Why not?
Why do some people pay vast sums of money for artworks? Would you?

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