Damien Hirst's main obsession is wealth, not mortality

Paul Bond
26 June 2007

Damien Hirst remains one of the highest-profile of those artists who came to prominence through the vacuous "Brit-Art" movement. Cynical and showy, his work tends to receive column inches in inverse proportion to its artistic merit. His latest show, "Beyond Belief," has received major press coverage. One item in particular has attracted the journalists more than any other.

"For the Love of God" is a diamond-encrusted skull. Hirst has made a platinum cast of an eighteenth century skull and embedded 8,601 diamonds into it, with a value of some £12 million. He then placed the original teeth into the piece. "For the Love of God" carries a price tag of £50 million (US$99 million).

Amid the press furore, there has been little attempt to examine what the work might say about the current state of art or society. And what has been said is usually wide of the mark.

The first thing to be noted is that the skull really is as boring as the description makes it sound. It typifies the work of a man who has exhausted even the limited ideas with which he started. His current show also features a return to the embalmed animals with which he made his name. Even the titles ("Beyond Belief") give some indication of the barrel scraping that is going on.

This is not a recent development. In 2000, he ended up making a "goodwill payment" to a designer after claims that his giant reproduction of a classroom anatomical bust "Hymn" breached copyright. Similar allegations concerned his design contribution to a charity colouring book, which bore a similarity to an item in a geometrical dictionary. "For the Love of God" surpasses even these in its cynicism. Hirst has said he was inspired by Inca skulls (although the similarity of the piece to items on sale in London's West End was quickly noted).

Mortality is one of Hirst's recurrent themes, but he deals only in extravagant banalities. One of his most fervent supporters has struggled to say much about the new show beyond the platitude that "the totality of human experience is made up of evil as well as good."

"For the Love of God" tells us nothing about humanity's struggle with our own limitations. Neither does it offer some profound meditation on death. It is simply a glitteringly shiny and expensive object, designed to make money. Hirst has said that it was intended to represent "the ultimate victory over death," or the "maximum celebration you could make against death."

What he sees as this "ultimate victory" was clarified in a comment to Nigel Reynolds of the *Daily Telegraph* (see "Hirst's £50m skull goes on display"). Hirst told Reynolds he wanted the piece to represent "wealth against death." This is no fascination with mortality. It is the disdain of the wealthy for humanity.

All of this rather undermines his denials that the piece is an expensive gimmick. It also reveals much more about the artist's mind than any of the justifications he has offered about his fascination with mortality. But if art reflects the society around it in some way, what does this piece say about the world in which we live as opposed merely to the psychology of Hirst?

The piece cost around £12 million to make. This money was put up by Hirst and his dealer Jay Jopling. Hirst was working without a commission. To put this in some kind of context, the cost of building Christopher Wren's St. Paul Cathedral (commissioned as part of the reconstruction of London following the Great Fire) totalled £728,845 on its completion in 1709. Today, that would amount to about £75 million, only half as much again as the price tag on Hirst's piece.

Yet, the piece is already attracting potential private buyers, with Jopling describing it as all but sold. Hirst had talked of his desire to see it in a public collection, but is somewhat disingenuous. To have created something with such a price tag, without even a commission, indicates a turn towards a new layer of unbridled wealth, and a confidence that he would find a buyer there.

This could only have happened under conditions of the most extreme inequality, where a super-rich financial oligarchy has divorced itself from any concern with the living conditions of the vast majority of the world's population. Historically, artists have often made valuable trinkets and objects to demonstrate the wealth of the highest echelons of society. Under the tsars, for example, artists like Fabergé created costly items to demonstrate the conspicuous wealth of the aristocracy.

What makes Hirst different is that he is not making items on commission from an aristocrat or a royal family. He works with the confident assumption that there are numerous fabulously wealthy buyers out there who will compete to invest in a work carrying the prestige of a big-name artist, whatever its intrinsic merit. Not one tsar, but many tsars.

He will also find a compliant media willing to laud such works with what is effectively advertising copy. Jonathan Jones asked gushingly in the *Guardian*, "What is being born, exactly? It might be the art of the 21st century."

Perhaps worse still, Richard Dorment, writing in the *Telegraph*, acknowledges, "If anyone but Hirst had made this curious object, we would be struck by its vulgarity."

But Dorment, tripping over himself to exonerate the shallowness of the piece, claims that the skull represents a profound meditation on "the morality of art and money." Whoever buys the piece, he argues, "will never be able to enjoy it." Don't such buyers think about the morality of spending the money in this way, he asks, rather than endowing a hospital or a school?

This is delusional nonsense. There is a big difference between celebration and criticism, even if combined with a large dose of personal cynicism. Nothing in Hirst's work rises to the level of condemnation. Indeed, there is no evidence of any critical thought at work in "For the Love of God."

It will be bought by someone with the requisite £50 million to invest, whose lawyers and financial advisers make sure pays no taxes towards the cost of building hospitals and schools. And Hirst, who is more businessman than artist, will make a killing. He first made his fortune through the sponsorship of advertising mogul Charles Saatchi, which raised Hirst's profile and his work's market value. Then, like a latter-day Warhol impersonator, set up his art with various studio assistants churning out recognisably "Hirst-like" works for mass sale (Hirst claims authorship of only five of hundreds of his "spot paintings").

Hirst and Jopling bought the 8,601 "ethically-sourced" diamonds themselves over a period through the jewellers Bentley & Skinner, who inlaid the stones in the platinum skull for him. He has boasted of the influence their purchases had on the diamond market, which reportedly helped push the price of diamonds up 15 percent before they had finished buying them. Bentley & Skinner have said that the piece is the largest diamond piece created since the Crown Jewels of the British monarchy.

Hirst has made clear his lack of interest in social layers outside of the financial oligarchs. He told the *Telegraph* that he had been asked "how can you justify it when there are homeless people out there with nothing?" His answer was that he hoped "anybody looking at it would get some hope and be uplifted." One doubts that many of the homeless will have access to the "uplifting" experience of the ticket-only five-minute-maximum viewing of his work, before it goes into someone's private collection.

Hirst's bloated, complacent work represents a dead end for any artistic endeavour. But he is unconcerned by such questions. "I've stopped worrying about what art is," he told journalists. "If it's in an art gallery on the wall or on the floor it's probably art." At the very least, some kind of critical engagement with the realities of the world around the artist is the prerequisite for any serious and sincere work. There is, it hardly needs saying, none of that here.