

Nushin Elahi's London Letter

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Perhaps you are either for Damien Hirst or against him. I thought I fell into the latter category. Hirst seems to have singlehandedly turned art into a commodity on a production line scale, removed from any form of skill or craft. I wasn't expecting much from his retrospective at the Tate Modern (until 9 Sept), allowing me to be pleasantly surprised. It came as something of a revelation to realise once again why and how he shocked the art world as a cocky young Goldsmiths student. A retrospective gives one a wonderful sweep of an artist's progression – and in his case it has given me new respect for the young Hirst's originality, but also thrown into sharp focus just how shallow his work is now.

His first spot painting is a delight – bright colours, squiffy circles and dribbling paint – a far cry from the mechanised production line of today. That first shark seems to lunge out of the tank at you, the audacity of its concept and execution making it a legitimate icon of its time. The early wooden cabinet with his granny's pills has a human touch that the rooms filled with sleek metal cabinets, surgical steel instruments and doctors' dummies don't. The disgusting vitrine of the flies, zapped to death or feasting on the blood of a dead cow is clever black humour, but by the time you get to the real live butterflies you begin to wonder whether the Natural History section doesn't belong somewhere other than an art gallery. True, the stained glass panels with butterfly wings are exquisite - probably the only thing of beauty in the exhibition.

There is a stark contrast between the sheer bravura of his early work, and the tedium of his current crop. Hirst talks about his fascination with the endless repetition of a theme, encapsulating why his work elicits boredom. Just how many more spots can he make – or rather produce? It's as if he now has six different motifs and simply uses them in varying sequences. There are spots, cigarette stubs or ashtrays, pill cabinets, flies, formaldehyde and most recently, bling. So there are spots made of dead flies, cabinets with cigarette stubs and butterflies with zircons. It all blurs into one final room of golden excess fit only for an oil sheikh's mansion.

This is a superbly edited show by the Tate and one is very aware that the curators have pared away most of the forgettable excesses. In the process though, they may have heightened the sense of repetition. Even the diamond-studded skull, that point where death and money join together, is easier seen in reproduction.

Gillian Wearing is a YBA (Young British Artist), she went to Goldsmiths and she won the Turner Prize in 1997, two years after Damien Hirst, but that is where the comparisons with him end. The Whitechapel Gallery has 'a comprehensive survey' of her work on until 17 June which shows an artist constantly challenging herself, looking for new ways of interpreting the world around her. What she comes up with both inspires and disturbs. Wearing is fascinated by the masks people wear, by the discrepancies between the

public and the private face. There is a warmth and humanity in her work that is entirely lacking in Hirst's.

It is only when you get up real close that you see her series of self-portraits as other members of her family features intricate masks. There is a constant dissonance between layers of reality, whether it is the photographs of people holding up signs of what they are thinking, or the interplay between anger and affection in the unsettling Sasha and Mum. The video confessionals may be behind masks, but they tell the sad story of lives that have been shattered – many of them adults still struggling to cope with childhood abuse. Wearing's masterpiece is 10-16, a video where she has placed the stories of children in the bodies of adults. Her mismatch never seems to be simply for its shock value, but rather an impassioned portrait of the heartache of our society, and in that way she has found a theme that could be mined endlessly without ever becoming repetitive.

Attacks, murder, shooting, crack, porn – all words that feature in the newspaper headlines that form the basis of Gilbert and George's 2011 London Picture series on show at two White Cube galleries (Mason's Yard and Bermondsey) until 12 May. Headlines are by their very nature shocking and sensationalist, and these posters picked from newsagents over six years form a lurid portrait of the capital city. This is not the London that the Olympics marketing team want to publicise, a city of crime and mystery. The works range from multiples of four standard tabloids to thirty-six, all in black and white with a key word picked out in red. In the bottom corner, each one has a different picture of the Queen, taken from a real coin and blown up to show her image scratched and battered by life's daily grind. And behind the headlines lurk the familiar faces of the artists. At times they are blurred by reflections in car doors, or they peer through bricks or lace curtains, observers of modern life. The exhibition is arresting in its starkness, and how it plays with interpretation, but only the scale makes it more interesting to see in real life.

What is quintessential British design? The Mini, the E-type Jag, the Dyson vacuum cleaner, the Brompton Bike? The post-war Olympics of 1948 were called the Austerity Olympics. Sixty years later, and Britain is once again feeling the pinch. The V&A is hosting a look at British Design 1948 - 2012 between the two Games (until 12 August) which tracks the country's change from a manufacturing powerhouse to a service economy. It's a trip down nostalgia lane which includes Sanderson prints and Mary Quant dresses, Sex Pistol posters and computer games. Art features prominently in the exhibition: Henry Moore's sculpture of The Family in one of the first 'new' towns, stained glass by John Piper and a tapestry by Graham Sutherland for the bomb-damaged Coventry Cathedral. In the Sixties the emphasis is on how the radical innovation of art students such as David Hockney and Richard Hamilton inspired consumer culture.

Damien Hirst (4 April – 9 September 2012) Tate Modern *The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living* 1991. *Lullaby, the Seasons* 2002 (detail). *For the Love of God* 2007. *Mother and Child Divided* (installation view) Images © Damien Hirst and Science Ltd.

Gillian Wearing: *Self Portrait at 17 Years Old*, 2003. *Me as Sander*, 2012. *Will Britain Get Through This Recession?*, 1992-3 Images Courtesy Maureen Paley, London

Gilbert & George *Jail* 2011. Images Courtesy White Cube. Henry Moore: *The Family*

