Damien Hirst

The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living, 1991
Glass, steel, silicon, formaldehyde and shark
2170 x 5420 x 1800 mm
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Artist Rooms

Damien Hirst is the most prominent artist to have emerged from the British art scene in the 1990s. His role as an artist and curator has proved fundamental in the development of the group that became internationally known as ‘the YBAs’ (Young British Artists). Hirst’s work asks viewers to question the main dilemmas of human existence: birth, illness, death and religion. The ARTIST ROOMS collection (jointly owned and managed by Tate and National Galleries of Scotland) comprises five important works spanning Hirst’s career including photography, painting, sculpture and installation. The early photograph taken in a morgue, With Dead Head is included, displaying an early preoccupation with death. Away from the Flock - one of his ‘Natural History’ works featuring dead animals floating in vitrines - is also on show, featuring a sheep floating in formaldehyde. The lamb looks alive but is dead, and references the religious theme of the lamb of God. Religion is explored further in the large triptych work, Trinity - Pharmacology, Physiology, Pathology, in which medical products become a replacement for faith. Hirst is also recognised for his mirrored pharmacy cabinets lined with shelves full of drug bottles, pills, sea shells or cigarette butts, and his paintings, both which he produces in series. Included in this collection is the early Controlled Substances Key Painting (Spot 4a), a canvas where a grid of dots of different colours is accompanied by letters in alphabetical order that seem to dissect and reorganise the very matter of painting into cells. The most recent painting in the collection, the large butterfly diptych Monument to the Living and the Dead, was made by Hirst specifically for Anthony d’Offay’s collection.

Introduction to the YBAs

In the late 1980s British art entered what was quickly recognised as a new and excitingly distinctive phase, the era of what became known as the YBAs – the Young British Artists. Young British Art can be seen to have a convenient starting point in the exhibition Freeze organised in 1988 by Damien Hirst (the most celebrated, or notorious, of the YBAs) while he was still a student at Goldsmiths College of Art. Freeze included the work of fellow Goldsmiths students, many of whom also became leading artists associated with the YBAs, such as Sarah Lucas, Angus Fairhurst and Michael Landy.

Goldsmiths College of Art played an important role in the development of the movement. It had for some years been fostering new forms of creativity through its courses which abolished the traditional separation of media into painting, sculpture, printmaking etc. Michael Craig-Martin was among its most influential teachers.

What does YBA art look like?

Although certain broad trends both formal and thematic can be seen in YBA art (such as the use of found objects and imagery that is sometimes perceived as shocking), there is no one YBA style or approach. The era is marked by a complete openness towards the materials and processes with which art can be made, and the form that it can take.
Leading YBA artists have preserved dead animals (Damien Hirst); crushed found objects with a steamroller (Cornelia Parker); appropriated objects from medical history (Christine Borland); presented her own bed as art (Tracey Emin); made sculpture from fresh food, cigarettes, or women’s tights (Sarah Lucas). YBA artists have made extensive use of film, video and photography; used drawing and printmaking in every conceivable way (e.g. Michael Landy); increasingly developed the concept of the installation (a multi-part work occupying a single space), and not least, refreshed and revitalised the art of painting (Gary Hume).

The YBA brand

The first use of the term ‘young British artists’ to describe the work of Hirst and these other young artists was by Michael Corris in Artforum, May 1992. The acronym ‘YBA’ was coined later in 1996 in Art Monthly magazine. The label turned out to be a powerful brand recognised worldwide and a useful marketing tool for the artists associated with it (as well as for British art generally in the 1990s). One of the features that defines the YBAs is their ‘can do’ entrepreneurial approach to showing and marketing their work. This can be seen in ambitious exhibitions such as Freeze organised by Hirst and his contemporaries, as well as in ventures such as the Pharmacy restaurant opened in Notting Hill in 1998 and backed by Hirst, and The Shop set up in an empty shop in East London by artists Tracey Emin and Sarah Lucas in order to market their work.
“To create that structure, to do those colours, and do nothing. I suddenly got what I wanted. It was just a way of pinning down the joy of colour.” (Damien Hirst cited in Damien Hirst and Gordon Burn, ‘On the Way to Work’, Faber and Faber, 2001)

Spot Painting is one of Hirst’s first experimental spot paintings, created whilst in his first year at Goldsmiths. In 1988, after having created a series of hand-painted spot paintings on board such as ‘Spot Painting’, and the first work on canvas Untitled (with Black Dot) (1988), Hirst painted two near-identical arrangements of coloured spots onto the wall of the ‘Freeze’ warehouse. He called the works Edge (1988) and Row (1988). These paintings followed some loose hand-painted spots on board such as this one, dating from 1986, and the first spot work on canvas Untitled (with Black Dot) (1988) – the only ‘Pharmaceutical’ painting ever to have incorporated a black dot. Following ‘Freeze’, Hirst started to refine his creative process. Slowly, he began to employ assistants to create the spot paintings. Any physical evidence of human intervention – such as the compass point left at the centre of each spot – was removed, until the works appeared to have been constructed mechanically, or “by a person trying to paint like a machine”. For Hirst, it was a departure from
years of experimenting with paint and collage, and the first result of his search for a contemporary art form that could succeed without a reliance on “already organised elements.”

The random and infinite colour series within the ‘Pharmaceutical’ paintings is integral to the works. Hirst explains that, “mathematically, with the spot paintings, I probably discovered the most fundamentally important thing in any kind of art. Which is the harmony of where colour can exist on its own, interacting with other colours in a perfect format.” Any problems he had previously had with colour, Hirst claims, were removed by the perfect arrangement of complimentary, yet never repeated, colours in the spots.

The spot paintings vary in size from a 40 foot canvas containing spots of 1 inch, Iodomethane- 13c (1999 - 2000), to Erbium Oxide (2009), which has only four 60 inch spots, to L-Isoleucinol (2008 - 2011), which measures ten by sixteen inches and contains 25,781 one millimeter spots. Their titles are taken arbitrarily from the chemical company Sigma-Aldrich’s catalogue ‘Biochemicals for Research and Diagnostic Reagents’, a book Hirst stumbled across in the early 1990’s. The grid formula within the ‘Pharmaceutical’ paintings was the basis for an endless series. Over the last 24 years, Hirst has produced on average 60 spot paintings a year.

“I started them as an endless series ... a scientific approach to painting in a similar way to the drug companies’ scientific approach to life. Art doesn’t purport to have all the answers; the drug companies do. Hence the title of the series, The Pharmaceutical Paintings, and the individual titles of the paintings themselves: Acetaldehyde (1991), Albumin Human Glycated (1992), Androstanotone (1993) ... On each painting no two colours are the same ... I can still make all the emotional decisions about colour that I need to as an artist, but in the end they are lost.”

In 2012 Gagosian Gallery exhibited over 300 spot paintings across eleven gallery spaces worldwide. Conceived as a single exhibition, ‘The Complete Spot Paintings 1986-2011’ fulfilled Hirst’s longstanding ambition to show the works together. He explained in 2000 of the idea of an installation of multiple spot paintings, “it’s an assault on your senses. They grab hold of you and give you a good shaking. As adults, we’re not used to it. It’s an amazing fact that all objects leap beyond their own dimension.”

**With Dead Head, 1991**

**With Dead Head** is a black and white photograph of the artist when he was a teenager, posing with the head of a corpse. In 1992 he recounted the making of the image:

“It’s me and a dead head. Severed head. In the morgue. Human. I’m sixteen ... If you look at my face, I’m actually going: ‘Quick. Quick. Take the photo.’ It’s worry. I wanted to show my friends, but I couldn’t take all my friends there, to the morgue in Leeds. I’m absolutely terrified. I’m grinning, but I’m expecting the eyes to open and for it to go: ‘Grrrraaaaagh!’.

I was doing anatomy drawing. I took some photos when I shouldn’t have done. It was ten years ago. But I just suddenly thought ... to me, the smile and everything seemed to sum up this problem between life and death. It was such a ridiculous way of ... being at the point of trying to come to terms with it, especially being sixteen and everything: this is life and this is death. And I’m trying to work it out.” (Hirst and Burn, p.34.)

Hirst selected the photograph and enlarged it in 1991, the year of his first two groundbreaking solo exhibitions in London. At this time, he was setting up the central polemic on which his work is founded – the split or relationship between life and death and the unresolvable mystery of the point where one ends and the other begins. His first solo show, ‘In and Out of Love’, set a binary scene that contrasted white paintings from which butterflies hatched and flew around with coloured canvases incorporating dead butterflies hung next to ashtrays full of cigarette butts. Later that year, Hirst reproduced *With Dead Head* in the catalogue for his exhibition at the Institute of Contemporary Arts entitled ‘Internal Affairs’. Here he presented the two opposing strands of his work: spot paintings and butterfly paintings offering a light-hearted celebration of life; and
sculptural vitrines, such as *The Acquired Inability to Escape*, evoking the darker mood that was to lead to such works with animal carcasses as *Mother and Child Divided* 1993 and *Away from the Flock* 1994 that inevitably refer to death and decay.


A third central theme in Hirst’s oeuvre – fundamental to the making of *With Dead Head* – featured in a solo exhibition of the same year in Paris – ‘When Logics Die’ at Emmanuel Perrotin Gallery. Here gruesome photographs of suicide victims were juxtaposed with medical equipment on utilitarian tables, introducing the artist’s fascination with medical science. During the same period (1989–92), he presented medicine cabinets stacked with pharmaceuticals as sculptures, culminating in the full room-sized installation, Pharmacy 1992.
The Acquired Inability to Escape, 1991

Damien Hirst, The Acquired Inability to Escape, 1991. Glass, steel, silicone rubber, Formica, MDF, chair, ashtray, lighter and cigarettes. Sculpture 2134 x 3048 x 2134 mm

The Acquired Inability to Escape is a sculptural installation comprising an office table and chair enclosed in a vitrine or cell. Supported by heavy steel frames held in place by large bolts, the cell’s thick glass walls invite the viewer’s gaze while emphasizing the sealed condition of the space inside. The cell has two chambers, divided by a wall of glass, which is itself divided into two sections separated by a 45mm gap that allows the passage of air. The larger chamber is just big enough to contain the long rectangular desk and chair; the smaller is narrow and empty. Lying on the white laminate surface of the table, a packet of Silk Cut cigarettes, a white Bic lighter, and a glass ashtray containing cigarette butts and ash suggest the presence of an invisible and anonymous occupant. In contradiction to this, the black office chair, of the sort that rotates and is height adjustable, is pulled up close to the table in order to fit into the claustrophobic space, leaving no room at all for a human body.
The steel-framed vitrine of *The Acquired Inability to Escape* is a signature structure for Hirst, who has cited the painter Francis Bacon (1909–92), as an early influence. Such paintings of Bacon’s as *Study for Portrait on Folding Bed* 1963 feature cage-like lines around the human figures on which the images centre. At the same time, the heavy industrial aesthetic of the vitrines references the sculptural forms of such Minimalists as Donald Judd (1928–94) and Carl André (born 1935) – but more specifically echoes the pavilion structures of Dan Graham (born 1942) or the *Condensation Cube* series 1963–5 by Hans Haacke (born 1936).

Hirst’s earliest vitrine – a pair of interlinked glass cells hosting a colony of flies living in a rotting cow’s head and dying on an Insect-O-Cutor, entitled *A Thousand Years* 1990 – combines the pure clean lines of classic Minimalist sculpture with the uncomfortably eviscerated flesh of a Bacon portrait. Many of Hirst’s subsequent works, including *Mother and Child Divided* 1993, utilise a similar visual language.

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**Damien Hirst, A Thousand Years, 1990. Glass, steel, silicone rubber, painted MDF. Insect-O-Cutor, cow’s head, blood, flies, maggots, metal dishes, cotton wool, sugar and water. Sculpture 2075 x 4000 x 2150 mm**
The Acquired Inability to Escape belongs to a group of cells made during the 1990s collectively known as *Internal Affairs*, all of which contain combinations of such everyday objects as tools, various types of equipment, pieces of furniture and clothing, arranged in mises-en-scène that evoke an absent human presence. Hirst’s use of vitrines or cells to contain and present objects recalls the glass and plexiglass cases protecting and elevating ordinary consumer objects to the status of high art in works made by American Pop artist Jeff Koons (born 1955) during the 1980s. However, where Koons fetishises such objects as vacuum cleaners and basket balls, Hirst expresses more metaphysical concerns.

Many of Hirst’s air-filled cells, as in *A Thousand Years, Sometimes I Avoid People* 1991, *The Asthmatic Escaped* 1992 and *The Acquired Inability to Escape*, involve spaces that lead to other spaces, suggesting the possibility of movement. Hirst has commented:

“I like escape formally, as an idea. There’s a religious element to *The Acquired Inability to Escape* ... A spiritual, not physical escape, if you decide to choose it ... I really love glass, a substance which is very solid, is dangerous but transparent. That idea of being able to see everything but not able to touch, solid but invisible. The slits in the glass are very important to the works, you need some sort of access ... The slits are for the imagined element to get out, not in a literal, physical way ... I have dreams about spaces like my work, some uncomfortable sense of claustrophobia ... I think of ... the ... cigarette lighter as signifying some sort of God, but it’s just energy. It doesn’t have a choice, it doesn’t choose when things die ... I don’t think it’s fate. It’s just a buzzing thing that is always there. With *The Acquired Inability to Escape* it’s very much a real scene. But I also thought hard about the ashtray being a sort of graveyard, a death ... The whole smoking thing is like a mini life cycle. For me the cigarette can stand for life, the packet with its possible cigarettes stands for birth, the lighter can signify God which gives life to the whole situation, the ashtray represents death.” (Quoted in Adrian Dannatt, interview with Damien Hirst: ‘Life’s like this, then it stops’, *Flash Art*, no.169, March–April 1993, pp.59–63, pp.61–2.)

The notion of a hopeless cycle of entrapment evoked by the title words *The Acquired Inability to Escape* is confirmed by the total enclosure of the glass case, despite the possibility for movement between its two chambers. Hirst originally intended to use the case for a work involving butterflies
(Burn and Hirst, p.27). An installation he created the same year, entitled *In and Out of Love*, featured hundreds of exotic butterflies hatching from pupae attached to the surfaces of white canvases and nourished by plants in pots, only to fall on the floor and die as their short lives expired.

Where *In And Out of Love* presented the life cycle of the butterflies as a metaphor for the ephemeral nature of love, and *A Thousand Years* offers the continual death and reproduction of flies as a metaphor for human existence, *The Acquired Inability to Escape* equates life with smoking – a brief burst of pleasure leading inevitably to death, which Hirst has referred to as ‘the absolute corruption of life’ (quoted in No Sense of Absolute Corruption, p.11). He has said: “I want a glimpse of an idea of what it’s like to die ... Cigarettes are such clinical forms. They are like pills. They have a purity before you smoke them. They're expensive, dangerous, from the point when you light one to when you stub it out, it’s death.”
The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living, 1991

Damien Hirst, *The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living, 1991*. Glass, steel, silicon, formaldehyde and shark. 2170 x 5420 x 1800 mm

*The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living* has become embedded in popular culture as one of the most iconic images of contemporary art. Conceived by Hirst in 1989 whilst at Goldsmiths, the ‘Natural History’ work consists of a thirteen-foot tiger shark preserved in a tank of formaldehyde, weighing a total of 23 tons. The shark is contained within a steel and glass vitrine three times longer than high and divided into three cubes.

According to the artist, the title was, “just a statement that I had used to describe the idea of death to myself”. Thought of prior to the sculpture, it was taken from Hirst’s student thesis on Hyperreality and the work of Robert Longo and Umberto Eco. Hirst recalls liking the title’s poetic clumsiness because of the way it expressed, “something that wasn’t there, or was there”.

The sculpture, which successfully pushed the boundaries of contemporary art, generated colossal press attention when exhibited at The Saatchi Gallery’s ‘YBA 1’ at Boundary Road in London (1991). Explaining “I didn’t just want a lightbox, or a painting of a shark” Hirst’s intention was to force the viewer out of their element by introducing into a gallery setting, a shark that was “real enough to frighten you”. By isolating the shark from its natural habitat, with the formaldehyde providing an illusion of life, the work explores our greatest fears, and the difficulty involved in adequately trying to express them. As Hirst states: “You try and avoid [death], but it’s such a big thing that you can’t. That’s the frightening thing isn’t it?”
In 1997 ‘The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living’ was included in ‘Sensation: Young British Artists from the Saatchi Collection’ at the Royal Academy, London. A decade later, Hirst chose the work as the focal piece in ‘Re-Object’ (Kunsthaus Bregenz, 2007) – in which Hirst, Jeff Koons and Gerhard Merz each presented an artist’s statement in an exhibition exploring the influence of Marcel Duchamp.

*Pharmacy, 1992*


This work is a room-sized installation representing a pharmacy. It was conceived as a site-specific installation and initially shown at the Cohen Gallery, New York, in 1992. Hirst had been using glass-fronted cabinets of the type found in a laboratory or hospital, stacked with pharmaceutical drugs as well as other objects, since 1989. In these works (but not in *Pharmacy*) he arranged the drugs on the shelves so that they offer a model of the body: those at the top are medicines for the head; in the middle are medications for the stomach; those at the bottom treat ailments of the feet. These works are related to his famous ‘spot’ paintings, which bear the names of pharmaceuticals as their titles. Hirst’s spot paintings and pharmaceutical works recall an early work by Marcel Duchamp (1887–1968) also titled *Pharmacy* (1914). One of Duchamp’s first ready-mades, this is a commercial print of a winter landscape signed by an unknown artist onto which Duchamp painted...
two small drops of colour (red and yellow) suggesting personages, which for him represented the coloured apothecary bottles generally seen in pharmacy windows at that time.

In Hirst’s *Pharmacy* the small medicine cabinets of the earlier pieces have been expanded to cover the walls with rows of packaged drugs behind glass. Four glass apothecary bottles filled with coloured liquids stand in a row on a counter and represent the four elements: earth, air, fire, water. Their traditional form is a reminder of more ancient practices of treating and healing the body. The counter fronts three desks, covered with an array of office equipment and stationery, and three chairs. Four bowls containing honeycomb sit on four footstools arranged around an electric insect-o-cutor, which hangs from the ceiling. Hirst has commented: “I’ve always seen medicine cabinets as bodies, but also like a cityscape or civilization, with some sort of hierarchy within it. It’s also like a contemporary museum of the Middle Ages. In a hundred years time this will look like an old apothecary. A museum of something that’s around today.” (Quoted in Dannatt, p.59.)

Medicine and drugs are recurring themes in Hirst’s work as means of altering perception and providing a short-lived cure, ineffectual in the face of death. Here the honeycomb operates as the central metaphor: it potentially attracts flies, only to lure them on to a quick and brutal death. In a similar manner the pharmaceutical drugs with their inevitable side effects could be seen to represent a range of impermanent means for escape from sickness and pain. *Pharmacy*, with its clinical and authoritative atmosphere, made cheerful by the colourful apothecary bottles, connects the laboratory or hospital (the source and location of modern medicine) with the museum or gallery space. For Hirst medicine, like art, provides a belief system which is both seductive and illusory. He has commented: “I can’t understand why some people believe completely in medicine and not in art, without questioning either”. By reproducing the area of a pharmacy the public is normally denied access to in a highly aestheticised context, Hirst has created a kind of temple to modern medicine, ironically centred around an agent of death (the insect-o-cutor). Offering endless rows of palliative hopes for a diseased cultural body, Hirst’s *Pharmacy* could be seen as a representation of the multiple range of philosophies, theories and belief systems available as possible means of structuring and redeeming a life. Like medicine, however, these attempts to think a way around death are eternally doomed to failure.
Damien Hirst, *Mother and Child Divided*, 1993. Exhibition Copy 2007. Glass, painted stainless steel, silicone, acrylic, monofilament, stainless steel, cow, calf and formaldehyde solution. Two parts, each (calf): 1136 x 1689 x 622 mm | Two parts, each (cow): 2086 x 3225 x 1092 mm

*Mother and Child Divided* is a floor-based sculpture comprising four glass-walled tanks, containing the two halves of a cow and calf, each bisected and preserved in formaldehyde solution. The tanks are installed in pairs, the two halves of the calf in front of the two halves of the mother, with sufficient space between each pair that a visitor may walk between them and view the animals’ insides. Thick white frames surround and support the tanks, setting in brilliant relief the transparent turquoise of the formaldehyde solution in which the carcasses are immersed. The sculpture was created for exhibition at the 1993 Venice Biennale and was subsequently the focal point of the 1995 Turner Prize at Tate Britain (then The Tate Gallery), the year that Hirst won the prize. It is now in the collection of the Astrup Fernley Museum of Modern Art, Oslo. Hirst created Tate’s copy for exhibition in the Turner Prize Restrospective at Tate Britain in 2007.

One of a group of works collectively entitled *Natural History, Mother and Child Divided* follows Hirst’s most famous work, created in 1991 for the British collector Charles Saatchi, a tiger shark floating in a giant formaldehyde-filled tank, entitled *The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Somebody Living*. In the same year the artist filled two sets of shelves with fish in solution in individual Perspex boxes and titled the two separate works *Isolated Elements Swimming in the Same Direction for the Purpose of Understanding* followed by the bracketed words ‘left’ and ‘right’ indicating the ways the fish are heading. He also made his first works with ungulate carcasses in liquid: *Stimulants (and the way they affect the mind and body)*, consisting of two cuboid tanks each containing a skinned sheep’s head and *Out of Sight. Out of Mind*, two individually encased skinned cows’ heads.

The heavy frames of Hirst’s tanks have been a signature structure since he created his first steel-
framed vitrine in 1990, *A Thousand Years* 1990, in which a pair of interlinked glass cells hosts a colony of flies living in a rotting cow’s head and dying on an Insect-O-Cutor. Like *A Thousand Years, Mother and Child Divided* combines the pure clean lines of classic Minimalist sculpture, with the uncomfortably eviscerated flesh of a portrait by the painter Francis Bacon (1909–92). Bacon saw and praised *A Thousand Years* not long before he died in 1992. Hirst has frequently cited Bacon as an early influence, making a sculptural homage to Bacon’s many triptychs of his lover George Dyer in a work entitled *The Tranquillity of Solitude (For George Dyer)* 2006, in which skinned sheeps’ carcasses take the place of Dyer, sitting on a toilet or leaning over a basin, each individually immersed in a formaldehyde-filled vitrine.

Hirst has commented that the vitrines, “first came from a fear of everything in life being so fragile’ and wanting ‘to make a sculpture where the fragility was encased. Where it exists in its own space. The sculpture is spatially contained.” The white frames that surround the formaldehyde tanks are particularly dominating visually because of their width, and now function as something of an artist’s logo. Hirst has explained that he is attracted to formaldehyde “because it is dangerous and it burns your skin. If you breathe it in it chokes you and it looks like water. I associate it with memory.” He has also commented that he uses it not for its preservative qualities, but “to communicate an idea”. Central to this is the futility of preservation in the face of death – that whatever we do to protect bodies against entropy, inevitably, eventually they will disintegrate and die.

In its reference to a mother and child, *Mother and Child Divided* subverts one of the oldest icons of Western Christian art – the portrait of the Holy Mother and Child traditionally the centrepiece of Catholic devotion. Hirst attended a Catholic school so the iconography is familiar to him, as he has commented: “I have a lot of strong memories of religious imagery. We had a big illustrated bible and when I was young I would go straight to the crucifixion or severed head pages.” Instead of the joyful unity of mother and baby, which the traditional image celebrates, Hirst presents a mother and child not only forever separated from one another, but also fatally severed in themselves. The impossibility of achieving or retaining an idealised (lost) unity (often coupled with a fear of fragmentation) is a theme dealt with extensively in psychoanalysis (by Sigmund Freud (1856–1939) in his 1920 essay *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, and subsequently by Melanie Klein (1882–1960) and Jacques Lacan (1901–81) in various papers. It is the subject of several works made by Hirst in the early 1990s, with such titles as *I want to spend the rest of my life everywhere, with everyone, one to one, always, forever, now* 1991, in which a ping-pong ball floats on a jet of air above a structure made of panes of glass. *Love’s Paradox (Surrender or Autonomy, Separateness as a Precondition for Connection)* 2007, comprising two tanks each containing the severed forequarters of a cow, is a development of this theme.

In the same year that he created *Mother and Child Divided* Hirst bisected his own work *The Acquired Inability to Escape* 1991 twice, setting the precedent for a series of divided works, reflecting on and emphasising his obsession with the mind-body dualism that was being articulated as a significant debate in art in the early 1990s. For Hirst, the bisecting and skinning of animals is about giving people the possibility to look in a new way. He has explained that cutting up cows and sheep is: “like creating emotions scientifically. What do you do if an animal is symmetrical? You cut it in half, and you can see what’s on the inside and outside simultaneously. It’s beautiful. The only problem is that it’s dead ... In a way, you understand more about living people by dealing with dead people. It’s sad but you feel more ... a viewer should be intrigued. The work should attract you and repel you at the same time ... cows are the most slaughtered animals ever ... I see them as death objects. Walking food ... What’s sad is that if you look at my cows cut up in formaldehyde, they have more personality than any cows walking about in fields.”
Hirst worked in a mortuary for several months after graduating from Goldsmiths College (BA Fine Art 1985–8), where he discovered that everyday exposure to corpses dulled his sense of the horror of death but did not lessen its mystery. While it revealed the internal structure of once-living beings, it failed to reveal ‘the mystic truths’ American artist Bruce Nauman (born 1941) claimed that ‘true art’ should reveal. Hirst has frequently referred to Nauman’s work The True Artist Helps the World by Revealing Mystic Truths 1967 (Pompidou Centre, Paris), which presents the title words spiralling outwards in neon script on the wall, most recently acknowledging it to be his favourite work of art.

Hirst continued his use of animals in tanks as metaphors for religious themes in 1994 with Away from the Flock – a single, whole sheep in formaldehyde-filled tank – and XII Disciples – a series of flayed bovine heads presented in glass tanks. He developed his interest in bisection with a cow and bull sliced vertically eight times, mounted in individual tanks, and titled Some Comfort Gained from the Acceptance of the Inherent Lies in Everything 1996, elaborating that: “... [the inherent lies are] that you have to kill things in order to look at them.” Death Explained 2007, presenting a bisected shark in two separated tanks as in Mother and Child Divided, returns to this subject in the face of a theatrically staged existential despair.

Damien Hirst, Away from the Flock, 1994, Glass, painted steel, silicone, acrylic, plastic, lamb and formaldehyde solution. Sculpture 960 x 1490 x 510 mm
Trinity - Pharmacology, Physiology, Pathology, 2000

Damien Hirst, *Trinity – Pharmacology, Physiology, Pathology*, 2000. Glass, faced particleboard, wood, steel and anatomical models. Three parts: 2135 x 1530 x 472 mm (Left), 2745 x 1835 x 472 mm (Centre), 2135 x 1530 x 472 mm (Right)

*Trinity – Pharmacology, Physiology, Pathology* is a wall-mounted sculptural installation composed of three large glass fronted cabinets displayed in triptych formation, with the large central cabinet flanked by two equal sized smaller cabinets. Custom-made for the artist from white formica-covered MDF with identical steel fittings (handles and locks), the cabinets contain medical demonstration models – made of plastic, leather and wood – arranged on white shelves. The order in which the objects are arranged is aesthetic, rather than following any kind of logical or discursive rationale. Many items are repeated in two or all of the cabinets, or presented in several versions of the same thing. These include: enlarged eyeballs; foetuses in various stages of development, both in and out of wombs; cross-sections of male and female reproductive organs; cross-sections of the skin with giant hair follicles; skulls – both adult and infant; enlarged teeth; and torsos with their skin removed to show the body’s internal organs and half the head sliced open to reveal the skull and part of the brain – two of these are brown skinned and stand side by side, evoking twins (the subject of ongoing fascination for Hirst). The cabinets also contain an enlarged brain; an enlarged heart; a pelvis and full set of vertebrae (painted various shades of green); an infant’s spine; hand, arm, leg and foot bones; an enlarged bisected kidney; a gynaecological model of a newborn infant; and a model of a woman’s lower torso, genitals and upper thighs. The largest object is a torso and head sliced horizontally into fifteen parts and hinged on a vertical stand so that they can be viewed separately.
Hirst’s earliest use of the vocabulary of medicine for making art dates to the cabinets filled with pharmaceutical packaging that he created between 1989 and 1992, culminating in the room-sized installation *Pharmacy* 1992. In a group of works entitled *The Lovers* 1991 he presented real specimens (internal organs taken from cows) in formaldehyde solution in jars lined up in rows on formica-covered cabinet shelves, the precursors to such works utilising whole and bisected animal carcasses as *Mother and Child Divided* 1993 and *Away from the Flock* 1994. The titles of these works herald the references to Christian iconography that have become central to Hirst’s artistic language, which equates medical science with religion and art. He first used a medical model as the basis for sculpture in 1999–2000, when he massively enlarged a semi-skinned and eviscerated male head and torso and cast it in painted bronze. Entitled *Hymn*, this sculpture, like *Trinity – Pharmacology, Physiology, Pathology*, embodies Hirst’s equation of medical science with Christianity – both of which he views as belief systems which promise, but fail to deliver, any real redemption for our common fate – death. *Trinity – Pharmacology, Physiology, Pathology* presents three types of medical science – the study of drugs, the functioning of the body and the study of disease – as metaphors for the holy trinity of the Christian church which unites the Father, Son and Holy Spirit in one. The format of the triptych is common in church altar-pieces, although they do not usually depict the actual trinity. In the same way, Hirst’s *Trinity* is a metaphorical association of image with idea, rather than actual illustration. In 2005 he commented:

“I just can’t help thinking that [medical] science is the new religion for many people ... there [are] four important things in life: religion, love, art and science. At their best, they’re all just tools to help you find a path through the darkness. None of them really work that well, but they help. Of them all, science sees to be the one right now. Like religion, it provides the glimmer of hope that maybe it will be all right in the end ... I want ... people to think about the combination of science and religion, basically. People tend to think of them as two very separate things, one cold and clinical, the other emotional and loving and warm. I [want] to leap over those boundaries and give you something that looks clinical and cold but has all the religious, metaphysical connotations too.
“I just thought, ‘What can you pit against death?’” (Damien Hirst cited in ‘Conversation’, Gordon Burn, ‘Beautiful Inside My Head Forever’ (Sotheby’s, 2008)

*For the Love of God*, a platinum skull set with diamonds, is one of Hirst’s most important and widely recognised works. Its raw materials define it as an artwork of unprecedented scale. The 32 platinum plates making up ‘For the Love of God’ are set with 8,601 VVS to flawless pavé-set diamonds, weighing a massive 1,106.18 carats. The teeth inserted into the jaw are real and belong to the original skull.

The skull from which ‘For the Love of God’ was cast, was purchased from a London taxidermist and subsequently subjected to intensive bioarchaeological analysis and radiocarbon dating. This research revealed it dated from around 1720 - 1810, and was likely to be that of a 35-year-old man of European/Mediterranean ancestry. The title originates from exclamations Hirst’s mother would make on hearing plans for new works when he was starting out as an artist. As he explains: “She used to say, ‘For the love of God, what are you going to do next!’”
‘For the Love of God’ acts as a reminder that our existence on earth is transient. Hirst combined the imagery of classic memento mori with inspiration drawn from Aztec skulls and the Mexican love of decoration and attitude towards death. He explains of death: “You don’t like it, so you disguise it or you decorate it to make it look like something bearable – to such an extent that it becomes something else.”

The incorporation of the large central stone was inspired by memories of the comic ‘2000 AD’, which Hirst used to read as a child. He relates how the comic, “used to have a character in it called Tharg the Mighty who had a circle on his forehead. He was like a kind of powerful, God-like figure who controlled the universe,” Hirst explains. “It kind of just looked like it needed something. A third eye; a connection to Jesus and his dad.”

Alongside their dazzling brilliance and “Eucharistic” beauty, Hirst’s fascination with diamonds results partly from the mutterings and uncertainty surrounding their inherent worth. In the face of the industry’s ability to establish their irreplaceable value, it becomes necessary to question whether they are “just a bit of glass, with accumulated metaphorical significance? Or [whether they] are genuine objects of supreme beauty connected with life.” The cutthroat nature of the diamond industry, and the capitalist society which supports it, is central to the work’s concept. Hirst explains that the stones “bring out the best and the worst in people […] people kill for diamonds, they kill each other”.

In 2010, Hirst created a second, baby diamond skull called For Heaven’s Sake using pink diamonds.

Damien Hirst, *For Heaven’s Sake*, 2010. Platinum, pink and white diamonds. Sculpture 85 x 85 x 100 mm
Predominantly based upon the minimalist aesthetic of the medicinal pill, the works on display at Paul Stolper act as a continuation of Hirst’s life-long investigation into our almost-spiritual relationship with the rigours of science and the pharmaceutical industry. He explains: “Pills are a brilliant little form, better than any minimalist art. They’re all designed to make you buy them… they come out of flowers, plants, things from the ground, and they make you feel good, you know, to just have a pill, to feel beauty.”

Included in the exhibition is *The Cure*; a wall of thirty silkscreen prints, each depicting a two-colour pill set against vibrant backgrounds of pop-candy colours. Also on display is a series of corresponding sculptural works; fourteen hugely enlarged resin pills, each measuring thirty centimetres long, as well as ten smaller pills, rendered in an array of seductive, immaculate colours. Sculptures of medicine bottles, pharmaceutical boxes, ampoules, syringes, a scalpel, and drug packaging that all play with concepts of scale – the tallest measuring nearly one and a half metres. The editions continue Hirst's exploration of contemporary belief systems; religion, love, art and medicine.
Glossary

Conceptual Art
Conceptual art is art for which the idea (or concept) behind the work is more important than the finished art object. It emerged as an art movement in the 1960s and the term usually refers to art made from the mid-1960s to the mid-1970s.

Installation Art
The term installation art is used to describe mixed-media constructions or assemblages usually designed for a specific place and for a temporary period of time.

Minimalism
Minimalism is an extreme form of abstract art developed in the USA in the 1960s and typified by artworks composed of simple geometric shapes based on the square and the rectangle.

Pop Art
Pop art is an art movement that emerged in the 1950s and flourished in the 1960s in America and Britain, drawing inspiration from sources in popular and commercial culture such as advertising, Hollywood movies and pop music. Key pop artists include Andy Warhol, Roy Lichtenstein, Richard Hamilton, Peter Blake and David Hockney.

Readymade
The term readymade was first used by French artist Marcel Duchamp to describe the works of art he made from manufactured objects. It has since often been applied more generally to artworks by other artists made in this way.

Site-specific
The term site-specific refers to a work of art designed specifically for a particular location and that has an interrelationship with the location.

Young British Artists (YBAs)
The label Young British Artists (YBAs) is applied to a loose group of British artists who began to exhibit together in 1988 and who became known for their openness to materials and processes, shock tactics and entrepreneurial attitude.

Vitrine
A large, glass cabinet used for displaying art objects. Often used in museums, the vitrine was appropriated by artists like Joseph Cornell in the 1950s and Joseph Beuys in the mid 1960s to display unusual materials they invested with spiritual or personal significance. Other artists who have used vitrines in their work include the American artist Jeff Koons and the British sculptor Rebecca Warren.