**Damien Hirst Retrospective, Tate Modern, London (April 2012)**

Tempting as it is to look at the Damien Hirst Retrospective as an exercise in nostalgia for a lost world of shocking art, it’s not just a carnival of schlocky transgression. Though there is far too much here to take in, its fourteen rooms carefully guide us through his career from his early work around the time of his graduation from Goldsmith’s College at the end of the 1980s to his collections of medical instruments, and from the spot paintings to the infamous plexiglass cases containing slowly pickling animals and the room full of dying butterflies.

The problem is not that the exhibition is a cabinet of gory wonders. Nor do the sensation of the works themselves, or their accompanying publicity, obstruct our experience of them. They are the very condition for its possibility. The problem instead is that this exhibition is the scene of the crime of contemporary art, the index of all the lies it has ever told itself. It has told itself that these objects exceed the problems created by the ‘conceptual turn’. It has told itself that the work of art should never admit to itself that it actually *is* one. It has told itself that artworks should instead build a context of inquiry *into* themselves from which they can criticise their own status *as* art to avoid the problem of *being* works of art.

These questions can only be interesting if they also act as a critique of nihilism. Hirst, however, chooses to give us things forged from it. He makes a virtue out of his own insincerity. Modernist radicalism sought to challenge the bourgeois assumption that works of art should be beautiful. It undermined the idea that the individual artist is a romantic existential hero, embedding their genius into a work’s formal properties. Hirst’s take on this is to delegate the act of artistic creation to his army of assistants. This is only problematic because he idolises himself in the process. He turns the creative moment into the site of its own negation, positing himself as the embodiment of the resurrection of the creative genius. Describing Damien Hirst as the self-proclaimed Christ of contemporary art would make us guilty of lionising his own decadence, but he hints that this is what he wants us to say.

We can find the best example of this in his famous shark-in-formaldehyde, *The Physically Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living* (1991). It is certainly a powerful image, forcing us to confront the indifference of nature towards the isolated, fragile living thing. Here, we engage with the reality of illness and suffering in the face of the constant deferral of death. It would be an immensely satisfying meditation on the subject if Hirst could bring himself to think in terms of questions rather than answers. He focuses on the immediacy of the object’s physicality, and our typical response to it – our infantile fears and the desire for relief. The work is just scary enough pose these questions, but just vain enough to believe that it is a solution.

The problem for Hirst is that *The Physical Impossibility* dethrones itself. It cannot work as *a work* of art because it is just one example of his endlessly repeated point. We would be far too kind to describe death as a ‘theme’ in his work. It could only be thematic if different works addressed the same issue from different angles, refracting it in different forms. Instead, it merely *recurs* in objects that are variously absurd, disgusting, or morally apathetic. *Retrospective* makes no room for subtlety, because Hirst never opens up such a space.

Take, for example, his collections of medicines, *Pharmacy* (1992) or the giant filled ashtray of *Crematorium* (1996). They make the same point as *The Physical Impossibility*, but deviate from it only by telling us about the changes to the packaging semiotics of pills and cigarettes over time. This reduces the works to being little more than mere images, undermining the traditional question of the formal beauty of the work of art by being about surfaces alone. They ridicule the idea of using the vocabulary of ‘experience’ and ‘meaning’ to talk about art at all. The cows in formaldehyde – *Mother and Child Divided* (1993) – make us complicit in their brutality by encouraging us to gawp at them.

Damien Hirst does not force us to think about the nature of the works themselves, nor of art as such. As a result, *Retrospective* is little more than the sum of its expensive parts. It is a brash assertion of the hubris of contemporary art. Hirst’s work is depthless, sneering. It elevates its own posturing above the possibility of challenge or the event of meaning. This is beyond depressing. His desire to shock and sell above all else compounds his essential dishonesty. His works expose themselves only insofar as they try to cover the smell of their own fear of death.

By Max L. Feldman