

Damien Hirst: *No Love Lost, Blue Paintings*, Wallace Collection, London
14th October 2009 - 24th January 2010

A few quick questions.

1. *Are these new paintings, painted by Damien Hirst himself, any good?*

No, not at all, they are not worth looking at.

2. *So why are you writing about them at such length?*

Because he is very famous.

3. *And why has the Wallace Collection decided to exhibit them?*

Because he is very famous.

4. *And why did Damien Hirst even paint them in the first place?*

Because he is very famous.

Now let me put this at more length. Damien Hirst has painted some paintings, entirely by hand. So far he has made his name with other kinds of art: with assemblages, mainly involving dead animals and pills, and paintings, painted by other people. There have been the spot paintings, the spin paintings, paintings copied from photographs, all of them done by assistants. But now he has chanced his arm, and risked his fame, with some paintings done by his own hand.

Anyone interested in Hirst's art to date, anyone simply interested in Hirst as a very famous artist, will probably take an interest in this radical turn in his work. What will they look like? There's another thing. Even now we've learnt to accept that skills needn't matter, still that old question seems to linger over any artist, whatever methods they employ: but actually, can they paint?

And if that wasn't enough, there's an extra attraction - in where these paintings are being shown. It's not the National Gallery, the Tate or the Royal Academy. But the Wallace Collection is a distinguished, old-fashioned venue, and chosen precisely as a traditionalist setting, to stress the way these new paintings have a place in the great tradition. As the artist has said himself, he feels they are "deeply connected to the past." For the public, it's another intriguing surprise. If you were expecting some outrage from the master of Brit Art shock, expect again.

Here they are, then, looking like history. In one long chamber, just off the Wallace's main gallery of masterpieces, they hang on walls of sumptuous silk, and held in heavy old master frames. There are 25 pictures, including two triptychs. Their collective title is *No Love Lost, Blue Paintings*. And they don't look back that far. As you'd expect, they are most reminiscent of paintings by Hirst's hero, Francis Bacon.

You see it at once. They take their effects, not from Bacon's virtuoso exploding flesh images, but from the dourer Bacons of the 1950's. There's little colour. Blueish

whites glimmer out of blueish darkness. As in Bacon, but more so, the figures are contained within frameworks of straight white lines. The figurative matter consists (mainly) of Hirsty things - skulls, skeleton, a shark's open maw, ashtrays, cigarette packets, flayed bodies, also iguanas, thickets of wood. There are grid patterns of white dots.

Like Bacons, they're pretty big. Their themes come in repetitive sequences. There's a series of very similar paintings of flayed bodies seen in a thicket, another series of skulls and ashtrays. The subjects may sound harsh, but the painting of them is neither violent nor graceful, simply unassertive and unconfident, caution suggesting uncertainty. There's not a dash of virtuosity. There's an attempt at blurry, glowy etherealness. There's one picture of a vase of flowers with butterflies flying out of it in all directions, and some of the butterflies are quite neatly painted.

But come now. This is ridiculous. To talk in this considered way is to pretend that the paintings can be taken seriously. It's like I was saying: they have their faults, but on the other hand they have their interest. So let's be clear. Many kinds of paintings get reviewed on these pages, and some of them (in my judicious way) I say are good, and some bad. But in a way they're all quite good, or they wouldn't be getting reviewed here in the first place.

These Hirst paintings are way outside that range. They're thoroughly derivative. Their handling is weak. They're extremely boring all round. I'm not saying that he's absolutely hopeless. But I'm not saying he's any good either. There are many degrees of painting. There are many painters in evening classes much worse than Hirst. On the other hand, you'd find quite a few who were better, too. To try and be accurate, Hirst, as a painter, is at about the level of a not very promising first year art student. He is in his mid-forties.

There are dozens of youngsters who turn up at our art schools each year, doing this turgid teen angst stuff. And many of them are deluded enough, in their innocence, to think that their work is "deeply connected to the past." Their teachers have to scold and embarrass them out these bad habits. These kids may come to something. At that point you can't really be sure. But you can be sure that the Wallace Collection, in its kindness, wouldn't offer them a gallery to display their work. And I too, in my kindness, wouldn't write about this present show, if it wasn't for the level of public interest.

As for what Damien Hirst thinks he's doing, it's not my business, but anyone may wonder. Yearning to be among the masters, and blinded by self-belief? Maybe. But I could imagine another famous artist, who had made their name in assemblage, and who decided to try their hand at painting - but when it turned out like this, they

realised it simply wouldn't do, and sighed, and put it away. Their fame hadn't warped their judgement.

And I could imagine another famous artist who did a similar thing, but who wasn't quite sure, and realised that their fame was likely to distort both their judgement and the public's. So they submitted one of their new paintings, under a pseudonym, to the biennial John Moores Painting Prize competition, to see what would happen. Hirst could have done the same.

Well, the artist can make a fool of himself, and it doesn't matter. I'm sure the pictures will sell for a packet anyway, and if the critics are rude - I jolly well hope they are - the buyers need only be reminded of Van Gogh, rejected by all in his time, now seen as great. (Ignore the slight circularity of this argument.) No, it's our poor little art world that I feel sorry for. We just look so bloody stupid.

I mean, here is the Director of the Wallace Collection - no names, no pack-drill - but what she says is: Hirst's paintings are "very classical in nature" and "his ethereal other-worldly treatment of the *memento mori* subject evokes centuries of great art... a comparison can be made to the Wallace Collection's great Poussin, *A Dance to the Music of Time*."

Actually, the Wallace thinks so highly of its great Poussin that currently it exhibits it with a statuette plonked directly in front of it, so you can't see it properly. Never mind. You can see those Hirst paintings clearly enough, and then imagine what could have moved the mind of this Director. Was she money-bribed? Was she dazzled by stardom? Can she really not see anything?

We're all blinded, I suppose, somehow. So many things obscure a pure attention to good art. The spectacle of blazing fame and self-delusion, the joy of people talking utter rubbish, and writing rude reviews: the freak show goes on. At least today I have detained you long enough.