



BEYOND
THE
DARK
NESS

ARMED WITH NEW WORKS AND FRESH WAYS OF LOOKING AT DEATH, THE
INFAMOUS **DAMIEN HIRST** HAS COME TO ASIA. **LILI TAN** MEETS ONE OF THE
WORLD'S RICHEST LIVING ARTISTS | PHOTOGRAPHY BY FRÉDÉRIC LAGRANGE





Insolent, egotistical,

temperamental, just plain awful – I had heard all the descriptors for Damien Hirst from other journalists who'd interviewed the maverick artist. So it only verifies their assessments when bodyguards stop me at the entrance of the new Gagosian Gallery in Hong Kong, where Hirst's show is opening in the next few days. *Jerk*, I think to add. ¶ Surprisingly, the suited, oversized meat is not there to ward off girls in short smocks attempting to fawn over the celebrity artist. Instead, they are guarding a small, but very valuable piece of Hirst's collection: *For Heaven's Sake*, a human baby skull cast in platinum and covered with more than 8,000 pavé diamonds, the headliner of his first solo show in Asia, *Forgotten Promises*, which runs until March 19. ¶ The gallery's managing director waves me through, but my expectations are prejudicially low. Hirst, though, is soft, even warm when he extends his hand to greet me. Liberated from his Bono-esque glasses (thanks to laser surgery) and dressed simply in a black jumper that hugs his round belly, he looks more like an ordinary, middle-aged dad than the bad boy of British art. ¶ The 45-year-old began garnering attention in the late 1980s when he was a student at Goldsmiths College and spearheaded the student exhibition, *Freeze*, in London's Docklands.

Advertising mogul Charles Saatchi later sponsored Hirst's work, the result being *The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living*, his iconic shark in formaldehyde which earned him a Turner Prize nomination in 1992.

Submerged sheep, cows and other animals followed, along with spin paintings, medicine cabinets and the Turner Prize win in 1995, but Hirst soon became more notorious than prominent because he was accused of plagiarism, fell off the wagon for nearly a decade and suffered from verbal diarrhoea, even sparking public outcry when he praised al-Qaeda for its 9/11 attacks during a BBC interview. Yet none of this stopped him from reaching the top: he set a world record for a living artist in September 2008 when a two-day sale of his work raised US\$270 million. The auction, *Beautiful Inside My Head Forever*, started on the same day that Lehman Brothers went bankrupt. It was also a controversial move, as Hirst had offered up new works to Sotheby's London, cutting out his supporting galleries. Regardless, *The Sunday Times* Rich List 2010 valued Hirst at just over US\$340m, making him one of the world's wealthiest living artists.

Sarah Thornton, sociologist and author of *Seven Days in the Art World*, notes that Hirst probably understands the market better than any other artist, possessing the ability to draw into the sphere of contemporary art people

who normally would not be interested. "Hirst isn't just an artist," she says. "He's a global cultural phenomenon."

Hong Kong first hosted Hirst in 1997, when he was here to print his monograph, *I Want to Spend the Rest of My Life Everywhere, with Everyone, One to One, Always, Forever, Now*. Last year at Art HK, London gallery White Cube featured Hirst's *The Inescapable Truth* (2005), his first formaldehyde work to be shown in China, and sold it for £1.75m. Fourteen years after his initial visit, he's back to exhibit for the first time. After all, to ignore neighbouring Mainland China's buzz and buying power is impossible.

DURING THE SEPTEMBER 2008 auction, Sotheby's noted an untapped international market for Hirst's work, as more than eight per cent of his work went to buyers in Asia and the Middle East. Oliver Barker, senior international specialist of contemporary art for Sotheby's Worldwide, confirms: "Asia is unbelievably important. In the West, there's a palpable sense that Hong Kong and Chinese collectors are operating on the most

BUTTERFLY EFFECT

Inside the Gagosian Gallery, Hirst shows his playful side in front of one of his new oil paintings, *Idea leuconoe in Nerium oleander* (2009-2010)

*“There’s only ever one idea,
and every artist just repeats
themselves endlessly”*

sophisticated levels. I don’t see Larry [Gagosian’s] show as a drop in the ocean.”

Furthermore, Hirst, like the majority, was not immune to the global financial crisis that followed his September 2008 auction. According to *The Economist*, his annual auction sales contracted by 93 per cent – to US\$19m – in 2009, and by autumn last year, the average auction price for one of his pieces was US\$136,000, down from US\$831,000 in 2008.

Still, don’t ask him if he’s here begging for buyers. Hirst remembers: “When I was in the Ukraine, I was asked a really stupid question: ‘Mr Hirst, are you here because you are like Deep Purple and can only fill stadiums here?’” Within six weeks in 2009, Hirst’s *Requiem* at the Pinchuk Art Centre in Kiev attracted 350,000 visitors, 90 per cent of whom were between the ages of 18 and 35. Hirst counters, “There’s a whole new audience and it feels a lot like that [in Asia] as well. I always want to go where people are hungry for art. And [the answer is] no, I can fill stadiums in my own country too.”

FOR GAGOSIAN, CHOOSING Hirst to christen its Hong Kong gallery was easy. “We reached a decision on our opening show in a matter of minutes,” remembers Nick Simunovic, managing director of Gagosian Gallery in Asia. “Not only is Damien one of

the world’s most important living artists, he was also incredibly generous in offering us five new bodies of work.” Including *For Heaven’s Sake*, *Forgotten Promises* also introduces: a series of diamond cabinets, a group of paintings featuring real butterflies concealed in layers of silver paint, gold statues in the form of St Bartholomew and a foetal winged skeleton, as well as butterfly oil paintings that imitate photography. The last of which is a wonder since just over a year ago Hirst had declared his affair with the insect to be over.

“I love the idea of saying ‘no more butterflies’ and then it’s: Damien Hirst, new butterflies,” he laughs, while scratching his nose, but goes on to explain: “The paintings in here are from before I

said that, and I didn’t mean no more butterflies of any form. I think there’s only ever one idea, and every artist just repeats themselves endlessly.”

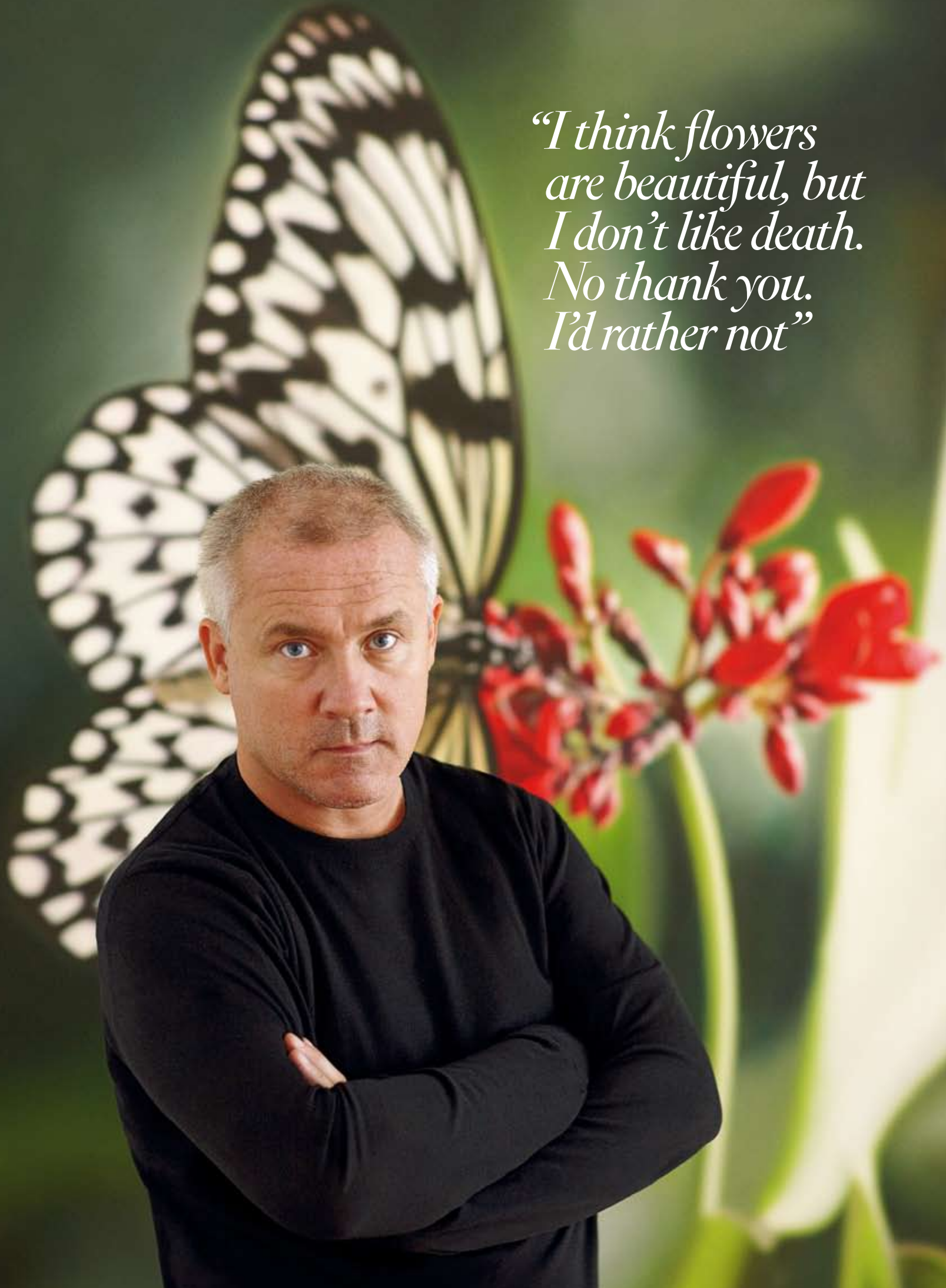
It’s also in recent years that Hirst has attempted to reinvent himself as a bona fide painter, putting the pillboxes and pickled creatures that made him famous on hold. Though his spin and spot series are technically paintings, Hirst began eliminating the noise, cutting out the mechanical processes and robotic repetition and actually putting a paintbrush to canvas, something he says he stopped doing when he was a teenager because he “struggled with the infinite possibilities of painting, and found it quite difficult to get anywhere.”

After the 2008 Sotheby’s auction, Hirst used the downtime during the market downturn to hone his creativity and concentrate on the paintings in this exhibition. “I think as an artist it’s a lot easier to make work when there’s no money around, sadly. I don’t like the Van Gogh idea that artists have to be penniless and hungry to make good art because it’s a lot better to be paid, obviously. But I do believe you’ve got to stay focused when everyone’s telling you you’re great. There are times when it’s kind of unreal, when you’re selling everything you make. When art’s moving like that, you miss the point. How much art is worth and going up by becomes slightly irrelevant when you put it on the wall and ask, ‘Do you like it?’ And I go, ‘Yeah, I love it.’ How much you value something doesn’t really have anything to do with money.”

Hirst’s new oil paintings have a *trompe l’oeil* effect and are pretty, but rather underwhelming unless you know the process or objective: that he was trying to make them look like photographs. “People trust photography in the way they used to trust paintings, and if you paint like that then maybe you could trust them,” he explains. “For a long time, people took paintings to be the truth. When photography came along and was the actual truth, it sort of made painting disappear. Then since the manipulation of images with the computer and Photoshop, it starts to not be the truth. With a photograph, you take more snapshots per second. But to take that one second and then to spend three years painting it to get it to



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look just like that, it means something else and it makes you think about it differently."

The paintings are also vibrant rather than dark, the latter of which Hirst is famous for. Which begs the question: what's his relationship with death these days? "I don't like it - I've never liked it," he exclaims, before beginning his dizzying streams of consciousness. "I always think about life, really, but a lot of people say [my work] is about death. I was definitely taught to confront things that you can't avoid, and the last time I looked, you can't avoid death. Anything I've made is to throw you back to life, to make you feel good things, not bad things. Death is debilitating and rude and nasty and horrible. It's unbearable when you can't look at it, but I think flowers are beautiful because they don't last very long. You need to be aware of it and have an exciting time while you're here and have an exciting life, but I don't like death. No thank you. I'd rather not."

AND HOW WILL CRITICS evaluate Hirst's new work this time around? "I don't know - they'll love it," Hirst predicts blithely. "Andy Warhol said, 'Don't read your reviews. Weigh them.'" Hirst knows all too well that it doesn't matter what journalists are saying, as long as it's about him. This may be why he seems to have no qualms about picking his nose constantly. But then, he just has to take it one step further: *Flick*.

And as this dry slice of whitish discard spins in what seems to be slow motion and lands between us on the russet strands of the pony-hair sofa we're sitting on, I don't know whether to offer Hirst a tissue or abscond with the rejected matter, pickle it and sell it on eBay - perhaps as the first in a series titled *Forgotten Boogers*.

Nevertheless, to describe Hirst as offensive, temperamental or any of the aforementioned adjectives is too simple. He's complex, a character and impossible to contain. He goes from dark to light, from mugging at the camera to sticking his tongue out as if to sneer "na-na na-na boo-boo," from dropping the F-bomb to complimenting women on their shoes, and from a conceptual shock artist to a traditional painter of butterflies.

Where to next? I ask. Do you have any plans to experiment with... "Drugs?" he jokingly interrupts, then grows more serious. "I try not to have any pre-conceptions and think that just anything can be used. I'm constantly on the lookout for things to make art out of."

In the meantime, Hirst is in talks with Britain's Tate Gallery to stage a show some time in 2012. "It hasn't been announced yet, but

it's going to be my first retrospective, a proper museum show. I always used to say, 'museums are for dead artists,' but I got to a point where I thought, I'm ready to do that now."

As for future plans in Asia, "I would probably like to do something a bit bigger, like greatest hits, in China somewhere," Hirst envisages and looks up, as if he were surprised to have made it all this way in the first place. "When I lived in the north of England, London seemed like a crazy place, a long way away. The world's changing so much. I think [China] is exciting, but it's unknown and it's new."

Then he snaps back to his usual self: "I spent a hell of a long time doing things that people told me not to do or were impossible. I remember when I first started, someone said to me when I wanted to do the shark in formaldehyde that I couldn't sell that for over £10,000. [But now] I don't have the doubt anymore that I used to have. I think I just grew up. I mean, nobody knows what they're doing so let's just get on with it. Like these paintings, I really like them now but it took me 10 years to get to this point. Along the way, a lot of people were like, 'Are you sure?' If you get there one day, it's all worth it." ■



A Head for Figures

HIS WORKS ARE JAW-DROPPING, AND SO ARE THE PRICES THEY COMMAND. HERE'S HIRST'S TOP FIVE AUCTION SUMS

- 1. *The Golden Calf* (2008) - £10.3M** in September 2008. A 2.15m sculpture of a bull with horns and hooves dipped in gold sold by Sotheby's London
- 2. *Lullaby Spring* (2002) - £9.65M** in June 2007. A steel-and-glass cabinet lined with 6,136 individually painted pills sold by Sotheby's London
- 3. *The Kingdom* (2008) - £9.6M** in September 2008. A tiger shark in a silicone and formaldehyde solution sold by Sotheby's London
- 4. *Fragments of Paradise* (2008) - £5.2M** in September 2008. A stainless-steel-and-glass cabinet with manufactured diamonds sold by Sotheby's London
- 5. *Eternity* (2002-2004) - £4.72M** in October 2007. Butterflies and gloss household paint on canvas sold by Phillips de Pury & Company, London