

ALL CREATURES GREAT AND SMALL- THE ART OF DAMIEN HIRST

CHAPTER 1 - MORE THAN A MEMENTO.

The art of Damien Hirst has constantly been linked to vanitas or memento mori images. This idea is bandied about time and time again, that Hirst deals with life and death, most especially the transience of life and the inevitability of death. This is not a wrong assumption to make, Hirst's art does engage with these ideas but surely there has to be more to it otherwise it would not be particularly interesting art. However, it is interesting, it seems to have struck a chord, it is populace in a way in which much contemporary conceptual art is not, it seems to mean something to people. So, what is it about Hirst's work that makes it so important? What is the component that causes it to rise above the fatalistic banality of memento mori? I would have lost interest in his work quickly if it had only communicated the trite message that we are born to die. I doubt also if the musician Dave Stewart would have felt the urge to implore Hirst (in the lyrics of a song) to "save him and be his guide" if he had not been aware of something life affirming and spiritual in Hirst's art. "Cut me in half and I'll let you see/what this whole world has done to me", goes the song suggesting that Stewart expects something more from his artistic mentor than a crude moral message such as an hour glass running out or you will soon be reduced to pile of bones. Although there is truth in this and memento mori, have visibly (in a kind of kill-joy fashion) attested to this (fig.1), fatalistic messages are not the stuff inspirational art is made of. That is why there has to be more to Hirst's work since it does inspire, it is not fatalistic, on the contrary it encourages the viewer to question rather than accept the inevitable.

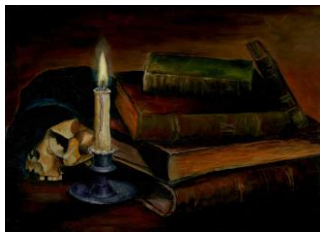


FIG 1



FIG 2



FIG 3

Probably the most often quoted phrase attributed to Hirst is when he claims that there has only ever been one idea in art, "what the hell are we doing here and what's it all about"? This does not sound like a resigned intellect, this sounds like a man in search of an answer to a big question, fascinated not so much with the phenomenon of life and death as with the mystery of creation. Somehow, in trying to explore this mystery his work has become side-tracked so ideas about life and death are present but not as integral as many interpretations of the work suggest. The ancient Greek sophist philosopher Protagoras is claimed to have said "about the Gods I am unable to discover whether they exist or not, for there are many things preventing knowledge, the obscurity of the subject and brevity of human life". This seems like an apt description of the aims and side-effects of Hirst's art since it appears that, in the process of his search for an answer to what lies behind creation, he has stumbled upon obscurity and the transience of human life. That does not detract from the fact that

he is looking, like Protagoras he is aware of the limitations, however, he is not in the business of giving up on the search. As far as answers are concerned it is difficult to say, once again, Hirst is like Protagoras – searching but unable to commit himself to a given answer since no proof can be found, no certainty available on the subject.

Hirst's engagement with the unanswerable, or at least debateable subject of creation is what makes his art so potent and meaningful. It is also crucially relevant to its time since it throws itself into the middle of the science versus religion battle with great vigour. Hirst is an expert stirrer, he seems to relish posing obscure puzzles which undermine modern man's capacity to be sure of anything. Nevertheless, he remains a neutral observer waiting himself for proof one way or the other of how creation occurred, was it a God-given phenomenon or did we evolve? This tension between religion and evolution is certainly at the heart of Hirst's work. It is my intention to discuss certain aspects of Hirst's art and also where it stands in terms of art history in order to come to some kind of conclusion about why it has had such an impact on the late twentieth-century psyche. His art often works at a subliminal level, entering the consciousness and posing questions which have not been asked in such a relevant way in art for many years. Religion has not been given much importance in recent years, whereas in previous centuries it was almost the sole reason for making art. In this respect Hirst is a religious artist and in many ways he is a traditionalist who has links with much art from the past. I hope to be able to show here that, through his work, Hirst is responsible for a contemporary revival of religious themes which are tempered with the preoccupations of the present but can also be traced back to earlier centuries. However, I am not suggesting that religion is the main subject of his art, I am merely drawing attention to the fact that it is a crucial element of it. This needs to be acknowledged in order to fully understand Hirst's importance as an artist and the underlying reasons why his work occupies such a significant place in contemporary art.

CHAPTER 2 – A SHEEP IN SHEEP'S CLOTHING

It is possible to trace Hirst's use of animals as a subject matter back to early man, the earliest known figurative visual art reveals a preoccupation by the cave-men artists to depict the animal life around them. However, these pre-historic artists might have been more inclined to view the beasts as dinner rather than ponder over whether they were biologically related to them. Nevertheless, the animal interest in Hirst's art is as old as art itself, man and animal have existed side by side for an exceptionally long period of time.

Having noted this, however, I want to travel forward in time from these pre-historic days to the eighteenth-century, to a time just prior to Charles Darwin's theories, but still a time of tremendous intellectual and scientific endeavour. It was in this environment that the artist and poet William Blake produced his powerful and mystical religious writing and paintings which seemed to run contrary to the Age of Reason. Blake was a visionary who displayed a sense of religious fervour which was irrational, yet questioning. These, however, were not questioning in an empirical sense although he still sought answers. This is particularly noticeable in Blake's literature, for example, his poem *The Tyger* reveals an intense desire to understand God's creation (if it is God's creation) through the observation of animals. He writes –

Tyger! Tyger! burning bright

In the forests of the night,

What immortal hand or eye

Could frame thy fearful symmetry?

However, Blake's observation is not scientific or empirical, rather he engages with the unfathomable nature of other species questioning the relationship between man, animal and creator. The poem, like Hirst's art, is popular being taught line by line to school children it has somehow become a verbal icon in a similar way that many images become visual icons. One such visual icon of the present time is the shark piece by Hirst entitled *The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living* (Fig 2). When confronted with this piece it is difficult not to connect it with Blake's Tyger poem. Hirst has claimed on occasion that his titles are deliberately misleading, of the shark piece he has said that he hopes that "at first glance the shark will look alive". This betrays a contradiction of the title since, if the viewer were imagining the shark to be alive, the title would lose its relevance. What seems overwhelming about the piece is not so much the incomprehensibility of death (which is still an issue but, in some way a side-issue) as the incomprehensibility, from the perspective of a human being, of this creature. The piece could almost be renamed *The Impossibility of Being a Shark in the Mind of a Human Being*. This leads back to Blake's Tyger and who created him since Hirst's piece also delves into the mystery of creation. It seems an interesting coincidence that the species of shark used in the sculpture is a tiger shark. It is known that Hirst was particularly interested in a stuffed tiger which he allegedly spent hours staring at in the Leeds Natural History Museum (while an art student). Obviously, he would not have been able to use a real tiger since they are an endangered species so perhaps a tiger shark was a compromise which, nevertheless, has worked wonderfully. This might seem like speculation, and it is, I have no idea whether the shark piece was inspired by Blake's poem. However, I am aware of the personal response I have towards the piece. This is an inexplicable detachment about imagining myself as a shark and the alienness of such an experience. The resulting uneasiness is akin to standing in front of a painting by Francis Bacon. You know something unpleasant lurks there, it is like an itch you are unable to scratch, something psychologically disturbing in an inexplicable way. Blake vividly describes the alienness of such a wild and fearful creature and agonises over how it came into being. Was God responsible for its creation, he asks, "what immortal hand or eye could frame thy fearful symmetry"? In his shark piece Hirst echoes Blake's question and calls on the viewer to examine their relationship with animals (other species) in a manner that seems to reach people at a subconscious level. It seems that he has asked himself the same questions on many occasions and felt the same experience. His intention seems to be to communicate a feeling to others which is almost too remote to put into words. However, Blake managed to do quite a good job in his poem, he makes us aware that he is experiencing very human doubts, like Hirst he throws out questions such as "who made such an alien creature as you" and "am I related to you"? Before Charles Darwin's Theory of Evolution Blake was asking related questions and looking for answers "did he who made the lamb make you" he asks the Tyger. A century later those affected by Darwin's theory were taking the question a step further asking "did he who made the lamb make thee – and me"? It is almost as if Hirst is visually answering Blake's poetic question. By creating a shark piece (which I identify with Blake's tyger) by becoming the creator of tiger shark and a sheep piece *Away From the Flock* (Fig 3) Hirst seems to be answering in the affirmative by becoming the creator (or the re-creator) of both the savage, alien shark and the docile, familiar sheep he artfully evokes the different essential nature of each creature. Hirst is still

asking and seeking to provide answers to these questions today as we go into the twenty-first-century as are many others. It is an issue that will tax the intellect for generations to come.

Before considering modern opinions, however, it is important to look at those late-Victorians who were reeling from the effects of Darwin's research while also wrestling with their religious conviction in the light of the scientific challenge to their view of the creation of the universe. The Victorian age was a particularly religious period, or maybe pious would serve as a more accurate description. Whatever the case, it was difficult for those with strong religious beliefs to accept that God did not create the universe and it was, in fact, an accidental occurrence. Without going into too much historical detail, I would like to introduce the artistic group from this period known as The Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood into the discussion. The PRB laid great emphasis on getting as close to nature as possible. In their view, this meant painstakingly painting every minute detail of what they saw before them in order to achieve true communion with nature and the creator of that natural world, to them it was a religious quest. I would only liken Hirst to one of these painters William Holman Hunt (who remained a PRB to the end). Hunt stands out from the other artists associated with the PRB by virtue of the genuine intensity of his vision and religious conviction. Although he has often been derided (along with the others) as sentimental and over-zealous, he seems to be a prime example of a deep-thinking individual trying to come to terms with his faith in a changing world, a world which has witnessed the ground being pulled from under the feet of those who felt secure in their beliefs. How then does Holman Hunt relate to Hirst? Again I come back to Blake's lamb (which seems to him so much the antithesis of the tyger) which was a subject occasionally used by the PRB artists. However, the creatures portrayed in Ford Maddox Brown's *Pretty Baa Lambs* (Fig 4) bear little resemblance to the lambs Hunt portrays in his painting *The Hireling Shepherd* (Fig 5). Maddox Brown glosses over the doubts, presenting man in harmony with nature, these lambs are cute and fluffy; they are part of the happy family portrayed. In other words a quiet acceptance that man and animal are united through God. By contrast Hunt's lambs are out of control, they stray out of the field, eat green apples and throw up, in other words they are a problem. The human protagonists are shown integrated with the animals unlike Maddox Brown's figures who exude gentility and are physically separated from the animals. The shepherd and his wench in Hunt's painting come across as coarse and uncouth specimens of human kind, that is, they are closer in nature to the animals and the behaviour they display. Some interpretations of Hunt's painting suggest that he is using the animals to symbolise the state of affairs within The Church of England in that there was an increase in unorthodox behaviour, it has been viewed as an evangelical image. This may be true, however, the way in which Hunt has used the lambs as a metaphor for bad behaviour is interesting. This painting suggests that he has not come to terms with Darwin's findings, he is reacting against such ideas suggesting if man admits to being related to animals the consequences will be chaotic. That is, humans will be brought down to the level of the beasts in the field.



FIG 4



FIG 5

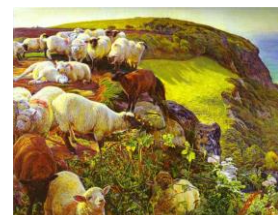


FIG 6

In a later painting *Strayed Sheep (Our English Coasts)* (Fig 6), Hunt portrays sheep, in a stunningly realistic style, wandering beside the cliffs on the coast of England. It is a strange painting which does not seem to relate to anything, Delacroix is said to have been astounded by Hunt's sheep and there is no doubt that they are extremely naturalistically rendered. However, they do not seem to appear as problematic in Hunt's view in this case and (apart from the demon-eyed black sheep) it is a rather bland and neutral statement which seems to suggest he is coming to terms with the animals. Nevertheless, it is in his superb painting *The Scapegoat* (Fig 7) that Hunt truly comes to terms with the human/animal relationship. He took great pains with his work in which he depicted an animal from a biblical tale whose fate was to be sent out into the wilderness as a sacrifice (a scapegoat as the title suggests). Hunt was almost obsessed by this image, he endured discomfort and danger in order to capture the beast in its authentic habitat beside the Dead Sea in the Holy Land. I find this painting moving since it seems to show Hunt eventually coming to terms with his internal struggle and thereby reconciling his reaction against the idea that man and animals are related with his faith and belief in the biblical version of creation. In *The Scapegoat* Hunt captures the beautifully pathetic relationship between humans and animals, how man has mistreated animals and how he has come to understand that all God's creations are deserving of respect. The face of the animal is one of the saddest images in the history of painting, the painting itself is an apology – its purpose is to vindicate the human race for regarding animals as inferior. "I am sorry" it seems to say, "I did not know that you were one of my own kind". Hunt's painting is significant in this respect because it retains his religious convictions yet, at the same time, it acknowledges scientific findings.

The sentiment of the sculpture by Hirst entitled *Away From the Flock* (mentioned previously), could be seen to embody the three stages of what I regard as Hunt's transition to acceptance of the evolution theory. The title of this piece echoes Hunt's *The Hireling Shepherd* since it presents the sheep as something apart, a different species, not human. It is also reminiscent of *Strayed Sheep (Our English Coasts)* in that it presents the animal in a bland, matter-of-fact way which neither disputes nor confirms anything regarding views on the human/animal relationship. However, at another level, Hirst's piece evokes the pathos of *The Scapegoat* and the viewer is encouraged to empathise with the beast. It is a fairly domestic, intimate sculpture when compared to the shark piece, for example. The comparison of the faces of the animals in *The Scapegoat* and *Away From the Flock* reveals an uncanny similarity in the expression of suffering in each, they also might be said to produce a similar response from the viewer, that of a combination of shame and absolution. However, Hirst's shark piece is quite a different tank of fish. Formally it is massive and awe-inspiring, there is a less discernible relationship between the animal and the spectator than in *Away From the Flock* whose size and format almost enables the viewer to pat the animal on the head. Not so much with the tiger shark, he is kept at a distance, intimate contact is not possible nor does it feel desirable or comfortable.

CHAPTER 3 – YOU'VE BEEN FRAMED

Science and religion have seriously wrestled with one another for prominence since the Enlightenment, the period during the eighteenth-century when civilised man began to examine, analyse, experiment with and categorise the universe. In his book *Modern Art and the Death of a Culture*, H R Rookmaaker claims that it was during this period that man became "caught in a box". He claims that science had previously been the way to gain insight into the structure of reality, into the way this world is built to find out the greatness of God's creation but now it had been elevated

by the rationalists into the tool to know all truths, the foundation of all knowledge. He believes that the world was no longer open to the idea of a transcendent God, it had become a closed box and man was caught in that box. Rookmaaker seems to be suggesting that religion had lost the contest. He goes on to suggest that by the time scientific methods had been applied to economics, sociology and psychology man had become further trapped in the box – a human specimen, “an object determined by natural laws to be studied by scientific methods – and nothing more”. Scientism, he claims, was almost a new religion, man was really no different from animals, plants and all things. And Darwin seemed to give the final proof by providing the mechanism of natural selection.



FIG 7



FIG 8



FIG 9

The reason I have felt it necessary to quote from Rookmaaker is because I believe that Hirst's art is concerned to a great extent with these issues. He is aware of modern man's preoccupation with science, experimentation and categorisation. His art often consists of objects arranged methodically in rows having been, by implication, analysed, categorised and labelled. Consider the rows of fish, geological samples, surgical instruments and medicines, for example. However, the most striking example of Hirst's engagement with the idea that science has taken over where religion left off are his large installations which are, in fact, boxes. These boxes contain various objects and sometimes living (and dead) creatures. Ironically, there is no overt human presence to be found in these boxes, however, this does not deny the implication that humanity is being observed. Hirst has created a complex set of installation/sculptures which not only deal with the domination of science and the consequence of such, but which also question where religion actually fits in to the equation. Nowhere could the idea of “man in a box” be better articulated than in two of Hirst's installations, one entitled *He Tried to Internalise Everything* (Fig 8) and the other, *The Acquired Inability to Escape* (Fig 9). In both of these works human presence is implied, it is the objects they leave behind in a Marie-Celeste type scenario which communicate the notion that someone has been there. These boxes have been described as glass-walled prisons, an abandoned desk and chair suggesting perhaps the imprisonment of a routine job, or merely a routine life? However, the uncompromising severity of the pieces produce a claustrophobic uneasiness which could have the viewer gasping for air if they were to take it seriously enough. Air is an important component of much of Hirst's work, in *He Tried to Internalise Everything* he has placed an oxygen mask on the top of a table, it has the look of a chemistry or physics lab with an oxygen tank placed on the floor. This installation is reminiscent of a painting from the eighteenth-century by Joseph Wright of Derby entitled *An Experiment on a Bird in an Air Pump* (Fig 10). However, unlike Hirst's depopulated version, Wright's image is well populated with spectators who are witnessing a cruel experiment on a live creature. Hirst's piece acts like the aftermath of the earlier work, it speaks obliquely about the suffocating effects of modern science, not only on the bird in the air pump but also on human beings themselves. The obvious lack of fresh air is significant since there is an implication that science not only imprisons humanity, it also endangers it, that is, that without essential life-giving air, humanity (and indeed all

species) will eventually cease to exist. However, this notion is enlarged by Hirst as both pieces subtly suggest that each individual has the choice (the power even) to transcend the suffocating effects of being “man in a box”. In *He Tried to Internalise Everything*, he has placed the oxygen mask and tank which indicates a way out, a mechanism to provide life-giving air – something that the poor bird in Wright’s painting is deprived of.



FIG 10



FIG 11



FIG 12

Another installation *The Asthmatic’s Escaped II* (Fig 11) is a particularly intriguing piece since it brings religion in to the equation by subtly reworking Christ’s resurrection combining ideas of science and theology. This has the effect of opening up new avenues of investigation and prompting the question – would humanities understanding of Christianity have been different if Jesus’ return from the grave had been captured on film? *The Asthmatic’s Escaped II* is a diptych taking the form of two glass and steel cases (or vitrines or boxes). On one side is a pile of discarded clothes, dirty trainers and an asthma inhaler, on the other is a hi-tech camera paced on a tripod and a small filing cabinet on which rests tea and biscuits. What seems to be happening here (by implication) is the resurrection of Christ being observed by a camera which has been placed on a time-lapse setting in order not to miss what might occur. The pile of clothes have been said to symbolise poverty and the plight of the victim, the inhaler is thought to show the work’s concern over the suffering of asthmatics (especially in the light of increasing air pollution). I do not dispute this analysis, however, the pile of clothes could equally be viewed as those garments discarded by Christ at the time of his alleged resurrection and the asthma inhaler again brings in the theme of air, breathing and the thin line between life and death. The inhaler is an ingenious method of suggesting that Christ might have died and then come back to life again in the way (thankfully usually less fatally) an asthmatic regains breath after an attack. At the other end of the vitrine the camera watches automatically detached and scientifically aloof, it is implied that if anything has happened, the camera will have recorded it. The filing cabinet, tea and biscuits represent the idea of a human presence being there although not visible (especially the scientists), these non-representational people are engaged in a collective waiting game, they wait patiently for the moment when the mysterious event can be captured then filed away and compartmentalised like any other scientific finding. This installation is for the X-Files generation, it hints at the possibility of a mysterious, inexplicable occurrence but balances this with a rational counterweight which neither believes nor disbelieves. It is a Dana Scully versus Fox Mulder visual game, Scully representing rational science on the one hand and Mulder open to the possibility of the unknown, scientifically, unable to be categorised on the other. Hirst has openly said that the piece was inspired by a pile of old discarded clothes he came across one day that struck him as eerie, and he wondered if their owner might have “gone to heaven”.

Hirst has taken the idea of science as a tool to explain all only this time it is being used to witness a supernatural occurrence. He has turned the scientific spotlight on religion which is a neat trick and one that has been needed in art (and in general) for a long time. Francis Bacon scrutinises religion in a similar way when he places Popes in cages in his paintings, however, Bacon's Popes collapse under the strain of scrutiny, they begin to lose their composure along with their actual substance. For example, Bacon's *Head VI* (12) shows a Pope starting to dematerialise from the top of the head downward. This suggests that Bacon saw no future for Christianity (or at least Catholicism) since its main spokesman was soon to become redundant, invisible or, at other times, screaming and inarticulate. This is not the case with Hirst's examination of religion, his is more open-ended, the pile of clothes remain evident and visible, the film in the camera waits to be processed and Hirst (along with humankind) waits to see what develops.

CHAPTER 4 – LORD OF THE FLIES

The Asthmatic Escaped is not the only piece of work to rework and, to some extent, reinvent religious themes. For example, *Mother and Child Divided* (Fig 13), a real dead cow and its calf split in half with each half displayed in tanks of formaldehyde (the space between them is big enough to walk through) could be described as an animal Pieta. The gap between the two halves of the preserved animals becomes a temple-like spiritual space and, undoubtedly, the spectator is moved by the pathos of what surrounds them. And, why not translate the Pieta with animals at the centre of it? Traditionally, Christian art has given animals the role of supporting actors (perhaps Holman Hunt's *The Scapegoat* mentioned in an earlier chapter is one of the few works that put the animal to the forefront). However, examples of this abound in Christian art, consider the mule on which the Virgin Mary rode into Bethlehem on and the cattle and sheep in the stable where Christ was born. The animals have been employed as symbols and have certainly been included in the iconography, however, they have rarely (if ever) been given centre-stage in such a way as is evident in *Mother and Child Divided*. It has a dignity which I can only relate to a Pieta; comparing it with Michelangelo's sculpture of the *Pieta* (Fig 14) in Rome it holds its own completely. It is almost more moving since animals are not usually portrayed on such an emotional level as loving and suffering parents.



FIG 13



FIG 14

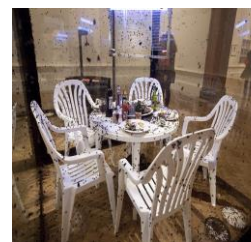


FIG 15

The comparison between the way humans and animals behave and exist in the world is a theme which appears frequently in Hirst's work. He likes to examine and comment upon man's often dismissive attitude towards other species. Mankind has placed himself on a superior level to animals, therefore, it is human beings who are important, who require (and deserve) to be treated humanely, who are the only species capable of emotion and suffering. Hirst dismisses this idea time

and again as witnessed in *Mother and Child Divided* (and also in *Away From the Flock*). Two separate and seemingly unconnected installations help to further illustrate my point. Again, these pieces engage with religion and science, they comment on the way in which the universe is perceived through these separate perspectives. The two sculptures/installations in question are *Let's Eat Outdoors Today* (Fig 15) and *A Thousand Years* (Fig 16), both pieces use the familiar format of the glass and steel case (or vitrine). *Let's Eat Out Today* takes the form of a diptych, on one side Hirst has placed some plastic chairs, a table with food and wine and some soggy serviettes. On the other side of the case he has installed an object which has been described as an oversized barbeque, this has a cruel look about it like an instrument of torture. Continuing with my theory that Hirst sometimes reworks religious iconography, this piece brings to mind the connected events of *The Last Supper* and *The Crucifixion*. As previously suggested, these empty tableaux of Hirst's exude the feeling that they have been inhabited previously at some point. Obviously, if food has been consumed someone must have been around to consume it. Although it is not exact in detail, notably there are not enough chairs, there are small clues which hint that *The Last Supper* is being referred to, for example, the liquid soaked napkins. I interpret these as alluding to the oil soaked sop that Christ is said to have given to Judas. The other case containing the strange torture like contraption must be included for a reason and that reason I interpret as the need to substitute a replacement for the cross – the instrument of Christ's torture and death. However, this again is not a traditional motif, Hirst has substituted the crucifix with this barbeque-like object which looks like a man-sized insect zapper. His piece *A Thousand Years* is the other piece I want to discuss at this point. Often described as a mini-eco system, *A Thousand Years* consists of maggots at one end of the vitrine which hatch as flies, at the other end is a rotting cow's head and in between the two is the aforementioned normal-sized insect zapper. The religious dimension is less evident, however, it does seem related to *Let's Eat Out Today* by having flies being crucified (by implication) before they even reach the supper. Of course, some of the flies make it to the other side and this fact highlights the notion of the survival of the fittest, or the chance element of the survival aspect of existence extremely aptly. These two pieces seem to draw attention to the way humans have reacted to the ruthlessness of nature and how they have, by virtue of man's superiority, created one moral ethic for the human species and another for animals, birds, insects and aquatic creatures, in other words those species that are not human. The usual emotional response to the crucifixion of Jesus is one of sadness, despair and horror at the thought of another human being having to endure such inhuman treatment at the hands of his fellow man. Hundreds of years of religious art has brushed and sculpted tirelessly to illustrate the tremendous impact of such behaviour and preach how wrong mankind was to let this happen. Yet, there has been little said in religious art about what happens constantly to animals at the hands of humans not to mention the cruelty of nature itself which indiscriminately executes, disposes of and obliterates living things at random. Although Darwin studied and wrote about the biological origins of the universe and all its inhabitants, he is known to have been plagued by religious doubts (he was a Victorian after all). In a letter written in 1860 he defended his research claiming that he found it hard to believe that an omnipotent God could have been responsible for designing such a creature as the Ichneumonidae wasp which lays its eggs inside live caterpillars. The wasp larva then feeds on the host caterpillar eventually killing it. Darwin's doubts are understandable and his example graphically illustrates the cruel ways of nature. Significantly, however, he also reveals that his opinion on the subject of creation and evolution had not been fully resolved claiming, "I feel that the whole subject is too profound for human intellect". Hirst seems to agree with Darwin's comments since no discernible answer can be reached from engaging with his work. His art is more a statement than a response or verdict, he comments (by implication) on the issues in an often oblique way but does not appear to resolve them – possibly because, like everyone else, he is trying to work them out for himself. In *Let's Eat Outdoors Today* and *A Thousand Years* he is considering (and asking the

viewer to consider) why is it that Christian theology depends largely on rejecting man's inhumanity towards man, yet nature remains mercilessly cruel and human beings often just as cruel, especially towards other species.



FIG 16

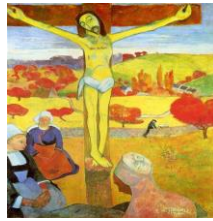


FIG 17



FIG 18

CHAPTER 5 – DEEPENING THE GAME

Hirst's desire to draw attention to the discrepancy between religious teaching and science could be explained by his upbringing and aspects of his experiences and character during his formative years. It is not my intention to play the role of amateur psychologist here, however, it helps to be aware of the mind behind the work when trying to interpret it. It is known that Hirst has been significantly influenced by his mother who has been described as a "lapsed Roman Catholic". However, that Catholic upbringing seems to have had an effect on Hirst, it has left its mark as can be seen from his reworking of *The Resurrection* and *The Last Supper* (as I interpret them). Nevertheless, his religiousness seems to have combined with an acute interest in natural science which has resulted in a strange mix of ideas in his art. When he was a young boy his mother told him it was wrong to kill living things, he was troubled about this and wondered "well, what if I stand on an ant or something"? This youthful dilemma has stayed with him into adulthood and has developed in his art almost as if he is trying to come to terms with the seemingly incompatible forces of religion, nature and science himself. This is possibly why his art has struck a chord in contemporary society since it is not only Hirst that is trying to make sense of the situation – it is everyone. Twentieth-century man is looking for an answer, or at least they are looking to engage with the questions which are the legacy of post-Enlightenment, post-Darwinian and post-Existentialist life. Art has not really been interested in these questions for the last one hundred years or so. It would seem only now as the old millennium is behind us that art has begun to wrestle with the difficult task of bringing the separate strands of religion, science and nature together. Hirst is a master in this genre, mostly so because his work is, to a great extent, subliminal in its effect (it is no accident that he was first noticed by Saatchi, the advertising supremo and doyen of subliminal manipulation).

I have previously discussed the effect of Darwin's Theory of Evolution and Natural Selection on the art of late-Victorian artists, William Holman Hunt in particular. This was a watershed period in the history of religious art since, after this time, overt religiousness almost disappeared, religion as subject matter no longer attracted artists. This is not to say that art was not spiritual, on the contrary, it was almost more spiritual but not in an obvious religious way. It is not possible to give a thorough account of late-nineteenth and twentieth-century art in a short essay such as this,

however, it is important to mention some of the reasons why religion was not an obvious ingredient within modern visual imagery especially after the turn of the century. As noted already, Darwin played an integral part in the situation, his findings not only affected art but had reverberations throughout all of society. However, specifically significant in art terms was the emergence of new modes of formal expression such as Impressionism, Symbolism, Expressionism, Cubism and Abstraction to name but a few. This caused such an upheaval in visual representation that subject matter seemed to become less of an issue as the means of expression became more crucial, for example, Paul Gauguin's painting *Yellow Christ* (Fig 17) is more notable for the vivid colouring than for the subject matter. As well as this, the first half of the twentieth-century witnessed two World Wars within fifty years and this also affected the visual arts. Early twentieth-century British artists, for the most part, steered clear of conspicuously religious themes in their work. A noticeable exception is Stanley Spencer who introduced religion into a series of wall paintings or frescoes which can be found in the Sandham Memorial Chapel in Burghclere. The centrepiece of the piece entitled *The Resurrection of the Soldiers* (Fig 18) depicts Spencer's fellow soldiers rising from their graves and returning the crosses to Christ. Spencer painted the resurrection theme repeatedly, he also painted other biblical scenes which were almost always set in the village of Cookham where he was born and lived most of his life. Although Spencer's work is moving it is also fairly introverted since it deals with his personal experience of religion, Spencer himself often makes an appearance within his paintings. Hirst, on the other hand expands the parameters of experience, he is almost the antithesis of Spencer since he is decidedly detached from his work, he is more an impartial observer than a participant. Other British twentieth-century artists to express an interest in religion include David Bomberg, Peter Lanyon and Alan Davie. Bomberg's *Hear, O Israel!* (Fig 19), Lanyon's *St Jude* (Fig 20) and *Altar of the Blue Diamond* (Fig 21) by Davie all display religious overtones. However, as with Gauguin's *Yellow Christ*, those paintings seem more notable for their stylistic qualities than their subject matter; that is, the painterly emphasis in each of these works detracts from the content and, although they touch on religion, the impact seems lost amongst the paint.



FIG 19



FIG 20



FIG 21

Later in the twentieth-century artist duo Gilbert and George dally with religion in a piece such as *Prick Ass*, for example, a crucifix is placed in a central position among images of social deprivation and decay. Here, as in the other examples mentioned, religion is narrowed down to a specific rather than a universal phenomenon. Spencer's religion is personal, Bomberg's, Lanyon's and Davies religion is formal and Gilbert and George's religion is sociological. Apart from Hirst, another British artist in the twentieth-century to engage with religion on a more significantly universal level is Francis Bacon who is one of Hirst's few acknowledged influences. Bacon widened the frame of reference in his paintings of screaming, dematerialising Popes (which have already been mentioned). These paintings are significant in the sense that they do not question the continuing role of religion. However, Bacon's images leave the viewer in no doubt of the artist's own opinion on the subject,

religion (or at least Catholicism) holds no mystery for Bacon. It is a phenomenon which is disappearing before the eyes of twentieth-century mankind. Hirst's art is sometimes bleak like Bacon's, however, he manages to overcome total existentialism because there is mystery in his work, a mystery which hints at the idea there might be something more. Bacon was a master of his art and a man of his time, Hirst is the same but time has moved on and a different approach is called for. Bacon once prophetically spoke about his art saying,

“Man now realises that he is an accident, that he is a completely futile being, that he has to play the game without reason. I think that even when Velasquez was painting, even when Rembrandt was painting, they were still, whatever their attitude to life, slightly conditioned by certain types of religious possibilities, which man now, you could say has had cancelled out for him. Man now can only attempt to beguile himself for time by prolonging his life – by buying a kind of immortality through the doctors. You see, painting has become a game – a game by which man detracts himself. And you may say that it has always been like that, but now it's entirely a game. What is fascinating is that it's going to become much more difficult for the artist, because he must really deepen the game to be any good at all, so that he can make life a bit more exciting”

Bacon almost anticipates here the kind of artists that would emerge towards the end of the twentieth-century and Hirst is just the kind of artist Bacon is talking about. The reason why Hirst is so relevant is because he has deepened the game and, in a way, in order to deepen the game he has had to refer back to that which Bacon claims Velasquez and Rembrandt expressed in their art – that is, an awareness of certain types of religious possibilities. Religious possibilities are in evidence in much of Hirst's art, however, in his work religion becomes just one component in a bigger game which also includes other players such as science and nature. Two examples of his work which help to illustrate the complexity and depth of his art are two paintings with butterflies *I Feel Love* (Fig 22) and *I Love Love*. These paintings have been interpreted as memento mori images (the butterflies symbolising the transient nature of life), also, Hirst's ability to recognise the poetic beauty of this has often been pointed out. This is not an inaccurate reading of these paintings, however, (as discussed at the start of this essay), there is more to Hirst's work than memento mori albeit this is one important aspect of it. From my point of view, Hirst's art can operate on varying levels and another reading of the two butterfly paintings could include religious possibilities which are subliminal, yet equally important. I see these butterfly paintings as reworkings of the crucifixion theme, again using species other than human (as in the cow Pieta) as the subject of the work. Hirst has scattered the many hued insects about the canvas, they look decorative at first sight, however, if they are studied individually, the fact that they are pinned down in an inhuman way cannot be escaped. This is reminiscent of images of butterflies kept in rows in glass cases by collectors, cruelly pinned by their wings, which could be likened to Christ nailed by his hands and feet to the cross. Again, it seems that Hirst is drawing attention to the discrepancy between science and religion, whereby natural history condones this treatment of insects, but religion condemns the same kind of treatment towards humans. Therefore, the butterfly paintings could be described as literally painted versions of butterfly crucifixions.



FIG 22

However, Hirst adds even more excitement to the game by giving the butterfly paintings enigmatic titles which prompts the question “why is one about feeling and one about loving”? Both paintings, according to the titles are about love and, just as the titles differ so do the colours. I Feel Love is a pale green whereas I Love Love is a candy pink colour. Again, Hirst is deepening the game, he is inviting the viewer to question their emotions, to ask themselves “is there a difference between feeling love and loving love and, if so, what is it”? The viewer might also wonder what the different colours signify, for example, is green better for expressing feeling and pink more appropriate to express loving? Love is an important aspect of religion in general and Christianity in particular and these two paintings involve themselves with examining love. Therefore, by making subtle distinctions about the way love can operate, in effect, they question the whole concept of love. Since love is something which is beyond the scope of science, something which is experienced but not measurable as such, Hirst could be raising the important point that science does not have all the answers. Again, however, it is not clear cut, he could also be pointing out the futility of love since love might not exist. By drawing attention to the tentative distinctions of feeling and loving he is possibly dismissing them altogether as nothing but emotions of the imagination? This latter idea coupled with the fragility of the material substance of the butterflies is a powerful statement which is as intense as Bacon’s existentialist imagery. The ingredient that sets them apart, however, is the religious possibilities evident in Hirst’s work. Whatever the message, the fact that religion once again plays a positive role within the imagery means that it is not being excluded from the artist’s world view. As Bacon predicted, artist in the future would have to deepen the game and that is what Hirst has done. That is why his art has made such an impact on his late-twentieth/early-twenty-first-century audience.

CHAPTER SIX – THE BIG X FILE

It is important to consider the type of audience who are engaging with the art being produced at this time, the end of the twentieth-century. Bacon’s view suggests a godless human condition which has rejected religion as a valid option, which is existentialist in nature and which needs to distract itself from time to time with art. However, it should be noted that he was speaking from an intellectual standpoint, there is no evidence to prove that the majority of society ever stopped believing in something. Certainly, secularity became more evident during the middle decades of the twentieth-century, but the decline in religion was essentially a decline in institutionalised religion, that is, the church became a venue for occasional visits at religious festivals such as Christmas and Easter or for life cycle rituals. However, the religion of what is termed the “silent majority” (those who have beliefs but do not regularly attend church or are members of religious groups) should still be taken into account. This vast group of believers were around when Bacon made his comments and they are still very much in evidence today. Fairly recent research shows that direct religious experience is common among people in Britain regardless of their conventional religious beliefs. Superstition and supernatural belief is still strong even in urban areas and alleged paranormal encounters are gaining in popularity. From this information it would seem that society has not given up on religion as Bacon suggests, on the contrary new and diverse practices are emerging ; whilst folk religion is in the decline, new religious movements are increasing. Indeed, since the middle of the twentieth-century Britain has become a multi-faith society. This is the audience which is consuming the art of the present time, an audience which relishes mystery and the unexplained, an audience which has, to some extent, grown tired of scientific explanations as an answer to all questions and is looking for something beyond. In a period when television programmes such as The X-Files are so popular it is

clear that, whilst science is still respected, mystery, magic and the scientifically unfathomable (or the unexplained) aspects of life are increasingly becoming a collective preoccupation within a civilised, rational and post-technological society.

Science versus religion is a hot issue in present times and the implications involved are not going to go away in the foreseeable future. Consider the anti-evolution stance in some parts of the USA, for example, attempts by the state of Tennessee to ban the teaching of Darwin's evolution theory in schools. Evidently, therefore, Christian theology in some quarters are unable to come to terms with this widely recognised scientific data. Although it could be argued that this is an isolated case, the fact remains that science and religion are balanced in a tense relationship with one another. Hirst's art addresses these issues and his audience is ripe to engage with such ideas as placing animal suffering in the forefront of his art, relating their suffering to human suffering and bestowing on butterflies, cattle and sheep the reverence usually reserved for divinities and holy figures. He is reminding the viewer of the Sunday school hymn which goes "all things bright and beautiful, all creatures great and small. All things wise and wonderful, the lord God made them all". His audience need to be reminded of this, indeed they want to be reminded.

Many people whether believers or atheists are influenced and conditioned by the biblical story of creation as told in Genesis. In her book *Primal Myths*, Barbara Sproul comments that

"Most westerners, whether or not they are practicing Jews or Christians, still show themselves to be heirs of this tradition by holding views that people are sacred, the creatures of God. Declared unbelievers often dispose of the frankly religious language of this association by renouncing God, yet even they still cherish the *consequences* of the myth's claim and affirm that people have undeniable rights *as if they were created by God*. And further consider the beliefs that human beings are superior to all other creatures and are properly set above the rest of the physical world by intelligence and spirit with obligation to govern it - these beliefs are still current and very powerful"

The question is, have these beliefs led to abuse and, as suggested in Chapter 4, the tendency to apply one moral ethic to humans and another less favourable one towards other species? In his work Hirst is tackling the difficult job of putting religion back into art in a relevant, and efficiently communicated manner. In order to efficiently communicate these complex issues he seems to have felt the need to be obscure at times. He is challenging the preconceived conditioning of western theology, however, not in an obvious way but rather he provides an oblique, subliminal encounter for the viewer which stays with them and perhaps subconsciously alters and reconditions their way of thinking. As previously mentioned, the advertising guru Charles Saatchi was largely responsible for bringing his art to the attention of a wider audience. It would then seem that the methods used by advertisers to persuade an audience to accept a point of view has been instrumental in the creation of art for a society deeply immersed in mass-media information gathering.

Hirst is offering no answers as such (apart from the answers the viewers are able to supply for themselves). His titles sometimes ironically reflect this, for example, *No God and Creation Explained*, these titles seem to highlight his veiled cynicism, hinting that he regards it as flippant, even unacceptable to pretend that such heavyweight matters can be glibly (and unequivocally) dealt with in a two word quip. His work deals with the total complexity of the universe and the systems which govern it, mixing aspects of religion, science and nature together in an intoxicating cocktail which

brings mystery and excitement back into art (this is what Bacon meant by “deepening the game”). Hirst once remarked that he considers his greatest work of art to be his son (quoted in his Turner Prize speech in 1995). A collaborative piece, the creation of a new being is something which will always retain an unmeasurable sense of wonder and mystery even though it can be biologically explained. Therefore, it seems from his statement, that Hirst’s priority in his art is that of creation both with a small and a large C. He is not only interested in birth and death, he is concerned with the bits before, after and in between. He enters enthusiastically into the game and his work fills a void in the contemporary collective psyche which is still spiritually sustaining and nourishing even if it provides no real answers. At the beginning of this essay I compared Hirst to Protagoras the ancient Greek Sophist philosopher. Sophists have received a bad name over the centuries being branded as frauds and charlatans, therefore, some might feel that my comparison is an apt one and Hirst’s detractors might accuse him of the same. Even some of those critics who admire his work wonder where he can go next, how he can continue to produce innovation in his art, feeling that he will become unstuck at some point. This, in my view, indicates a misunderstanding of his work since, although often regarded as avant-garde (which he is), Hirst is also a traditional artist. He merely continues to explore ways of expressing his inherent curiosity, his medium might seem shocking to some, however, the shock value is not the element which ultimately survives in great art, it is something deeper and more enduring which weathers the centuries. Hirst’s work exhibits this lasting quality and I hope this essay provides some insight as to why this is. Mainly it is due to his search for the truth or at least for answers, this is a timeless pursuit which has occupied intellects in past ages and will continue to do so in future times. In the fifth-century BC Protagoras was preoccupied with the same concerns as Hirst at the end of the twentieth-century. However, far from being fraudsters, they are both honest enough to admit that they are unlikely to find the answers in the course of one lifetime.

The End

IMAGES – FIGURES 1 -22

1 Memento Mori painting

2 The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living – Damien Hirst (1991)

3 Away From the Flock – Damien Hirst (1994)

4 The Pretty Baa-Lambs – Ford Maddox Brown (1851)

5 The Hireling Shepherd - William Holman Hunt (1851)

6 Our English Coasts (Strayed Sheep) – William Holman Hunt (1852)

7 The Scapegoat – William Holman Hunt (1854-1856)

8 He Tried to Internalise Everything – Damien Hirst (1992-1994)

9 The Acquired Inability to Escape – Damien Hirst (1991)

10 An Experiment on a Bird in an Air Pump – Joseph Wright of Derby (1760’s)

11 The Asthmatic Escaped II – Damien Hirst (1992)

- 12 Head VI – Francis Bacon (1949)
- 13 Mother and Child Divided – Damien Hirst (1993)
- 14 Pieta – Michelangelo Buonarroti (1498-1499)
- 15 Let's Eat Outdoors Today – Damien Hirst (1990-1991)
- 16 A Thousand Years – Damien Hirst (1990)
- 17 Yellow Christ – Paul Gauguin (1889)
- 18 The Resurrection of the Soldiers – Stanley Spencer (1929)
- 19 Hear, O Israel! – David Bomberg (1955)
- 20 Study for St Just – Peter Lanyon (1952)
- 21 Alter of the Blue Diamond – Alan Davie (1950's)
- 22 I Feel Love – Damien Hirst (1990's)