

# Holy cow - again



First UK show in eight years: Damien Hirst

By [Nick Hackworth](#) [Evening Standard](#) | 09 September 2003



**D**amien Hirst: Romance in the Age of Uncertainty, White Cube, N1

He is the most famous artist of our age and will be remembered, whether we like it or not, long after we are all dead. Today sees the opening of his first London solo show of new work since 1995.

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1

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2

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So, predictably, given our collective, quiet but fervent hope for the imminent failure of all famous people, everywhere, what everyone wants to know is: "Has Hirst lost it?" The answer is that the new work exhibits no serious falling-off in quality - but equally no innovation and far more importantly, no great stride forward in quality. Certainly none of it matches the relatively restrained iconic quality of the shark and cloven cows with which he made his name in the early and mid Nineties.

What we have is business as usual for Hirst. In typically hit-and-miss fashion he continues to tackle the Serious Issues of Life, his tone, as ever, paradoxically both charmingly naive and laddishly jocular. All of it, of course, is packaged in his grim and crudely spectacular chainsaw-meets-hospital-ward aesthetic - so here again are cows' heads, vitrines full of formaldehyde and medicine cabinets.

Hirst's much noted obsession with death is matched in this exhibition by a new-found interest in Christianity. This addition to his mental checklist of "subjects to make art about" has surprised some, but shouldn't have done. His work has almost exclusively consisted of the creation or manipulation of symbols and supposedly significant visual metaphors, many of them painfully simple. Pills represent our penchant for chemical oblivion, cigarettes the brevity of life, medical equipment the contemporary denial of death. So the plunder of a culture as visually rich in symbolism as Christianity must have been irresistible.

That much is clear from the centrepiece of this show, a massive installation of two interrelated works, both of which depict the 12 apostles and Christ. One is a series of medicine cabinets representing Jesus and the apostles, each one modified to the particular fate and iconography of the subject. St Peter, keeper of the keys of the gates of heaven, has a set of car keys in his cabinet; St Andrew's cabinet plus contents is upside-down, playing on his inverted crucifixion; and Judas's cabinet is black, stuffed with money and smeared with real, stinking blood. Christ's ascension, in a good visual joke, is shown by the installation of glass shelves holding pristine medical receptacles above an empty and opened cabinet. The other piece has each of the divine *dramatis personae* incarnate as severed cows' heads contained in closefitting, formaldehyde-filled vitrines, placed on the floor facing their respective saintly cupboards.

Naff and over-the-top the work might be, but it is visually arresting and informed, one suspects, by a strong degree of sincerity. In similar fashion, Hirst, or St Damien of Hoxton as he must henceforth be known, deals with Death in a series called *The Cancer Chronicles*, 13 canvases covered with hundreds of thousands of flies trapped beneath thick coats of resin.

Each one is named after a disease - such as Syphilis, Malaria, Ebola, Meningitis - in a strategy more hilarious than horrifying. That sense of hilarity is only heightened by an accompanying set of poems by Hirst, also called *The Cancer Chronicles*, unwisely published in the exhibition catalogue. Unwise, for in word, unlike in image, Hirst's crassness cannot be rescued by his aesthetic talent. So the reader is left to enjoy literary nuggets such as "There's a rumour they found a tumour", while a passage on the theme of "Complete destruction, treason/and entropic certainty" concludes with the terrifying metaphor of "The collapse of the gingerbread house".

Though poetry is one creative avenue in which he should perform a handbrake turn and exit as swiftly as possible, his art continues to deserve attention. It is often visually powerful, often funny, sometimes deliberately, sometimes not, and it is informed by the right artistic instincts. Unlike the strand of contemporary art that is selfreferential to the point of meaninglessness, his is at least guided by a concern for aesthetics and a desire to communicate about subjects that many can engage with. So it will be rightly said of St Damien that, though he did not dine at the highest intellectual table, and though his holy works were not all equally good, his heart was in the right place.

- *Romance in the Age of Uncertainty opens today and runs until 19 October. Information: 020 7930 5373.*