

# A Reluctant Defense of Damien Hirst's "Spot Painting" Spectacular

by Ben Davis

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"I Spot DH" pins

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If [Damien Hirst](#) didn't exist, we would have to invent him. In some ways, I think we have invented him. He has taken on fantastic proportions as a villain in many people's minds. In smart company these days, admitting that you actually liked [Damien Hirst](#) would be something like saying that you appreciated the painting of Thomas Kinkade, or the cinematic oeuvre of Michael Bay, or the literary stylings of Tucker Max — or, really, some kind of hydra-headed combination of the three, a kitschy, blockbuster-chasing frat boy monster.

But give the guy credit: His current "Complete Spot Painting" stunt at Gagosian gallery has inspired the most magnificent and readable outpouring of art hate of recent memory. Dan Fox[derided](#) the experience of the show as being "like eating a vanilla ice-cream in a branch of Gap stocked with a particularly beige seasonal clothing range"; Christian Viveros-Faune [wrote](#) a blistering fake obit, dubbing him the "the art world's huckster laureate." My favorite takedown, and one of the most-

quoted, is by [the adroit and acidic Will Brand](#), written *before the show even opened*: "These spots reflect nothing about how we live, see, or think, they're just some weird meme for the impossibly rich that nobody knows how to stop."

To me, there's a kind of theatrical character to a lot of the street-level Hirst opprobrium. It's almost as if denouncing him as a phony is required to prove one's own authenticity. To be clear, I'm not going to offer a full-on endorsement of the artist. I think people hate the guy because they hate venality, ego, and excess — all things that I hate too. I'm just not sure that all of the attacks on his spot show really reckon with the art, and I sometimes get the feeling that people are critically demolishing the baby along with the bath water.

Hirst has a long history of clouding commentators' thinking, his celebrity forming a kind of force field that prevents people from dealing with the particulars of what he does. In the current case, Hirst's Gagosian spot spectacular has come under fire because he hasn't actually painted all of the works in it. [David Hockney](#) and [Yayoi Kusama](#) have both scored points off of Hirst recently, needling him in the media about not personally painting his work. But, come on, we all know that these are cheap shots. Some artists make their work by hand, some don't. I'd think that 90 years after Laszlo Maholy-Nagy phoned instructions for a painting into a factory we wouldn't have to debate this point. (You know who else had his assistants paint much of his work? *Rubens*.)

The spot paintings are also derided for being both [purely decorative](#) and for [being boring](#), even though they are not meant to be purely decorative and in fact are deliberately boring, or at least deliberately similar. The near sameness of the paintings is part of their concept — they are theatrically similar, as suggested by the [performance](#) Hirst staged when he had identical twins take up stations beneath two of the paintings in the Tate's "Pop Life" show. Criticizing Hirst's spot paintings for being affectless is like criticizing the Impressionists for being brushy, or the Fauves for using intense color, or the Surrealists for being irrational, or... you get the point.

Death, as everyone knows, is Hirst's theme. Sometimes it is literal death, as in the pickled animals or the pills or the skull imagery. Sometimes, however, it is a more metaphorical death, the hollowing out of subjectivity. This is the case with the spin and the spot paintings. In all cases, the point is that something dead confronts you.

When his art works, it is powered by the tension between mortification and a spark of aesthetic energy that seems to exist both in spite of and as a kind of dark side effect of it.

I'm not crazy. You won't see me wearing one of those "I [SPOT] DH" pins they are selling at Gagosian. I like some of his ideas (the shark and the pills). A lot of his recent output has been dreadful. "For the Love of God" — that's the diamond-covered skull — is titled after [what his mom said](#) when he told her the idea, and you have to agree with the sentiment. "The Golden Calf," a preserved animal with a golden halo and hooves, is a real stinker, its moronic bling canceling out the pseudo-scientific reserve that makes his more famous animal displays spooky.

Where does that leave the spots? As a body of work, Hirst's spot paintings are neither early nor late. One of his very first serious works, for the [DIY "Freeze" show in London's Docklands](#) that he used to bootstrap himself to fame, was a spot painting, applied directly to the wall. As individual compositions, the spots in the various Gagosian shows are a mixed bag. Some are pompous monstrosities or mere curiosities. Some I actually think are kind of good paintings, with a deadpan cool that I find appealing. But as a total project, the "Global Spot Show" experiment actually makes a kind of sense. Seeing the works in depth emphasizes that they are basically about individuality — a nearly annihilated individuality — sparking against the background of precise and merciless repetition.

The canvasses are deliberately individual enough to count as paintings but also deliberately impersonal enough to edge on being wallpaper. The sprawling, pan-continental presentation emphasizes that what Hirst is doing is not that dissimilar to French conceptualist [Daniel Buren](#). Inspired by the striped patterns on awnings, Buren created installations and canvasses using stripes, each deliberately seeming to be a fragment cut from one vast fabric.

I'm not going to argue that anybody has to like this stuff. All I want to insist upon is this: There are two quite different ways to approach Hirst that have to be separated out. You can assert that he is a total fraud and always has been, or you can say that he is an at least semi-talented artist working in a contemporary idiom, who's let his best impulses be crushed by wealth and fame. I take the second approach. The first is either the terrain of people who hate contemporary art in general ("he doesn't even paint his own works!"), or, more subtly, a way of consigning Hirst to some

convenient realm that doesn't relate to any of the stuff we actually like, thereby insulating us from really having to reckon with what the whole phenomenon actually means. Because if you assume that Hirst was always corrupt and never corrupted, you can also comfort yourself by assuming that authenticity is a given. But it's actually something that you have to fight for, and if I had to take something useful away from this show, it would be that lesson.

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