

HIRST MCA DENVER WORK LIVES UP TO HYPE

By Mary Voelz Chandler

To the 3 zillion or more words written over the past several months about British artist Damien Hirst, let's add a few hundred more.

That's because there really is something to write about, in this case an installation of his work just opened at MCA DENVER. Rather than merely speculate about whether Hirst is more showman than artist or angst over the recent "Beautiful Inside My Head Forever" auction that netted him a cool \$172 million (on \$201 million in sales) or fret over the State of Contemporary Art As We Know It, let's allow the objects in the Large Works Gallery at MCA DENVER to answer more legitimate questions: Is there meaning and beauty in this work, and will it hold its power in years to come?

But first, it has to be said: The press has had a field day with Hirst for years since he emerged as a leader of the Young British Artists, or YBA's, for his bad-boy reputation and his innovative approaches to making art and, yes, selling it.

The most recent flood of coverage has been pinned to the auction last month of 223 works that skirted his gallery representation. Hirst and Sotheby's put on a show and sold a lot of art. This engendered reportage and commentary lusty enough to be found on the sports pages, where no one is shy about talking about money. Anyone who thinks art and commerce are strangers is living in a fantasy world.

This also was publicity you cannot buy - especially when (you pick the word: *caustic* or *grumpy*) critic Robert Hughes rained fire all over not just the sale, but the artist. Yes, Hirst has a platoon of studio assistants (as artists have had for centuries, though not perhaps a platoon). Yes, Hirst lived large during the 1990s, hardly news and really not relevant when his work is the issue at hand.

The most unusual - and important - thing to remember about Hirst is that his work is quite affecting, addressing, as it does, themes of life and death, transience and mortality. It is art fueled by the conceptual as much as by art historical references, with a strong scent of Pop.

So a trip to MCA DENVER to see these four works - one is brand new - may not be a voyage into happy-land, but it certainly is engrossing, beautiful and oddly sad.

That's because Executive Director/Chief Curator Cydney Payton and her staff have positioned the centerpiece - the 8-ton *Saint Sebastian, Exquisite Pain* - in such a way that upon entering you are

immediately drawn to the partly beatific/party suffering visage of the bullock encased inside a monumental formaldehyde-filled glass tank. With carefully placed arrows piercing its body, suspended and tied with cable to a steel beam, this creature serves as an able contemporary interpretation of any of the scores of paintings over the years of the martyr who was shot with arrows, beaten and thrown in a sewer. ("SS" is noted at the top of the beam, a la the "IHS" present in depictions of Christ on the cross).

To Payton, this work is a metaphor for many things, from the assault on our collective humanity to the AIDS pandemic. "I'm always concerned about prejudice in general. It's representative of social injustice," she said of the work.

So when the Goss-Michael Foundation (as in collectors Kenny Goss and George Michael) called to see if she wanted to show the work, Payton said yes. Also on view from that collection is the intricate *Incorruptible Crown*, in which butterflies are arranged on deep blue household gloss paint to resemble a kaleidoscopic pattern and a stained-glass window.

To augment these works, Payton contacted Hirst's studio about borrowing two pieces. They sent the 1992 medicine cabinet *Nothing Is a Problem for Me*, a sleek piece stocked with boxes for everything from Gaviscon to Prozac to children's medicine, and the 2008 butterfly and household gloss paint diptych *War After War*. (Reportedly, Hirst is ending production of both genres.)

This last piece has not been shown in the United States before and consists of artfully scattered butterflies, many of them near-fluorescent, set in and daubed with paint. One panel is a darker, dried-blood red, the other lighter, as if Hirst were commenting on the toll warfare takes on humans and our most basic element - blood - here seen as the blood of the dead and the blood of the living. The painting gleams, it glows and it is convincing in its intent.

So is the installation, which provokes thought more than shock. And isn't that what art is supposed to do? It's great to read about Hirst, form an opinion, damn the - gasp! - commercial aspects



DAMIEN HIRST'S 2007 SAINT SEBASTIAN, EXQUISITE PAIN, GLASS, STEEL, BULLOCK, ARROWS, CROSSBOW BOLTS AND FORMALDEHYDE SOLUTION.

of his career. But then do the only thing that really matters: Go look at the work.

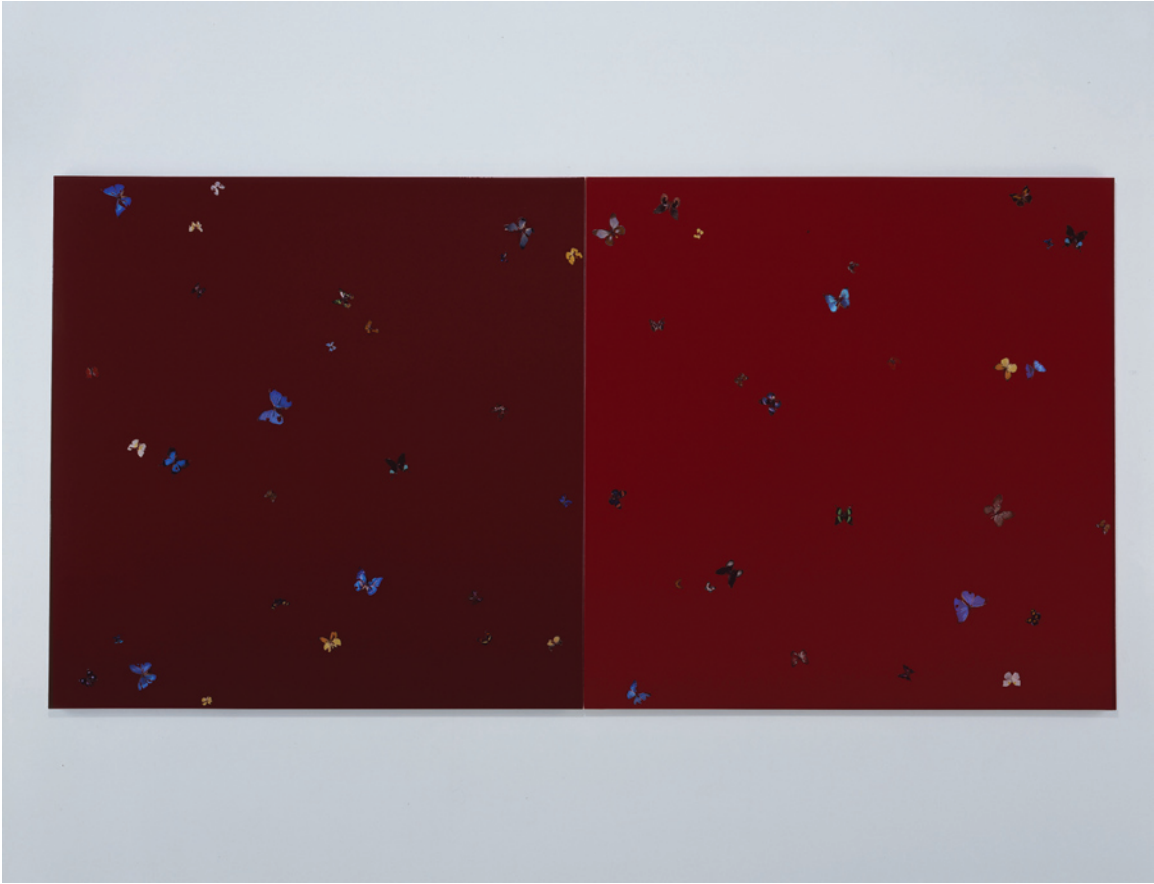
OK'd by Uncle Sam

The installation of four works by Damien Hirst opened on schedule last week at MCA DENVER, but not before two works needed to be cleared by government officials.

The pieces are new to this country, and one, the 2008 diptych *War After War*, includes animal matter.

The works had to pass muster with U.S. Customs, which is not unusual for art entering the country. The pieces arrived at MCA DENVER on Oct. 9, according to a museum spokeswoman. Once there, a representative of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service checked out *War After War*, which is encased in Plexiglas for viewing and protection.

The show went on.



DAMIEN HIRST'S 2007 SAINT SEBASTIAN, EXQUISITE PAIN, GLASS, STEEL, BULLOCK, ARROWS, CROSSBOW BOLTS AND FORMALDEHYDE SOLUTION.