

TURPS

Featuring
Damien Hirst on Painting

Issue 1

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New Figurative Paintings by Damien Hirst - In November 2004, *Turps Banana* went to see Damien Hirst's new paintings at his London studio, followed by a discussion with him at Science about the making of his paintings.

TB: So when I asked had you seen the Hopper and Tuymans exhibitions you seemed very enamoured with Hopper.

DH: Yes, I think I underestimated Hopper. I'd not looked at him properly so they were a surprise. I thought they were a lot more focused, less casual and seemed a lot darker than I had imagined. You could see he was after that early David Lynch horror. I had thought he was a just a happy painter who accidentally came across that, rather than someone who dug around and found those black eyes. He went up in my estimation, whereas Tuymans went down.

TB: Why?

DH: I just don't get it. I mean, they're sadly not up my street. They don't seem to grab hold of anything at all.

TB: Who does grab/do it for you?

DH: Baselitz, Soutine, Goya. Fucking Goya, I don't get Luc Tuymans if you've got Goya. If you've ever seen a few paintings by Goya, you'd want to slit your throat if you started to make paintings like Tuymans.

TB: Well maybe you can, maybe that's his point. Maybe it's not appropriate to do all the heroic stuff anymore.

DH: There's too much hesitation with Tuymans.

TB: So you don't like hesitation?

DH: Not in that way. I think Tuymans hesitates about subject matter, and he's obviously terrified of life's size, terrified of scale, and he looks like he can't hold a fucking brush straight.

TB: He holds it as though he has some kind of spastic seizure, deliberately.

DH: I absolutely don't get it and I hate the colours - will someone buy him some colours and a ruler. I just hate that kind of indecision in any art, and to make a virtue out of it, I find very dodgy. I mean we're all weeping babies underneath, but I think in art you need to make bold statements which say that. Jay (Jopling) says that I like all that operatic art and I think I sort of do. Look at someone like Kippenberger who I always find weak and annoying - it's almost like he's trying to tell his parents to fuck off, like a little kid, saying that it's all shit, which never seems like a good thing

to do with art, you have a responsibility and you should take it further. And at the end of the day, you're making a visual thing, people have got to desire it, and that's a big issue for me or any painter, and there's a load of people who make it ugly for the sake of it. Klee is brilliant, Richter absolutely awesome, but I think that's maybe a sculptural thing, he sort of hovers in the area between sculpture and painting. Maybe I prefer Polke as a more heartfelt painter.

TB: What about Baselitz?

DH: Yeah, Baselitz is beauty. I love Baselitz. Weirdly, he bought two of my spin paintings.

TB: Can you talk to us about your new paintings, the ones we saw this morning at your studio?

DH: I've been working on these paintings for about three and a half years. For the first two years we never seemed to get anywhere, because nobody knew what I fucking wanted. When we first started doing them it was just me and one technician working on them. As the technician was painting I was trying to remove anything that was about him, to get more of a record of a scientific process and develop a process which I could teach to other people. I was always aware that if you get other people to paint your paintings you have to have a clear process so the making of a painting isn't dependent on any one person. And for the last six months there have been at least five technicians working on the paintings which are now coming together in the way that I want them to.

TB: Why not make them yourself?

DH: You will definitely end up with a more personally felt thing if you paint them yourself, but these paintings, and there are only a few that have been finished, are as much to do with the imagery as about picking up and developing a process. At the beginning, I was doing a lot of the painting, but it's not a question of whether you do it yourself or get somebody else to do it for you, but more about how much you do and how much you use other people to do it for you. Most painters I'm interested in, with the exception of Bacon, had assistants working on their paintings. My assistants have become very good at knowing



what I want. They do different things. One will do the out-of-focus stuff, another will do the sharp bits, and then I'll add black lines. So we are all a team. It's like being a film director, as they get better you end up getting less and less to do, or an architect - architects don't physically build their own houses do they? But I've also been picking up the brush because I do want to feel they are my own. You have to have a certain amount of involvement, in the same way that you do with anything, and I also think I should be able to do the paintings in the way that I expect the technicians do them. It's been a really weird journey to build up a language. The whole process has been a bit of a hands-on, hands-off thing. Isn't it a bit like the difference between driving your own car or having a chauffeur? You still have to get from A to B.

TB: But the journeys are about different experiences. And you could be restricting the painting you are doing if you have other people making them.

DH: I think you won't be able to recognise who has done what on the paintings, but I wouldn't necessarily say that I feel like a painter. I'm not actually going completely in that direction.

TB: The thing about the paintings we've just seen is that they're absolutely committed to the picture. They are pictures.

DH: I like abstract things and I like images, I just don't really like anything in the fucking middle. I had been thinking about the spot paintings, wondering whether I had painting under my belt, but I thought no, I haven't, I need to take the painting into images. I wanted the new paintings to capture the power of the image, as an object 'in' the painting. I wanted the image to amaze me, from afar and close up, and then shock me so that I have to grapple with it. I remember seeing a Bacon painting with an ear on some sort of newsreader or monkey, or some fucked-up head. From a distance it looked real, but then close-up you realised it had actually been sculpted out of the paint in relief like a proper ear. Painting is an amazing thing - it's practically made of nothing. I mean, people look at a sculpture of mine, and they think

fucking hell, how much has he spent on all that glass and steel and glue? And then you look at a painting, and there's none of that, it's just a bit of ground-up dirt and a bit of string.

TB: Are the images found or invented?

DH: I've been collecting thousands of photographs from newspapers and magazines. I'm using throwaway images, which don't really exist, in the sense that in a magazine they mean nothing. In fact, in a magazine you're totally unaware of the amount of effort the photographer's gone to, or about the tension that is required to get the right image to capture the stuff the magazine wants. I could blow the photographs up and mount them on aluminium, or put them in light boxes, and in a way, this would add to the throwaway nature of these images, which is also intrinsic to the world we live in and how we live. Although I wanted to get the paintings to look like photographs, and get the process to the point where I can almost totally reproduce the photographs (but not like Richter who is more concerned with surface), I felt that there should be something about the 'painting' which, however close they get to the photograph, would give a completely different pictorial value to that of the photograph. And I have also thought about using my own photographs. I was going to do *Le Dejeuner sur l'herbe*, but in a gynaecologist's surgery, with a naked woman looking at a group of medical students who surround her, with all the medical equipment displayed. Maybe she could be a bit sexy, with a pierced tummy, and looking at the viewer instead of the medical students - I think it would be interesting to find her really sexy in that environment. Through finding images I've come up with an image that I would never find, so why don't I just set that up? Maybe I'll do one of a chimp's tea party, made like a political or government painting. But I don't know if I'll do that yet.

At the moment I'm really happy with the found images.

TB: So there's an investment?

DH: Yeah.

TB: By investment, that means time.

DH: Yeah, they became something to study



Page 33: **The Tears of Jesus**

2003-2005

Oil on canvas

193.04 x 152.4 cm

Photo: Prudence Cuming Associates

© The artist

Above: **Mortuary**

2003-2004

Oil on canvas

193.04 x 152.4 cm

Photo: Prudence Cuming Associates

© The artist

and think about rather than something to throw away.

TB: But what does the ‘painting’ bring to the image?

DH: Initially I wanted the paintings to be totally like the photographs and have no expression of any kind in the way they were treated. But I was thinking of clouds and you can make the paint look like clouds, and the clouds look like paint. You can get something that is so similar to the two things, which implies that they are both connected in some way. I’m looking for that sort of harmony between what’s going on in the image and the way the image is created, and what the image is. Like with a picture about acupuncture, which could be painted in the Pointillist manner to emphasis the idea of the pin pricks, or like using a pallet knife to describe cut stones - if the stones are made like that they could be painted like that. So I think painting can come out of an image. The image directs the painting.

TB: Yeah, that awareness of language can inform the direction of a painting.

DH: Or it takes your eye away from the painting and into the more sculptural aspects of rendering an object in space.

TB: It can take you more into the medium, and engage you more with ‘why’ you’ve chosen that particular way to paint it, and that’s a really interesting area. But decisions about that sort of use of language cannot always be pre-determined if you want the ‘painting’ to have more than a superficial material association to what a thing is.

DH: I think you’re talking happy accidents, but it doesn’t matter how technically good you are, there’s always happy accidents at every level, and you’re always discovering things along the way.

TB: What about the look of them? I thought the one of the hospital corridor with the lights reflected on the floor, implying a very sterile place, and the one of the autopsy room, both have a social realist quality which seems to fit the subject quite neatly. Both images emphasis the alienation of such places and the treatment is quite dull and functional.

DH: I’ve found myself wanting to do areas

that are realistic, and other areas that are not. I then tried to forget about the edges, especially with the autopsy one, where the centre draws your eye in, so it doesn’t really matter if the painting at the edges isn’t that good. I can live with that because I made a decision about that. If you’ve got a team of people who are very competent at what they are doing as painters you can do what you want.

TB: Is it important to have arrived at a point when you can say ‘these are my paintings!’

DH: I don’t know. To some extent I see them as sculptures. Perhaps because the process that has been developed to make them is an extension of how I have worked as a sculptor.

TB: In a way, you think of painting as a sculpture.

DH: Yeah. It’s something that I have been thinking about for a long time, but I won’t really know whether I have got what I want until I put all the paintings together. The studio isn’t a great place to see them. There are no white walls and there are only a couple that are finished. I’ve been working really hard on one painting, and looking at it as an image, painting it, looking at the photograph, and just saying I want this to be that. But of course, you realise that you won’t be able to see the paintings properly until they are on the white walls of a gallery, which isn’t just about looking without anything distracting them, but about an emphasis on the detachment you have from them, created by the context of the gallery.

TB: I thought that the painting of the figure holding the brain prior to weighing it looked really interesting as an image and the way it was painted. But why so small? I thought it would be even more effective as an image and as a painting if it was a larger scale.

DH: It’s one of the few that are finished. I wanted the woman’s head to be about life-size so you could hold the brain in your hands. It’s been worked on quite a bit and is built up a lot in some areas with washes and stains over the top. I usually do two versions, large and small, so I can decide which is best, and some of the thinking attached to that relates to how I might show them. At what point do you start showing people the direction you’re going in? I think art is always the map of a person’s life.



Homo floresiensis, A New and Diminutive Species of Human Being Has Been Found

2004-2005

Oil on canvas

274.32 x 350.52 cm

Photo: Prudence Cuming Associates

© The artist



The Devil on Earth

2005

Oil on canvas

15 x 18 inches (381 x 457.2 mm)

Photo: Prudence Cuming Associates

© The artist

Next Page: Hospital Corridor

2004

Oil on canvas

198.12 x 346.71 cm

Photo: Prudence Cuming Associates

© The artist

Damien Hirst is represented by White Cube in London and Gagosian in New York. His new paintings were shown at Gagosian in New York, in March 2005.





