

## Killing in the Name of Art

### -- Critique of Damien Hirst's Exhibition "Natural History"

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#### Abstract

Recently, Gagosian Gallery in London presented the exhibition Natural History by British artist Damien Hirst. Most of the works in the exhibition use formaldehyde solution, a signature technique of Damien Hirst, and the exhibition has aroused a huge response from the society in an extremely avant-garde way, with appreciation and critical views going hand in hand. This paper will analyze and criticize Damien Hirst's exhibition "Natural History" from various aspects such as artistic content, presentation and social impact.

#### Keywords

**Damien Hirst; Natural History; Death; Formaldehyde Solution.**

#### 1. Introduction

Born in England in 1965 and a graduate of Leeds College of Art, Damien Hirst is a conceptual art painter and one of the most highly valued and influential artists of our time. Recently, the Gagosian Gallery in London presented his exhibition "Natural History", the first ever series of works dedicated to his work using formaldehyde solution, containing more than 20 works from 1991 to 2021.[1] The work "Death beyond the comprehension of the living" is a nearly four-meter long tiger shark placed in a transparent box filled with formaldehyde in a minimalist style; the work "Mother and Child" is a large and small cow cut from head to tail and placed in a transparent box also filled with formaldehyde solution. Such an avant-garde artistic approach brings strong visual stimulation at the same time, there is no shortage of opposition, art critic Jonathan Jones even said: Damien Hirst is "a disgrace to Britain".

#### 2. The Ambivalence between the Way of Expression and the Thematic Idea

I have also thought about whether Damien Hirst's exhibition "Natural History" is part of a certain school of art, Dadaism, which seeks to destroy rules, order and existing objects. I don't think so. The object of Dadaism is to break the inherent class concept or the obsolete superstructure, not the living body, and behind the "destruction" of Dadaism, there is also the hope to build a better society. And Damien Hirst, the act of putting death out for people to see again and again, some people think that there is nothing more shocking than death, such a form of teaching people to value life, even if the exhibition can play such a positive effect, but this kind of animal killing expression, does not play a greater negative impact?

The idea of the "Soak the Carcass" series came about when Damien Hirst once went to the zoo and looked at the animals surrounded by them and thought to himself, "If only there was a zoo where all the animals were dead, then we wouldn't have to watch them suffer. From this we can also see that Damien Hirst is also a person with a good nature, with a strong ability to empathize,

but his late implementation for his own ideas is smacking, every time the exhibition is held, there will be a group of animals in the future of his exhibition effect and killed, Damien Hirst also expressed his artistic ideas: I am trying to praise life by cursing death. The two cows in "Mother and Child" are in two adjacent containers, and there is no atmosphere of affection. Killing life in order to teach people to value life? This is a ridiculous act of putting the cart before the horse, and I beg to differ.

### **3. The Social Situation that a Work of Art Can Reflect**

#### **3.1. Artwork is a Product of the Times**

A work of art, rather than being created by the artist, is a product of its time, because the artist who created it received enlightenment, feedback, and a gift from each unique time. If the process of an artist creating a work of art is too subjective to the artist himself, too contingent to encapsulate an era, then a work of art that is sought after by the public is bound to reflect something unique to the era. During World War II, artillery fire devastated the world, and people's scarred hearts were also collateral trophies, thus creating a large number of artists whose works contained fear, sorrow and pain, such as Francis Bacon and Pablo Picasso, etc.[2] What about now? Some say that Damien Hirst's greatest success was to turn art into a commodity, and Damien Hirst was chased by capital, with a value of over 100 million dollars making He has become the richest artist, and "Natural History" is touring around the world, and the tickets he sells are a sign of his popularity, and there are signs that these works, which are made of killing, are very much to the taste of contemporary people.[3] Therefore, the "success" of this kind of exhibition is not the "failure" of human nature, and the social problems behind this social phenomenon are what we should pay attention to.

#### **3.2. Psychological Problems Unique to this Era**

And what does this mean, when the whole planet is obsessed with death, trying to study and understand the meaning of this pile of mutilated bodies, to enjoy their own sensory pleasure at the cost of killing other living beings, this, there is really no problem?[4] I dare not presume to conclude that the modern mind is not perverted, I just think, see the corpse, should not be indifferent, should not be laughing with a photo to send social software, the corpse was once the carrier of every living soul, it has seen the world's colorful flowers, but also for each sunrise touched, as no complex thought of low-end creatures, but also no moment is not love the world in its eyes. Animals respect their own lives, is God made the elf, it should not be so "viewing", should not.

### **4. Is it Art**

In the end, I don't think this is even art. Although I don't know the true definition of art, I do know that this killing must not be. I think Damien Chester's exhibit, "Natural History", is nothing more than a completely animalistic response using a corpse to bring the viewer to a physiological shock. [5]Some people think that it is rare to find an exhibition that can make people so touching, so this exhibition is of great value. However, I think that the reason why this exhibition is so touching to people is that the materials used in the exhibition are real corpses, and these corpses are posed as a series of humanized or special meaningful actions such as the torture of Christ, sitting on the toilet, etc. It is not that the artist's concept is so high above people, I think this kind of impact can be achieved equally by going to the morgue, the morgue, or facing a large body teacher in medical school. [6]I think this kind of impact can be achieved in a morgue, a morgue, or in front of a medical school teacher, and even get a more shocking effect. Therefore, for the successful effect achieved by this exhibition, most of it was contributed by those animals who were forced to deprive of their lives, not the artist's ability.

Can an artist, who makes excellent works with such raw materials with strong energy in itself, say that the artist's ability is high? It is a kind of incompetence to emphasize materials rather than thinking, to win with materials.[7]

Damien Hirst is aware of the controversies surrounding him, and he has only replied to queries related to whether his work is art, and has not responded positively to queries related to animal protection, saying, "I've always had negative comments, and I remember a guy with a bag of fries looking at my work once and saying 'that's not art', but I think it's too early to say whether a painting is good or bad". [8]I don't know if he thought in this statement that the opinions of people who love French fries and other fast food about art are not to be taken seriously, but I think for him, the most important thing to think about is not whether French fries or his works are art, but whether the almost cruel artistic expression he adopted is appropriate, and if it is accepted by the public, whether it will cause future generations to follow suit. There is no doubt that if this artistic expression is no longer questioned and accepted by the public, more innocent lives will be lost in the future for the so-called art, and then even the so-called "original intention" of Damien Hirst to praise life will be completely deviated.[9]

## 5. Conclusion

The criticism of Damien Hirst in this paper is mainly from the perspective of expression method. It is undeniable that Damien Hirst's works have a strong personal style and aesthetic level, and the use of corpses has reached the highest level, and I feel a deep peace when facing the blue formaldehyde solution, and the animal is fixed into a very dynamic movement, as if the moment of life blooming is fixed for eternity. His works are indeed innovative and seem to have achieved success in the conventional secular sense, but success is not only a standard of evaluation system, from the perspective of art, although art certainly does not only express truth, goodness and beauty, but his disregard for life, presenting killing and death in front of people's eyes, and trying to use the veneer of art to modify his own cold-blooded series of behavior, really can not be explained by art. The scope of art should at least not include the infliction of violence.

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