



# DAMIEN HIRST

31 March–1 June 2017

**“You have to find universal triggers: everyone’s frightened of glass, everyone’s frightened of sharks, everyone loves butterflies.”**

**— Damien Hirst**

A leading provocateur of the 1990s Young British Artists (YBA) movement, Damien Hirst remains one of the most influential and commercially successful artists of our time. His work relentlessly probes the intersections of life, death, science, religion, and consumer culture. Visually seductive and emotionally unsettling, Hirst’s practice continues to challenge conventional aesthetics while reigniting debates around the role of art in contemporary society.

Among his most iconic series, *The Rose Window*, Durham Cathedral (2008) exemplifies Hirst’s monumental Butterfly Paintings. Thousands of iridescent tropical butterfly wings are meticulously arranged with metallic paint on canvas, forming a

luminous mandala that echoes the medieval stained glass rose window of Durham Cathedral. The result is a dazzlingly symmetrical and kaleidoscopic surface that blurs the line between reverence and spectacle.

Throughout art history, butterflies have symbolized the soul and the fleeting beauty of life. In Hirst’s hands, this symbolism takes on new urgency. By embedding these delicate forms in luxurious materials—often alongside diamonds or precious stones—he collapses natural fragility into the aesthetics of wealth and display. These compositions invite viewers to meditate on mortality and transience, even as they seduce with dazzling surface beauty.

**"It's about love and realism, dreams, ideals, symbols, life and death. This work presents a romanticized view of death, showing the beauty of the butterflies even after they have died."**

**— Damien Hirst**

Modern medicine has long served as a central motif in Hirst's oeuvre. His renowned *Medicine Cabinets* confront the viewer with the paradoxes of healing and decay, faith and futility. In *Something must break* (2008), rows of pharmaceuticals are meticulously arranged behind glass, echoing both minimalist painting and clinical precision. These cabinets reflect society's faith in science, even as they quietly acknowledge the inescapability of death.

Recalling the inception of the series in a conversation with art historian Nicholas Serota, Hirst noted:

**"In the first twelve, I had arranged them in a similar manner to how I approach a painting. I spent a lot of time experimenting with their placement, and at some point, it felt as if I wasn't even present when it all came together. It was a way for me to achieve that without being too forceful with the viewers. After all, you can't keep creating paintings like Rauschenberg indefinitely."**

Hirst's *Spot Paintings*, begun in the mid-1980s, have been among his most debated series. *Tetrachloroauric acid* (2008) consists of carefully measured, uniformly spaced dots in vivid hues on a shimmering gold background. While the grid suggests order and rationality, the absence of repeating colors subtly destabilizes the composition. The result is a paradoxical experience—what appears harmonious from a distance reveals a quiet discord on closer inspection.

This calculated dissonance undermines our expectation of chromatic harmony. In traditional painting, repeated tones create visual "chords" that help organize and give coherence to a work. Hirst removes that comfort, producing a subliminal tension. Still, the exuberant palette suggests a superficial joy that may momentarily eclipse the discomfort—making the work at once seductive and disquieting.

Over the course of three decades, Hirst has produced a series of landmark works that have become icons of contemporary art: from *A Thousand Years*—a visceral installation of a cow's head, flies, and an Insect-O-Cutor—to the *Butterfly*, *Spot*, and *Spin* paintings, as well as his infamous formaldehyde-preserved animals. In 2007, he unveiled *For the Love of God*—a platinum cast of a human skull encrusted with 8,601 diamonds—arguably one of the most controversial and discussed artworks of the 21st century.

Hirst's work has been the subject of major solo exhibitions at some of the world's leading institutions, including the Tate Gallery (London), Museum of Modern Art (New York), Stedelijk Museum (Amsterdam), Fondazione Prada (Milan), Israel Museum (Jerusalem), and The Broad (Los Angeles).

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