



REUTERS

Hirst provokes anger with pickled sheep and sharks

By Gideon Long

LONDON, June 5 (Reuters) - If the aim of modern art is to shock and provoke response, Damien Hirst may well deserve the title some in the art world have awarded him -- the most important British artist of his generation.

Last year his sculpture of a pickled shark suspended in a see-through tank incurred the wrath of animal rights protesters who smeared it with excrement to highlight their cause.

Hirst had sold the 14 foot (4.2 metres) long tiger shark, entitled "The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living" to the Saatchi gallery for around 50,000 pounds (\$74,760).

In a second attack on his work, a protester last month poured black ink into the glass tank containing Hirst's latest creation -- a dead sheep pickled in formaldehyde.

The piece, "Away from the Flock", was the chief attraction at an exhibition of provocative contemporary art at London's Serpentine Gallery.

The piece was cleaned and stayed in the exhibition.

A gallery spokeswoman said: "We're quite shaken by it but we're delighted the work has been fully restored...Clearly this is not the sort of response Damien was seeking. That would be pretty masochistic."

Hirst's work, including a skinned cow's head covered in maggots, a pig's body sawn in half and a string of sausages which fetched 12,000 pounds (\$17,940), has earned him the scorn of those who argue that pickled animal corpses in glass tanks are not art.

But despite the acts of vandalism, 28-year-old Hirst says he has been generally surprised and delighted by the attention his latest exhibition has received.

"I've been totally amazed by it all," he told Reuters in an interview. "In England people aren't generally that involved in contemporary art so any kind of interest is welcome."

That includes the interest of British tabloid newspapers which have vilified and ridiculed his work.

"The media tell people my work's shit before they've had a chance to look at it, but they get it noticed. I think the public should be given the chance to come to their own decision," Hirst said.

He relishes the fact that the Sun newspaper set up a telephone hotline for people to call to give their opinions on his work.

"I would hate it if somebody walked into the gallery and walked out and felt nothing. The most important thing is to get people involved and to get a response from them."

He rejects the charge that his work has no aesthetic value and is designed merely to shock.

"People say my work's sensational. Sensation is about touch whereas art is about creating an extreme visual response."

He argues that people develop a natural fascination with the macabre from an early age. "You just have to look at children," he says. "They all watch horror films and hang around road accidents."

He points out that the images he creates are no more grotesque than those seen on advertising boards and on London streets every day.

"A load of pigs carcasses hanging on the back of a truck is not considered sensational or sick, so why is my art?," he asks. "The lamb would have been dogfood if it wasn't here."

About his future work, he said: "I'm thinking of doing some pieces without formaldehyde where the sculptures actually rot, and evolve."

He has also considered working with human corpses: "I'd like to put together a copulating human couple, and cut them in half lengthways to give a cross-section view. I'd call it "creation explained'."

But he admits the work would not get past censors wary of public distaste. "Making it wouldn't be a problem, but I couldn't exhibit it. And if you can't exhibit it there's not a lot of point in doing it."

He says his work is not difficult to understand and is not aimed simply at modern art specialists.

"Lots of people have seen it and have talked more sense about it than the art critics," he says. "Even my mum likes it."

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