

Ai Weiwei: Interlacing Damien Hirst

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TWO EXHIBITIONS BROUGHT ART LOVERS OUT IN DROVES earlier this year – ‘Ai Weiwei: Interlacing’ and ‘Damien Hirst’ at Jeu de Paume, Paris, and Tate Modern, London, respectively.

Ai Weiwei – architect, installation artist, blogger, photographer, cultural critic, twitterer, and social and political critic – holds a mirror up to Chinese society and, in the process, produces evocative and revealing works. In 1981 he left China for the United States and spent a decade in New York. At Jeu de Paume there was a selection from some 10,000 photographs of this period: pictures of urban life, of neighbours, friends and artists; ‘aimless hanging around’, as Ai described it.

Included in the exhibition was the well-known *June 1994*, the intriguing image of the artist’s partner lifting her skirt in front of Chairman Mao’s portrait at Tiananmen Square, and the iconic *Dropping a Han Dynasty urn*, 1995, and *Exchange*, 1999. The series ‘Study of Perspective’ (1995–2010), which defines Ai’s challenge to authority by giving a middle-finger salute to all things iconic, including the White House and the Eiffel Tower, also featured. Numerous images from Ai’s archive of ‘Blog Photographs’ (c. 2005–09) and ‘Cell Phone Photographs’ (2009–10), and the very moving ‘Earthquake’ (2008–10), which records the names of school students who died in a catastrophic Sichuan province earthquake, concluded the exhibition.

The sheer volume of work was breathtaking, even with the careful selection by curator Urs Stahel. It represented only one aspect of Ai’s work, what writer Carol Yinghua Lu, in the exhibition catalogue, called his ‘climbing out of the bottle of ink’. This is documentation as a way of remembering and questioning, as archive and memorial; photography as a diary and a form of sketching.

A very different exhibition, curated by Ann Gallagher at Tate Modern, surveyed the work of Damien Hirst – the darling of auction houses, commercial galleries and collectors. It covered most of his work since the Goldsmiths days: spot paintings, spin paintings, butterfly paintings, medicine cabinets, and a small herd of



formaldehyde-pickled animals. All hark back to 1988 and the artist’s now-legendary ‘Freeze’ group exhibition, which he curated.

It was, surprisingly, Hirst’s first substantial public show staged by the Tate (he once told David Bowie he never wanted to show in the Tate as he associated it with dead people), where it appeared as part of the London 2012 Cultural Olympiad.

But the exhibition wasn’t to everyone’s taste. Curator and art critic Julian Spalding wrote in *The Independent*, 27 March 2012: ‘Damien Hirst isn’t an artist. His works may draw huge crowds ... at Tate Modern. But they have no artistic content and are worthless as works of art.’ Hirst replied in the *London Evening Standard* within the week: ‘even Degas and Picasso were initially dismissed by critics.’

The titillation in the media should not detract from what was a substantial and challenging exhibition. Hirst’s paintings and installations have defined two decades of young British artists, showing a consistency and indifference to trends that is seldom seen in contemporary art. The show’s most interesting works were the vitrines, the medicine cabinets, and the installations of thousands of cigarette butts. Loaded with *memento mori* anxiety, these works show the logic of Hirst’s interpretation of our daily dose of horror and reveal a turn-of-the-century relevance in his visual syntax.

The two infamous conceptual artists – *agents provocateurs* Ai and Hirst – delivered, with exhibitions that made queuing patiently in the ticket line worth the wait.

Ai Weiwei: Interlacing, Jeu de Paume, Paris, 21 February – 29 April 2012;
Damien Hirst, Tate Modern, London, 4 April – 9 September 2012.



Left to right: Ai Weiwei, *Fairytale 1*, 2007, from ‘Fairytale’ (2007), inkjet print, 92.5 x 92.5 cm © Ai Weiwei; Damien Hirst, *Beautiful, childish, expressive, tasteless, not art, over simplistic, throw away, kid’s stuff, lacking in integrity, rotating, nothing but visual candy, celebrating, sensational, inarguably beautiful painting (for over the sofa)*, 1996, household gloss on canvas, electric motor, 365.8 cm diameter © Damien Hirst and Science Ltd. Photograph Prudence Cuming Associates.