

Damien Hirst's Alien Objects

I walked along the Zattere in Venice towards the Dogana where Damien Hirst has one part of his new exhibition, *Treasures from the Wreck of the Unbelievable*, the other part is housed in Francois Pinault's second museum, Palazzo Grassi, on the Grand Canal. The conceit behind this collection is that a treasure trove has been excavated from the seabed, the wreck of a ship called the Unbelievable, containing a fantastical cargo of treasures from all ages and in a multitude of styles. And indeed the pieces are fantastical and unbelievable.

Along the way I happened upon a modest, free exhibition glimpsed through an open doorway. The work was by Jason DeCaires Taylor, an artist who was one of the first to submerge his work so that it became encrusted with marine life. Jason Taylor's underwater art serves to promote environmental awareness as well as showing the beauty inherent in corals, algae, tube worm casts and other varieties of marine accretions. The proximity of these two exhibitions is not likely to be a coincidence; surely Mr Taylor is quietly emphasising his prior claim. It would seem that Hirst has brazenly stolen this artist's central idea.

On entering the Hirst exhibition there is a motto on the door lintel that reads, 'Somewhere between lies and truth lies the truth'. This trite statement sets the intellectual yardstick for this extravagant mishmash. It should have read, 'Somewhere between lies and lies lies lies.'

Beautifully coloured video screens portray scenes of divers swimming around statuary on the sea floor. This means that, unless digital manipulation is involved, many of the gigantic pieces were made and then deliberately submerged for retrieval soon after. Photos of marine crane barges endorse this perception.

Damien Hirst believes in the power of art to shock and amaze and with each new show he does just that but what is amazing is the scale and expense. There are greater than life size bronzes - maybe resin - and marbles a plenty plus a mass of other 'found' objects mostly gold plated or cast bronze. A great many of the statues are artificially encrusted with coral, anemones and molluscs cast and painted. These take on the feel of objects in a video game and may well be inspired by this genre. The production is continental in scale and incontinent in ambition. It is sad to see so much human effort and such a deal of money squandered on this pile of junk.

Add to this unconnected trove Disney characters and a statue modelled on Kate Moss and you will understand why it is hard to take this man seriously. The effect is of a child's toy box for giants filled with cartoon creatures and mixed metaphors in bronze and stone. The objects are beautifully made but are too perfect suggesting that they are neither hand-cast nor carved from stone. I would suppose that the new technique of three-dimensional laser imaging was used to control an automated machine carving process. The price to be paid is a carving lacking soul or artistic feeling and looks as if it has been mass-produced from a mould - it becomes a machine made lump of rock.

Extravagance of size and cost alone does not imbue an object with artistic quality nor does it serve to validate a trite idea. All it proves is that the artist has millions of pounds to waste and is devoid of interesting ideas. His name alone, and that of Monsieur Pinault who endorses him, are enough to ensure a substantial audience. I hear that the exhibition will travel the world and an edition of three of each object is planned. Given the price of Hirst's creations, the gross will well repay twenty fold the tens of millions of pounds expended. Damien Hirst is a moneymaking industry based on hollow self-promotion. In my opinion shock and awe are not a substitute for artistic imagination or genuine talent. I would guess that those who admire or acquire this work have no concept of art history or respect for what is of true worth; they are inspired by the worship of extravagance and a love of computer generated cartoon imagery.

Here we find historical periods conflated in a meaningless jumble, mythologies muddled and iconography blurred. Bronze age ox-hide ingots lie next of an Ife bronze head from 14thC AD. The reproduction Ife head has pointlessly and inaccurately been gilded. The objects that have been reproduced look real enough but the fantastical bronzes such as the battle between a westernised Kali and a classical Hydra are absurd toys; they do not instruct, create beauty nor make a statement – so what is the point of them?

In contrast to the banality and absurdity of Hirst's work stand the breath-taking Riace bronze statues. These two colossi are bronzes from 5thC BC depicting larger than life-sized nude warriors. They were found off the coast of Calabria in 1972 and join the miniscule number of intact bronzes from the Greek classical period. Not only are they rare and important objects from an historical perspective but also they exhibit a majesty and presence that is awe-inspiring. Were they wider known they might well become as iconic as the Mona Lisa. Conservators in Rome painstakingly removed the centuries of marine encrustation to reveal their pristine beauty. Hirst adds fake encrustation to add nothing to what is already worthless.

The Damian Hirst phenomenon reminds me of the tale of the two merchants who dealt in canned food. The first buys from his colleague twenty cases of tinned sardines at a knockdown price. One day, finding her larder empty, his wife opens a can for their supper. The contents are bad, she opens a second can and the smell overpowers her and again the same with a third can. She turns angrily on her husband who in turn complains to the man who sold them to him.

‘My friend’, replies the merchant, ‘You shouldn’t have opened a can; these are not eating sardines but buying and selling sardines’.

Was there ever a more accurate description of today’s contemporary art market?