Very British with a Hint of America:

The Hybrid Art of Damien Hirst

Gilda Williams

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"Jackson Bollocks" was chosen as a favorite caption in Damien Hirst's 2018 Instagram competition that invited fans (or foes) to pen the best words for a picture of the artist in his studio. The photograph sees Hirst taking a pause from work on his colorful Veil Paintings (2018), precursors to the recent Cherry Blossoms (2018–2020). Paint bucket in hand and bearing a quizzical expression, the artist is clad only in hot pink pants, matching socks, and customized black Crocs emblazoned "Damien." Hirst says he admired the irreverent two-word caption because it's "very British with a hint of America."

Hirst's own hybrid nationality might too be described as "very British with a hint of America." With the Cherry Blossoms, the artist turns for the first time to that most English of art staples, landscape painting, having often concentrated in the past on the relatively un-English genre of still life: the presentation of unmoving objects, from pills to cigarettes to medical equipment. With the brightly hued, painterly Cherry Blossoms, Hirst borrows scale and energy from the American Abstract Expressionists while running counter to common expectations around English landscape painting: the subdued, muddy, country view. For art historian Alexandra Harris, the accomplished English landscape artist is admired for "fathoming a thousand varieties of grey and green"—expressing the country's weird pride in its affinity for the mucky and the drab.[1] The painter Henry Fuseli (1741–1825) said he "wished for an umbrella when standing in front of Constable's showers," complimenting the English artist's skill at capturing a believably British wet haze.[2] The nation's finest painters depicted the countryside as reliably damp: undefinable in color, soggy in atmosphere, rheumatic in spirit. What a contrast with Hirst's horizonless landscape of frenzied dots, each blossom distinct and ablaze in pink, emerald, sapphire, or scarlet, like a bright scattering of dry confetti.

Even when painting the quintessential English genre, the natural landscape, Hirst defies the national template. The paradox of nationhood in Hirst is that he is simultaneously the epitome of British art ("the YBAs' prime mover and poster boy"[3]) and yet, in many ways, colossally un-English. Once upon a time, Englishness meant "reserve," "sobriety," and "conservatism"[4]—terms never encountered in the flood of press around the brilliant Mr. Hirst. Englishness is "nostalgic, deferential and rural," recognized for its "pragmatism, Puritanism and utilitarianism."[5] How on earth did Hirst's bold and brazen art—iconoclastic, urban, gratuitous, uncompromising, emphatically "now"—come to represent "Britishness"?

DAMIEN HIRST EXPLAINED TO AMERICANS

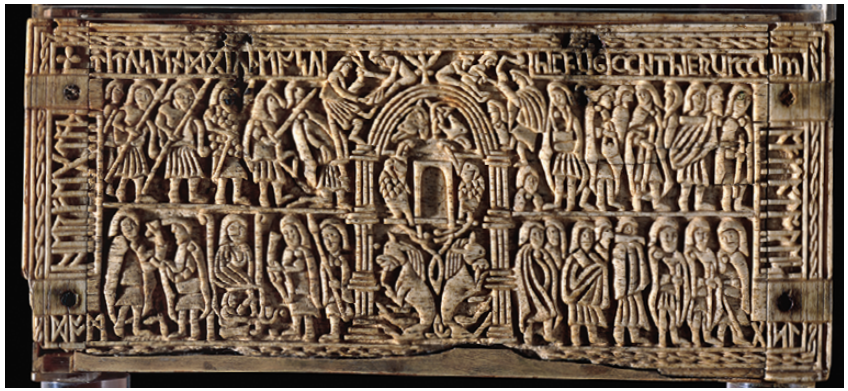
"Damien Hirst Explained to Americans" was the title of an annual lecture I gave on a London contemporary art course heavily frequented by US students. From across the Atlantic, my students could not get enough of the world-famous British superstar and his attention-seeking, class-toppling gestures. For my wide-eyed American students in the 2000s, "Britishness" was synonymous with Hirst-ian bravado: an upward spiral of world-class creativity executed with supersonic confidence. How on earth did colorless Britain become associated with such shining, sexy success?

Hirst's astonishing trajectory rocketed past the doldrums of Modern English art, which had generally been considered a nonstarter. Under Modernism, Britain lagged pitifully behind: a dreary and dated island has-been, not a patch on the larger-than-life American AbExers tossing paint at the art establishment. "None of the other nations in Europe has so abject an inferiority complex about its own aesthetic capabilities as England," wrote Nikolaus Pevsner toward the mid-twentieth century, a pitying sentiment echoed by others across the decades.[6] The isolation continued well into the 1980s, with squat-ridden London the perpetual art-center-wannabe, hopelessly chasing rivals New York and Cologne.[7] UK art stars of the decade (Gilbert & George, Richard Long, Tony Cragg) built their reputations abroad before returning home in pursuit of domestic recognition.[8] Until the 1990s, once-"Great" Britain seemed in terminal decline: sinking not swinging, resigned to the inevitable slow drop to the bottom.

Some attributed the UK's transformation—from boring to bullied to bolshy—partially to exposure to hot new 1980s American art. Jeff Koons's Total Equilibrium Tanks (1985) were often presumed the source from which Hirst cannily borrowed for his floating carcasses. The young artist/entrepreneur practically dragged critics and curators by the collar to see the group show *Freeze*—more pushy Hollywood mogul than polite English lad, seeking approval, cap in hand.[9] Americans have been among his greatest defenders (and most unforgiving detractors, I will add) from philosopher-critic Arthur Danto gushing over Hirst's "extremely beautiful … unforgettable image of life-and-death," to Ben Davis's recent ranking of *Treasures from the Wreck of the Unbelievable*[10] among the top fifty artworks of our century.[11] For US critic Jerry Saltz, Hirst is a classic working-class hero who almost singlehandedly "de-islandized England," reversing Britain's fate as a "second-tier art nation."[12]

Hirst's "Britishness" came down to the post-punk social reversal he'd tagged at the end of colonial rule, commonly described perhaps along the lines of "irrepressible Bristol nobody beats Mayfair art toffs at their own game." But there was nothing peculiarly "English" about Hirst's art itself, and the artist himself claimed no interest in making British art. "I want to make world art," Hirst has repeatedly insisted.[13] "For all the coverage he gets, surprisingly little of it actually deals with his work," Saltz once rightly noted.[14] Can we identify, in fact, anything peculiarly English about Hirst's art making?

The Franks Casket (rear panel), 8th century CE
Whalebone, 9 × 7.5 × 5.12 in.



Damien Hirst, *Forms Without Life*, 1991
Glass, painted MDF, pine, ramin, steel, and shells, 72 × 108 × 12 in.

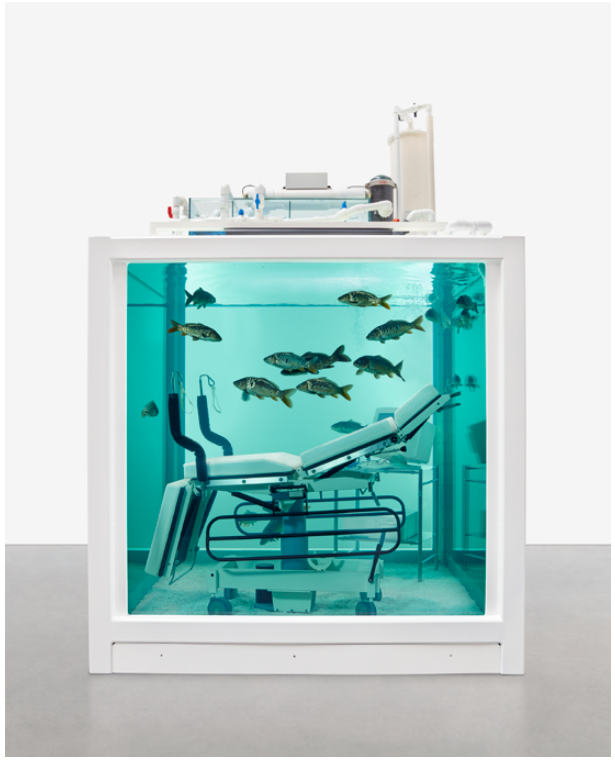
Is there an essence to "English art"? This question lies at the heart of historian Peter Ackroyd's study *Albion: The Origins of the English Imagination*. The answer he arrives at quickly is that English art, since its earliest awakenings, is marked by an overt contrast between naturalistic, wavy "patterns of repetition and variation" and a strong geometric frame: a "pattern of elaborate decoration … aligned with the affection for bold outlines."[15] Think Celtic knots: strings of snaking lines trapped within powerful rectilinear outlines. Or the limestone carvings of early medieval churches, with their elaborate scrawling patterns etched into a rigid perimeter, as seen in the ancient Yorkshire church of Saint Peter. Or the exquisite braids, serpents, and scrolls set within parallel bands in Malmesbury Abbey's twelfth-century portal. Or the ornamental stained-glass marvels of Westminster Abbey, caught in the geometry of a rose window or pointed arch. Or rich Victorian design, from the wrought ironwork of leaf- and vine-like motifs that adorn regularly spaced metal fence posts, to William Morris's imaginative fabrics, whose swirling flora and fauna are often repeated and intertwined along fixed lines.[16]

From the very first artworks of Saxon culture to (I am adding) contemporaries Gilbert & George, with their black-lined grids filled with curling hair, youthful limbs, and rounded pricks, flowers, and feces, this essential contrast—loose repeated organic forms fixed within a heavy frame—is for Ackroyd *the* abiding hallmark of the "the English imagination." Ackroyd's most emblematic example is the twelfth-century decorative motif of a serpent coiling round the circular geometry of a stone column:[17] the very pattern Hirst adopted for his fanciful Martini glasses at his West London restaurant, Pharmacy. Hirst was surely thinking more the serpent-entwined symbol of the medical profession (the Staff of Aesculapius) than Celtic or Saxon religious decor, but still, the coincidence is startling.

If we accept Ackroyd's assertion that the common recurring feature of English image making boils down to a decorative, naturalistic display inscribed within rectilinear confines, Hirst's artwork is emphatically English. Consider Hirst's stunning natural history-inspired cabinets such as *Forms Without Life* (1991), or *Isolated Elements Swimming in the Same Direction for the Purpose of Understanding (Left)* and *(Right)* (both 1991): collections of curving oceanic forms (shells, fish) positioned along parallel horizontal paths. Marine life proceeds left to right along straight lines like a kind of script—like the strands of mysterious letters carved into ninth-century runic stones. Consider Hirst's wondrous aquaria such as *Love Lost* (1999), in which a shifting, floating, living pattern of fishes swim about the uninviting contours of a gynecological chair, its two curved stirrups protruding threateningly upwards. These bodily forms share underwater space within the heavy confines of a cuboid cage. Or his almost architectural multi-part cabinets such as *End Game* (2000–2004), with its shapely gleaming forceps, surgical scissors, blades, and bottles of bleach, plus a dangling skeleton, all carefully arranged on tidy shelves and racks. This collection of medical paraphernalia—with its repetition of intricately detailed forms—reflects what Ackroyd describes as the quintessentially English "interest in exact detail and love of pattern."[18]

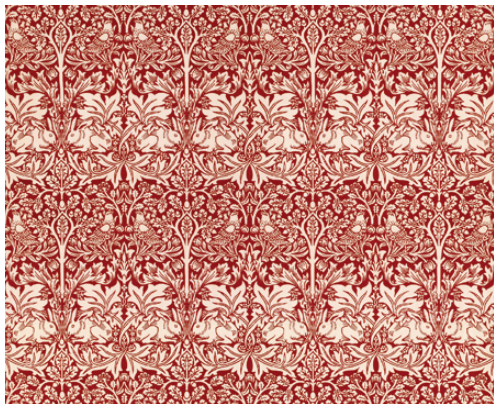
The more we look at Hirst's art, the more consistently we see Ackroyd's essential English combination—irregular natural forms bound by a constrictive geometric framework—persistently at play. A gently curving hose contrasts with the hard edges of a glass panel in *I Want to Spend the Rest of My Life Everywhere, with Everyone, One to One, Always, Forever, Now* (1991). The unpredictable, entropic pattern of dead butterflies embedded in the square canvases of the In and Out of Love series (1991)—each uninjured, colorful winged creature leaving a randomly placed good-looking corpse. The crazy splashes of color congealed within a perfect circle in the Spin Paintings (started in 1992). The multicolored, multi-height packages of prescription drugs neatly stacked on straight shelves in medicine cabinets, such as *God* (1989).

A Thousand Years (1990) is a heavy-metal glass-box fly hatchery where insects are born and spend their brief, doomed lives flitting about purposelessly—just like the rest of us—before getting zapped into oblivion. *The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living* (1991) suspends the big fish's luxuriant, terrifying curves within a five-meter rigid metal enclosure. *The Void* (2000) is a hypochondriac's centerfold: along stainless-steel linear paths, overdose levels of rounded, pretty colored pills and capsules have been lovingly deposited at equal intervals—like the breadcrumbs Hansel and Gretel regularly dropped behind them to find their way home, where drugs too metaphorically promise to lead us. Hirst's Cherry Blossoms introduce to the earlier Veil Paintings thick dark branches weaving between the boughs, adding a kind of armature along which to scatter color. In these paintings, the spray of visual candy extends to the confines of a rectangular frame, which provides the geometry to fence in the rush of colored dots.



Love Lost, 1999
Glass, painted steel, silicone, water, aquarium system, live freshwater fish, gravel, gynecologist's chair, stainless-steel table, computer keyboard and monitor, stool, mug, watch, spectacles, and pewter rings, 108 × 84 × 84 in.

William Morris, *Brother Rabbit*
Design registered May 20, 1882; printed 1917–1923
Block-printed cotton, 106.5 in × 37.5 in.



Damien Hirst, *Nothing to Fear*, 1994
Glass, painted MDF, beech, ramin, steel, aluminum, pens, pencil, and pharmaceutical packaging, 72 × 108 × 9 in.

FROM AMERICA TO BRITAIN AND BACK AGAIN: THE WARHOL CONNECTION

Often Warhol and Hirst are unimaginatively twinned on account of their supreme art-business talents and overlapped obsession with death, but closer inspection reveals they share plenty more curious idiosyncrasies. Coincidentally, Warhol actually photographed his bathroom shelves; the resulting image looks like a Hirst artwork *avant la lettre*, anachronistically stocked with 1970s pharmaceutical brands. Both artists were relentless, eccentric collectors—some might say compulsive shoppers. ("I buy! I buy! I can't stop!" Hirst has admitted; and Warhol began every single morning in his later life with a shopping trip.) Both were arguably unusually attached to their mothers, and both these women were inspirational homespun artists themselves. Both artists reinvented the genre of still life—from Coke bottles and dollar bills to surgical instruments and cigarettes.[19] Both excelled at "sound-bite art": high-concept artworks you don't actually have to see in order to imagine, whether a shark in a tank,[20] or a five-plus-hour film of a man asleep.[21] Both artists replaced the conventional studio with a factory-like production team. (Contrary to popular belief, both artists never entirely abandoned painting their canvases themselves, as witnessed in Hirst's Cherry Blossoms.) Both were self-made protagonists of a remarkable rags-to-riches story. All Warhol ever did was "make the art world safe for Andy Warhol,"[22] art critic Dave Hickey once said, and Hirst similarly can be credited with reshaping the art system in his own image. The British artist's early genius was to recognize the art system as an interconnected ring of power—like a big pie, with Hirst positioned at its sticky center. He poked a finger in every slice, and reached strategically to every category of art-world figure: artist (Lucas; Fairhurst et al.); collector (Charles Saatchi); academic (Michael Craig-Martin; Jon Thompson); curator (Nicholas Serota, Iwona Blazwick, Norman Rosenthal); critic (Stuart Morgan; Adrian Searle); publisher (*frieze* magazine, where a Hirst butterfly graced the 1991 pilot issue), and art dealer (Jay Jopling, who first exhibited Hirst at the Cologne "Unfair" back in 1992, the year before White Cube gallery opened). And Hirst was just getting started, practicing his marksmanship before the real coups: taking the auction house Sotheby's hostage with the multimillion-pound sale *Beautiful Inside My Head Forever* (2008); invading Tate Modern in 2012—London's world-stage Olympic year—with a victorious, record-breaking solo exhibition.[23] In 2018, the SS *Damien* dropped anchor at Pinault's Venetian peninsula museum, unloading its coral- and gold-encrusted treasure, like a pirate ship depositing its loot before triumphantly setting sail again.[24] Ultimately, Hirst makes the "institutional critique" generation look pretty timid—like disgruntled serfs politely popping conceptual slingshots at the art edifice while Hirst laid siege deep inside the castle, commandeering the whole art apparatus from within. And Andy Warhol, too, came to emblematize the art of his country, despite being, as an immigrant's son and perpetual outsider, as atypical an American as Hirst's nonconforming Englishman.

Warhol and Hirst were both forever suspected of charlatanry, despite publicly and prolifically committing their whole lives to art. Neither ever skipped a day of work—even if "art work" was reinvented as street-selling ads for *Interview* and disco dancing at Studio 54, or opening pricey restaurants and living the life of Riley on the Devon coast. But perhaps the most consistent theme the two artists share is their abiding preoccupation with the flow of time. "Preservation" is ongoing subject matter for both: from Warhol's tinned cans, Endangered Species series (1983), and lifelong collection of *Time Capsules*, to Hirst's eternally embalmed insect wings, rows of pharma promising everlasting life, and animal corpses forever resisting decomposition in formaldehyde baths. What is *For the Love of God* (2007) if not the association of the diamond and the human skull, two symbols of eternity enduring long after their countless thrill-seeking visitors—who queued worldwide to marvel at the sparkling twenty-first-century wonder—have all turned to dust?

At the other end of the spectrum, both artists turned their attention to the rapid passage of time: whether the minutes-long lifespan of a winged insect (*In and Out of Life*, not *Love*, the butterfly paintings could be called), or the single-day transience of a newspaper headline (Andy Warhol, *129 Die in Jet!*, 1962), or four hibiscus briefly in bloom (Andy Warhol, *Flowers*, 1964). It is no coincidence that both artists pictured cherry blossoms, whether Warhol's delicate black-and-white photograph (c. 1980) or Hirst's current sequence of explosive paintings. Cherry blossoms are universal symbols of transience—they bloom for just a few weeks a year—and their beauty served both artists as living reminders that art, like life, is everywhere a fleeting joy.

Andy Warhol, *Cherry Blossoms*, undated
Unique gelatin silver print, 8×10 in.

1 Alexandra Harris, author of *Romantic Moderns: English Writers, Artists and the Imagination from Virginia Woolf to John Piper* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2010), cited in Alistair Sooke, "What Makes British Art 'British'?," BBC Culture [online], October 10, 2014.

2 William Vaughan, "Constable's Englishness," *Oxford Art Journal* 19, no. 2 (1996): p. 19.

3 Julian Beecroft, *For the Love of London: A Companion* (West Sussex: Summersdale, 2017), p. 107.

4 William Whyte, "The Englishness of English Architecture: Modernism and the Making of a National International Style, 1927–1957," *Journal of British Studies* 48, no. 2 (April 2009): p. 457.

5 Peter Mandler, "Against 'Englishness': English Culture and the Limits to Rural Nostalgia, 1850–1940," *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 7 (1997): p. 155.

6 "The typical English inferiority complex … always prefers a foreign name to a native one', Gavin Stamp, "Britain in the Thirties," *Architectural Digest* 49 (1979): p. 21. Nikolaus Pevsner, *An Inquiry into Industrial Art in England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1937), p. 204.

7 Aidan While, "Locating Art Worlds: London and the Making of Young British Art," *Area* (August 2003), p. 256.

8 See Sarah Kent, "Nine Years," in *Young British Art: The Saatchi Decade*, eds. Richard Cork and Dick Price (London: Booth-Clibborn Editions, 1999), p. 9.

9 While, "Locating Art Worlds," p. 257.

10 Pinault Collection, Palazzo Grassi and Punta della Dogana, Venice, 2017.

11 Arthur Danto, "Death in the Gallery," *The Nation* (November 2, 2000).

12 Jerry Saltz, "Spots and Sharks and Maggots and Money," *The New Yorker* (January 6, 2012).

13 Damien Hirst cited in Hans Ulrich Obrist, "In the Darkest Hour, There May Be Light: Works from Damien Hirst's Murderme Collection" (Serpentine Gallery/Other Criteria, 2006), n.p.

14 Jerry Saltz, "More Life: The Work of Damien Hirst," *Art in America* (February 2, 2010).

15 Peter Ackroyd, *Albion: The Origins of the English Imagination* (London: Vintage, 2002), pp. 25, 26.

16 Ackroyd, *Albion*, pp. 10, 25, 27.

17 Ibid., p. 11.

18 Ibid., p. 27, citing Margaret Rickert, *Painting in Britain: The Middle Ages* (London: Penguin, 1954), p. 47.

19 Often Hirst's artworks literalize the term "still" (unmoving) "life": an actual shark hangs motionless in formaldehyde; fleets of once-living fish are stilled in resin; newborn butterflies are trapped in paint.

20 Damien Hirst, *The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living*, 1991 or *The Immortal*, 1997–2005.

21 Andy Warhol, *Sleep*, 1963.

22 Dave Hickey, "Andy and the Dreams that Stuff Is Made of," *Andy Warhol Giant Size* (London: Phaidon Press, 2006), p. 12.

23 *Damien Hirst*, Tate Modern, April 4–September 9, 2012.

24 *Treasures from the Wreck of the Unbelievable*, Palazzo Grassi and Punta della Dogana, Pinault Collection, Venice, April 9–December 3, 2017.