Damien Hirst’s shark changed my life. Now he has taken a **chainsaw** to **his glorious past**

In creating sculptures **backdated to** the days when his art **electrified the world**, the former YBA has cast doubt on **his youthful legacy** and destroyed our belief in his creative future

perhaps we should have pity for Damien Hirst. Artistic decline is a terrible fate, even if you have **immense wealth** to **cushion the blow**. **What artist, what person, wants to think all the good stuff, the fireworks and inventiveness, is in the past?** But Hirst apparently does think that. He could hardly **confess** it more clearly than by **pre-dating formaldehyde animal** sculptures made in 2017 to the 1990s, as [**whistleblowers** have **revealed to** the Guardian](https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2024/mar/19/damien-hirst-formaldehyde-animal-works-dated-to-1990s-were-made-in-2017).

The young [Damien Hirst](https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/damienhirst) lived fast and thought constantly about death. At 16 he **posed for a photo with a severed head** in a Leeds **morgue**. As an emerging artist he came up with a totally new spin on the ancient theme of the **memento mori** by putting dead animals, including a 14ft-long **tiger shark,** in tanks of **formaldehyde** and exhibiting them as art. Dry, dusty disputes over whether **ready-made objects** can be art **paled into** **irrelevance** before Hirst’s reminders of our **fleshy fragility** – and for a generation that had **grown up with Jaws** it was a **nightmare** come to life.

It was Hirst that came into my mind, not Rembrandt, as I paced a Liverpool hospital where my mum was having **heart surgery** in the 1990s. I have told Hirst that. I also **truthfully** told him in a Zoom conversation in the pandemic that he helped inspire me to become **an art critic**. That shark changed my life. **And I was far from the only one who loved and was moved by Hirst in the 1990s**. At his[Tate **retrospective** in 2012](https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2012/apr/02/damien-hirst-tate-review) there were mothers showing his **eerie** **stilled** animals to young daughters, 90s folk sharing with their kids the feelings these **hair-raising** sculptures created back in the day. Yet now we know Hirst has taken a chainsaw to that glorious past by **making new animal vitrines** in 2017 and giving them dates that suggest they were made two decades earlier.

Two of the **predated works**, Cain and Abel, and Myth Explored, Explained, Exploded, do a **stunning** job of apparently simulating the qualities that once made Hirst special. The third, Dove, is less impressive, but then the mostly early 2000s series of **pickled birds** to which it claims to belong already **manifested** a Hirst who **was shrinking into** **self-parody.**

Can I tell the difference in quality and significance between Cain and Abel’s two **calves side by side**, “brothers” **kept apart** in their separate tanks, which Hirst dates to 1994, and actual works from that period including Mother and Child (Divided) which won him the 1995 Turner Prize? No, since one **pickled beast** really does look like another. Hirst now claims that some of the dates he gave his formaldehyde works denote the year they were made, while others relate to the year of conception. Yet the **baffling time shifts** revealed by the Guardian threaten to **poison Hirst’s whole artistic biography.**

Hirst says the dating of a conceptual artwork represents the date of conception, and that there is no industry standard. But let’s be clear, this is very far from standard practice, even in **conceptual art**. In fact, because so much of it is **ephemeral** and has to be remade for museums and exhibitions, conceptual art is particularly keen on accuracy and detail. **This long tradition of careful dating of such art was established by none other than the inventor of conceptualism and the ready-made, Marcel Duchamp.** Duchamp “chose” ordinary objects as art, and created works whose existence was primarily intellectual, before the first world war, for a tiny **avant garde** audience**.** By the time he became pop-star famous in the 1960s – what he called “my sex **maniac** phase” – his legendary **ready-mades** such as the **bicycle wheel, snow shovel and urinal** **were long lost.** So he **authorised replicas** – but each is honestly catalogued as such, including Tate’s [Fountain](https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/duchamp-fountain-t07573) (the urinal), which not only has **detailed certification** **and a long catalogue entry** but is even **signed on the back** “Marcel Duchamp 1964”. It is real but a copy, a copy yet real. Hirst followed this proper Duchampian precedent himself when he made a new version of Mother and Child (Divided): [on the Tate website](https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/hirst-mother-and-child-divided-t12751) it is carefully described as “exhibition copy 2007 (original 1993)”.

The 1960s **conceptual art movement,** inspired by Duchamp, wanted to eliminate the material art object and, with it, the market. It produced “art” **in the form of a philosophical text or** **set of instructions.** These approaches are completely different from Hirst’s practice, which is highly physical and material.

So Hirst has **leapt into truly bizarre territory** by showing new works with dates which indicate to anyone remotely familiar with **artistic convention** that they were made more than two decades earlier than they were. Two decades – that’s another artistic lifetime. What was he thinking? One clue could be his show [Treasures from the Wreck of the Unbelievable](https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2017/apr/06/damien-hirst-treasures-from-the-wreck-of-the-unbelievable-review-titanic-return), which opened in Venice in the same year, 2017. **It comprised a spectacular museum of fakes**; a **deadpan**, **fabricated assembly of armour**, jewels and **erotic** statues **purporting** to be from ancient civilisations. **It was his best exhibition this century, absurdly kitsch and mind-boggling but also witty. Did it sow the idea to intervene in his own timeline?**

**What he’s done feels to me like a bitter private joke, not just on the art world – which probably deserves it – but on history itself.** Hirst’s formaldehyde animals will always be part of the story of late 20th-century Britain. Or so I assumed. Now he has not just **raised questions about** the origins of his back catalogue but also destroyed any belief we might **cling to** in his creative future.

Today, **Hirst paints dreadful seascapes and gardens and plays pointless games with digital tokens and the market.** There’s no heart to any of it. His creation of sculptures that **are backdated to** his younger, better days reveals an artist who’s so comfortably **numb** he can **meditate** philosophically on his own creative death. “What was so different about me then?” he seems to be asking, like a horror story by Henry James or Oscar Wilde in which the **ghost** of **a cynical, exhausted** old **master** **haunts** his young, **brilliant** self.

**But you can never go back.** By doing so, **the talentless older Hirst has pissed all over his youth**. **This is a parable of some sort, and a devastating one**.