

MURDER SCENES



ARTIST AND PUBLIC NUISANCE DAMIEN HIRST BRINGS HIS PRIVATE COLLECTION OF TOYS TO THE SERPENTINE AND DECIDES TO PLAY. CHRISTIAN McLAUGHLIN JOINS IN THE FUN...

WHAT springs to mind when you think of Damien Hirst? The shark in the tank? The spot paintings? A pretentious, over-paid conceptual artist?

Well, whatever the trigger, now you can add to that list a personal art collection reportedly valued at £100 million. In the first public display of its contents, specifically chosen examples from what Hirst calls his 'murderme collection' are now the main attraction at the Serpentine Gallery in Hyde Park.

Entitled, *In The Darkest Hour There May Be Light*, the exhibition is on the surface another example of Hirst's best-publicised preoccupation – death.

The reality, however, is more complex and far ranging. While it is Hirst's brainchild, the work on display is that of 24 artists – from household names such as Bacon and Warhol to newcomers like Lawrence Owen. Each brings their own personality, and choreographed with Hirst's conceptual vision, the exhibition calls into question all aspects of modern life.

Whether it's the forces of marketing manipulating our minds or the validity of art compared to the prices it sells for, the artist-cum-collector-cum-curator is not afraid to ask the questions whose answers can make a mockery of the system he exists in. So while the whole set-up may reek of an ego-maniac, at least it is the ego of a man who is not afraid to look at himself in the mirror and laugh.

Take his inclusion of renegade graffiti artist Banksy, for example. You may be tempted to scoff at a Hirst's attempt to show he is abreast of the latest subversive artists.

The originally anti-establishment Banksy, who is now gracing the cover of Sotheby's catalogues, has long-become the quintessential sell-out from the underground.

But that would be to underestimate Hirst's self-awareness, as Banksy's presence only serves to add yet another layer of reality to the collection. For however obnoxious and overly-cerebral the process can become, you could interpret that Hirst is acknowledging that the former kings of subversion, himself

included, are now the status quo and therefore ripe for a beheading by the next generation of upstarts.

Carrying on in the tradition of poking fun at our expectations, Hirst asks the viewer 'What is art?' before one even sets foot in the gallery. His question takes the shape of a Sarah Lucas sculpture entitled *Percival* on the front lawn.

It is a massive and extremely tacky looking horse and drawn cart carrying gigantic marrows, which you'd be likely to see in miniature form on your grandmother's mantelpiece.

The disproportion of the work forces you to question the boundaries of art – an object like the fake horse could be in a market stall or in a gallery, depending on how you look at it.

But by placing it in a gallery all of a sudden its intentions have changed as well as its reaction.

Like we later see in Jeff Koons' *New Hoover Celebrity* pieces, hanging inside the gallery. They are quite simply Hoovers from 1980 stuck to Plexiglass display cases that are invitingly lit-up with fluorescent lights.

Look closer, however, and it becomes clear that their intention is to expose marketing techniques. The once top-of-the-range 1980 Hoovers now look dated and clumsy, and are no longer as absurdly desirable as the advertisers at the time would have wanted you to believe.

It is these zig-zags, mental leaps and associations that form the bedrock of the exhibition – in both the art and in the way it is displayed.

Overloaded maybe, yet stepping into Hirst's mind, and then into the art-works as individual pieces, raises the countless questions that make the exhibition well worth a visit.

And luckily, entry is free, so whatever your conclusions, you'll only pay for them with your time.

● *In The Darkest Hour There May Be Light* runs at the Serpentine Gallery, Hyde Park, until January 28. Visit: www.serpentinegallery.org

'HE IS NOT AFRAID TO LOOK HIMSELF IN THE MIRROR AND LAUGH'

USUAL SUSPECTS: Left from bottom, *Chicken Knickers* by Sarah Lucas, *God II* by Michael Joo and *John Currin's Bent Lady*



HEAD CANDY: One of Steven Gregory's decorated skulls



GREENS SCENE: The rabbits fight over dinner

PARADISE GETS LOST

REVIEW

WATERSHIP DOWN
LYRIC HAMMERSMITH, W6

UNLESS you're a farmer, you love cuddly little rabbits.

But not the ones who are led by a determined leader to find a safe home in this thrilling and sometimes brutal adaptation by Rona Munro of the best-selling children's book by Richard Adams.

These bunnies are real, with personality. Picture a stage full of young people jumping about, leaping off trampolines onto a green carpet.

But when the humans show up and force the rabbit to seek new pastures, the male rabbits go on the pull for females to make their new paradise complete. Those they seek, however, are imprisoned in a totalitarian burrow – *Efrafa* – under the heel of General Woundwort, a

chilling parody on the fascist forces which threatened Britain during the 40s.

Barry Aird plays Woundwort, a real swine, kicking those who transgress his laws with the help of brutal guards, wearing Nazi-like uniforms.

However, the rabbits have a spy in his camp – *Bigwig* – played by Daniel Williams, a tough no-nonsense character who engages in a kickboxing duel with the general.

The pace of the production really picks up in the second act, as the fear of the imprisoned rabbits and the hope of their brethren outside seeking a new home, driving marauding foxes and dogs, grips the audience.

Kevin Vose

● Runs until January 13. Performances at 1.30pm, 2.30pm, 6pm and 7pm. Tickets from £9. Box office 08700 500511 or visit: www.lyric.co.uk