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Hirst catalogue tots up 1,400 spots

Trade divided over whether publication will enhance or undermine the value of the artist's signature works

By Cristina Ruiz. Art Market, Issue 245, April 2013
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One of the enduring mysteries of the contemporary art market is to be solved later this spring. The publication of a catalogue listing all the spot paintings made by Damien Hirst since 1986 will reveal that there are around 1,400, according to Jason Beard, the director of Other Criteria, the artist's publishing company, which has produced the book in conjunction with Gagosian Gallery. The majority of the works in the 1,000-page catalogue will be illustrated, and "every single spot painting made will be -listed", Beard says.

Collectors have long speculated about the number of spot canvases in circulation. "I've heard estimates ranging from 2,000 to 7,000," says Harry Blain, co-founder of the gallery Blain/Southern.



Damien Hirst at a preview of "The Complete Spot Paintings 1986-2011" at Gagosian

He believes that the publication will increase confidence in the series because it will allay fears that the paintings are much more numerous than they actually are. He says it will also show the series' variety. "People often say the spot paintings are all the same, but they're not—far from it. The catalogue will give an understanding of the many subsets within [the spot works]." All the same, "people love buying things that are reproduced, and they love it when their own works are published, so [publications are] always good for the market", says the New York dealer Christophe Van de Weghe.

Some observers are more sceptical. A London market source who asked to remain anonymous believes that, far from reassuring collectors, the catalogue will emphasise Hirst's overblown manufacturing process. "Francis Bacon produced between 600 and 700 paintings in his entire career, around half [the number] of the spot paintings. It's the difference between a master artist" and one who just churns out product, says the source, adding that the one aspect of the catalogue that will be interesting will be the ability to discover at what point in time Hirst dramatically increased production of the spots, "when he realised what a money-spinning machine he had created".

Another project, even more ambitious than this one, to publish a catalogue raisonné of Hirst's entire oeuvre is still under discussion, Beard says. Around 18 months ago, the artist's gallery, White Cube, had a note on its website calling for "current and former owners of the artist's work" to contact the gallery. A spokeswoman for White Cube says that the catalogue is not a gallery project but that the information was being collected on behalf of Other Criteria.

The spot-painting catalogue exemplifies the advantages of having a powerful gallery such as Gagosian promoting your work. Now that Hirst has parted company with the dealer, he has no primary representation in the US, although Emmanuel Perrotin, the Parisian gallerist who gave the artist his first solo show in 1991, is opening a branch in New York in September. Perrotin says he has no Hirst



shows planned for the new space, and James Kelly, the chief executive of Hirst's private company, Science Ltd, says that "Damien is not actively seeking new representation" in the US.

This is a mistake, says Van de Weghe, who sells the artist's work on the secondary market. "For sure, [Hirst] needs to find another gallery, because the gallery is going to promote the work, it's going to make clients really excited, it's going to make beautiful shows, it's going to make publications. It's very important that he finds representation in the US. If he doesn't, if he thinks it's not necessary, he's wrong."

Nevertheless, the artist may be keener to exploit new markets in the future. Before he parted company with Gagosian, Hirst had two shows with the gallery's outpost in Hong Kong, and his newest works—canvases decorated with scalpel blades and with butterflies, insects and spiders—are currently on display in White Cube's new branch in Hong Kong (until 4 May).