

The YBAs (Young British Artists)

Background notes

Barry Venning — 03 February 2021



Gavin Turk, *Pop*, 1993. Wax model, clothing, hair, vitrine.
Newport Street Gallery

The YBAs

The term 'Young British Artists' or YBAs (occasionally yBas) has had a complicated history. It was first used in 1992 by the artist, art historian and critic, Michael Corris, who was writing in the leading art world journal, *Artforum*, about the work of a group of young practitioners, most of whom had studied at Goldsmiths College of Art in the late 1980s. Many of those artists, such as Gary Hume, Sarah Lucas, Fiona Rae and Michael Landy, went on to become internationally famous, influential players in the global art world of the late twentieth and early twentieth century. A very few, such as Damien Hirst and (later) Tracey Emin, became household names and fodder for the tabloid press.

At that time, Goldsmiths had developed a particularly radical approach to art education that did away with the notion of artistic specialisation: rather than opting to enter, for example, the painting studio or the printmaking studio, students were encouraged to explore and mix a range of media. In addition, there was less insistence on the primacy of craft skill and a proportionately greater emphasis on the conceptual than in many British art schools. Damien Hirst spoke for many when he said "there wasn't a strict limit to things at Goldsmiths. Like growing a plant for a year and taking it along to seminars, you only have to talk about it for a while to realise it's an interesting idea." As Goldsmiths' students, many of those later dubbed YBAs were tutored by Michael Craig-Martin, who played a significant part not only in developing Goldsmiths' distinctive curriculum, but also in promoting the work of his students. Craig-Martin was very aware how staid and conservative the British commercial art world was at that time and later said that he "had always tried to help my students in any way I could, particularly in those first years after art school. I knew from personal experience how difficult it was—I never had things come easy". When in 1988 a small group of second year undergraduates that included Hirst, Hume, Landy, Rae, Lucas, Angus Fairhurst, Abigail Lane and Richard Patterson elected to stage an ambitious exhibition of their work and that of selected friends, Craig-Martin was instrumental in persuading a number of big names in the British and American art world to attend. The exhibition, *Freeze*, has since been viewed as a defining moment in contemporary British art.



Abigail Lane, *Freeze* opening party

Apart from the art itself, *Freeze* was remarkable for the sheer entrepreneurial gusto with which these young artists, and Damien Hirst in particular, went about making it happen. They found premises in an empty London Port Authority Building, painted it and installed gallery-type lighting, obtained sponsorship for the venue from the London Docklands Development Corporation and persuaded a major property development company, Olympia and York (then in the process of developing Canary Wharf), to subsidise a lavish, professional-looking catalogue with colour photographs of the works on show and a catalogue essay by Ian Jeffrey, one of the Goldsmiths tutors. This entrepreneurial spirit remained a characteristic of much YBA activity, especially on the part of Damien Hirst, who has never ceased to curate shows of his own and his friends' work. Michael Craig-Martin once remarked that he had never encountered such a collegial group of students as the original *Freeze* crowd; if a collector, curator or gallerist showed interest in their work, they would send him or her on to look at the work of friends and colleagues, often artists who were outside their immediate circle. In this way, the term 'Young British Artists' became increasingly elastic. *Freeze* also became the template for a further series of warehouse shows that served not only to consolidate the reputations of the original participants, but also to stretch the term 'Young British Artists' further still.

One such group exhibition was *Gambler*, organised by Carl Freedman and Billee Sellman in July 1990 in a disused Peek Frean's biscuit warehouse in Bermondsey. One notable visitor to the show was Charles Saatchi, who had visited *Freeze* in 1988 but not bought anything at the time. At *Gambler*, Saatchi bought *A Thousand Years*, Hirst's most ambitious piece to date: a large vitrine containing flies and maggots, a dead cow's head and an insect-o-cutor. Like much of Hirst's early work it had a *vanitas* quality to it, for it dealt with the brevity of life and the certainty of death.



Damien Hirst, *A Thousand Years*

During the 1990s, Charles Saatchi became the most prominent collector of work by young British artists to the point where his name is, for many people, inseparable from theirs. He not only collected their works, but displayed them in a series of high profile exhibitions at his own gallery, in St John's Wood, which opened in 1985: an immaculate, white-walled space with abundant natural light that had been a paint warehouse until it was re-purposed by the architect, Max Gordon. Saatchi's exhibitions of work by young British artists received no less critical and public attention than his earlier series of prestigious shows featuring work by well-established international artists like Lucien Freud, Andy Warhol, Richard Serra and Philip Guston.

For many people, Saatchi's shows were the first opportunity to see pieces such as Rachel Whiteread's breakthrough work, *Ghost*, which she made by casting in plaster the interior of a Victorian living room at 486 Archway Road in North London.



Rachel Whiteread, *Ghost* (installation photo in the Saatchi Gallery, St. John's Wood)

Ghost had been exhibited before at the Chisenhale Gallery, London, the Arnolfini Gallery in Bristol and even in the Netherlands at the Stedelijk Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven, but as part of Saatchi's Young British Artists exhibition in 1992, it reached a yet wider public. Since that exhibition included Hirst as well as Whiteread, the two artists became associated in the public mind, in spite of the fact that, unlike Hirst and many of the *Freeze* artists, Whiteread was a much more reticent, media-shy personality practicing a very different form of art. They both came up for the count as 'YBAs', an acronym that was first coined in 1996 in the British art magazine, *Art Monthly*, but popularised by Charles Saatchi, who helped to turn it from a piece of descriptive shorthand into a powerful brand that was known worldwide and which became a handy marketing tool for British contemporary art as a whole in the 1990s.

Central to this branding process was the exhibition provocatively titled *Sensation*, which comprised works by younger British artists, solely drawn from the collection of Charles Saatchi. It was shown at the Royal Academy in 1997 before moving on to the Hamburger Bahnhof, Berlin, in 1998 and finishing at the Brooklyn Museum, New York in 2000. It attracted huge crowds at each city, but it also caused acrid controversy in London and New York. In London, the furore arose over Marcus Harvey's large painting of the moors murderer, Myra Hindley, which brought down the wrath of the tabloids. It was vandalised twice and provoked demonstrations in which the Academy's windows were broken. In New York, it was Chris Ofili's painting, *The Holy Virgin Mary*, that created uproar. Ofili's image of a black Madonna, accessorised with elephant dung and small collaged details from pornography magazines, went almost unnoticed in London, but in New York it enraged the city's mayor, Rudy Giuliani, who threatened to cut the museum's funding.

Its provocative title did many of the artists no favours, for by no means all the work in *Sensation* courted outrage. Apart from the sober sculptural work of Rachel Whiteread or the fascinating abstract paintings of Ian Davenport or Fiona Rae, it also included the whimsical art of Simon Patterson, one of the original exhibitors at *Freeze*, whose lithograph *The Great Bear* renames the stations on Harry Beck's tube map after a host of celebrities, including comedians, scientists, saints and sporting stars.



Michael Landy, *Breakdown*, 2001

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