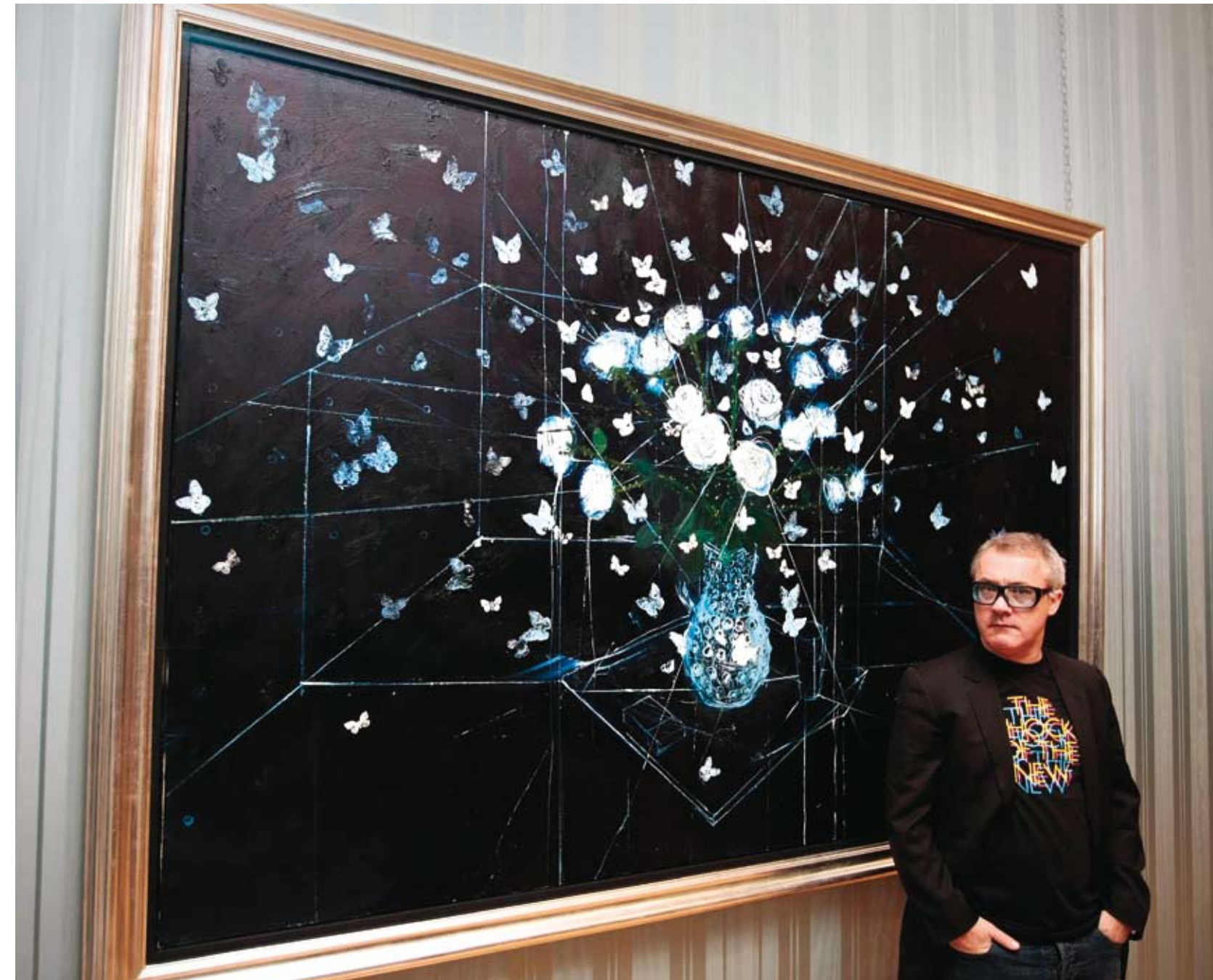


## Into the Dustbin

Eight aspects of art produced in the last 20 years suggest that we are once again in a decadent era for art — BEN LEWIS

**T**he contemporary art boom, which lasted from around 2003 until October 2008, was not just a commercial enterprise, it was an evangelizing ideological mission, which sought to convert the whole world to its creed. It presented, firstly, an argument for what was important — and even beautiful — in the art of the age in which we live; secondly, it presented an argument about the art for which our age will be remembered; and, finally, it also presented an argument for the character that will be ascribed to our age on account of the art for which it is remembered.

The proselytizers of contemporary art argued that we were living in a Golden Age. A generation of living artist-geniuses — Damien Hirst, Richard Prince, Takashi Murakami, Gerhard Richter, Neo Rauch, Anselm Kiefer, Gilbert & George, Jeff Koons, Andreas Gursky, Lucien Freud (no women here) — led the way. Behind them came a larger second division — Cecily Brown, Elizabeth Peyton, Cindy Sherman, Thomas Struth, Maurizio Cattelan, etc. And behind them came a third division of thousands of little-known emerging artists who filled the booths of galleries at art fairs. Art was more popular than it had ever been. Rich philanthropists were engaged in a wave of museum-building, and the new galleries were full, as never before, with a mass public. In Britain, we had a new statistic, culled in 2006: More people went to art galleries than football matches. New contemporary art cultures were suddenly becoming visible in parts of the world where they had never been visible before — China, India, the Middle East — with their own great artists, like Subodh Gupta, Zhang Xiaogang and Ai Weiwei. According to this triumphalist narrative, the new art spoke to us eloquently sometimes about love, life and death, and sometimes about consumer society, gender and colonial histories. The art of our age has defined the “revival” of beauty and by its cleverly ironic tone, as Pop fused with Conceptual art, and also by its flawless finish (its high production values). This was the “Age of Fabrication,” the logical next





step after the “removal of the hand of the artist.” A new past was found for this new present. The godfathers of the new Golden Age were Duchamp, Warhol, Fontana and Klein. Warhol and Duchamp were already stars, but Fontana and Klein were important, too, as artists whose visually stunning abstract “proto-conceptual” icons in the 1950s – the slashes and tears, sponges and patented colors – had already embraced the commodification of art. We lived in a time in which art had become a hotly traded repetitious commodity, but that was one of the defining novel characteristics of the “Age of Bling.” Today, the contemporary art boom is over. The art markets may be staging a guarded recovery, but the big money is going on the famous names of modernism, not the new contemporary art stars. It now looks like many of the biggest names of the last ten years – Warhol, Koons and many of the emerging stars from Anselm Reyle to Zeng Fanzhi – were commercially over-valued, and their prices at auction have dipped by around 50 percent. But it was not merely a question of pricing, as most of the art world claims. The art world is attempting to ring-fence the intellectual dimension of its boom. The economic question cannot be isolated from the aesthetic one. Now that we know the economic rules by which we operated for ten years brought most of the world’s developed economies to the brink of collapse, we must also ask whether the artistic rules by which we have operated also involved a kind of endgame.

Of course, the art world is not monolithic and there has been some important art produced in the last ten years, by which I mean art that will enter the canon (i.e., be admired by future generations for its artistic qualities not just its historical place). Yet despite the complexity of the scenography, the art that

rose to prominence during the boom – at art fairs, auctions and in the private homes and museums of billionaires – is distinguished mostly by a quality other than importance: decadence.

### The Spirit of the Age

At certain points in art history, art lapses into decadence. “Grand Styles” become formulated as sets of rules. There is exaggeration and multiplication instead of development.

A once-new armory of artistic concepts, processes, techniques and themes becomes an archive of visual tropes, quotations or paraphrasings, ultimately assuming the mode of self-parody. It must be said that decadent art possesses other qualities, which do not necessarily have to be stigmatized as “bad,” and are often articulated with great sophistication. Often it displays staggering technical skill. It may dazzle us with its beauty, amaze us with its scale or charm us with its wit. It always trumpets the spirit of its age.

In “decadent” eras, there is often an accompanying surge of interest in art. Artists become celebrities. The market booms as the art stagnates. Decadent art is almost always derided by the leading art critics of the day – but to little effect. Periods of decadent art often seem to occur before the massive political change, like the French Revolution, Reformation or World War I.

Thus, the Renaissance concluded as Mannerism; Baroque dissipated into Rococo; Romanticism and Neoclassicism degenerated into the academic history painting and Orientalism of the end of the 19th century. During the last ten years, I believe we have witnessed the same process not just for conceptualism (perhaps the dominant art movement of the last 30 years) but for the entire modernist project, which has become

a self-perpetuating, formulaic, though often brilliantly organized collection of gimmicks and ploys. Let’s call it “decamodernism.” I finally went to see Damien Hirst’s new paintings at the Wallace Collection. As I looked at these unimpressive canvases, most of which had been smeared in crude black strokes and were thickly varnished, as if to conceal numerous mistakes, my mouth was agape in an expression that combined disbelief, a repressed smile and pity. I was looking at the monster in its death throes and, for the first time, I felt sympathy for it, as it gasped its last breath. A wave of guilt swept over me, as I realized that all those articles I and other critics had written complaining about the repetitiveness of the spots, spins and skulls had probably played a part in propelling Hirst to make something infinitely worse. But I also felt vindication.

This was an apotheosis.

It wasn’t the poor quality of the work – it was, far more, its exhibition in such an illustrious setting. A group of art world curators, critics and administrators appeared to actually believe that this work merited (or were cynical enough to conspire to organize) such a prestigious display. It later turned out that Hirst had donated £250,000 to the Wallace Collection. Victor Pinchuk and François Pinault were reported to have bought a number of canvases. The whole project – pursued by an informal alliance of global billionaire collectors (Pinault, Bernard Arnault, the Mugrabis, Pinchuk, Peter Brant, et al.) and contemporary art auctioneers (Tobias Meyer, Francis Outred, Simon de Pury) and art fairs (Frieze, Basel, Miami) and some public museums, like L.A. MOCA, the Hamburger Bahnhof and Guggenheim – was now, if not proven to be bankrupt, at the very least called into serious question by this self-unmasking of its leading figure.

Most of the reviewers of this exhibition were outraged that Hirst’s paintings should be exhibited so close to masterpieces by Rembrandt and Poussin, but as I ascended the Wallace Collection’s grand staircase, I saw something that made me think the opposite. Two giant canvases by the French rococo artist François Boucher hung over the stairwell. Flocks of rosey-cheeked cherubs floated around fluffy white clouds, on which topless girls reclined. Notwithstanding the technical skill of Boucher, this was surely the perfect historic contextualization for Hirst. For just as Boucher’s art represented the degradation of the Renaissance’s classical and Christian values into a heavenly zone of soft porn, bereft of conflict, tension and strong moral values, so the art of Hirst represents the degeneration of the modernist project – from sweeping away the “bourgeois relics” of art to a set of eye-pleasing and sentimental visual tropes.

### Mannerism

“Decadent” is not the perfect adjective to describe the final phases of great movements – but the best word has already been taken. Mannerism is the term used to describe the art of Florence and Rome in the terminal stages of the Renaissance, from the 1520s until the end of the century. Artists such as Giulio Romano, Pontormo, Rosso and Parmigianino produced elaborate religious compositions, whose figure poses were derived from the classic works of Michelangelo and Raphael. Vasari called it *il maniera*. The English adjective is “mannered.” Instead of the Renaissance precept of study from nature, the Mannerists studied the artists who had studied from nature. Instead of invention, the balanced twisting postures of the High Renaissance were exaggerated. Limbs, especially necks,

literally became longer, especially in Pontormo’s paintings. In the battles scenes by Giulio Romano the crowds got bigger and denser. The art was magnificent but artificial – typified by Rosso’s early *Moses and the Daughters of Jethro* (1523–24). Here the rippling musculature that Michelangelo and Leonardo had studied from live models and dissections, now became a decorative pattern of ripples on the surface of bodies. As S.J. Freedberg writes in his classic study *Painting in Italy 1500–1600*, “The accomplishment of Raphael and Michelangelo required to be taken as an example before the experience nature could afford.”

### Boucher and Rococo

Born in 1703 into a lower middle class family of artisan-painters, François Boucher was a precocious talent, apprenticed to the leading painter and then engraver of his day and winning the Grand Prix de Rome at the age of 20. In the 1730s and ’40s Boucher created his own “lite” version of the genre of history painting, by abandoning its epic themes, strong moral exhortations and dark palette. Instead, he painted mildly eroticized classical subjects like shepherds and shepherdesses or the Lesbian encounter of Jupiter and Callisto. He formulated a Virgilian “pastoral” world of half-naked women, sexual flirtation and often feminized men in rural settings, with a sweet icing-like palette of bright greens, light blues and pinks. These kind of scenes became a genre in their own right known as “fêtes gallantes.” Boucher was patronized equally by French aristocrats and nouveau-riche merchants. In 1765 he was appointed court painter. He made many versions of the same work, for different clients, deliberately supplying them with his trademark product. He presented *Shepherd and Shepherdess Reposing*

#### Images

Takashi Murakami / *Miss Ko 2*

1997, oil, acrylic, fiberglass and iron, 186x68x65 cm

Courtesy of Marianne Boesky Gallery

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Damien Hirst Next to his work at the Wallace Collection

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## No one said this was going to be easy. Most art theory of the past ten years has been about valorizing “negative” concepts, like the theft and/or appropriation or the incompetence of “deskilled” art



to one collector as one of pair of “pretty pictures” with “a bit of everything.” As the art historian Melissa Hyde has written, “From modest beginnings as the son of an obscure guild painter, Boucher attained a level of wealth and celebrity that most artists only dreamed of. Indeed after 1740, he was the artist that his contemporaries either imitated or measured themselves against.” We could be writing the same thing today about some of the current contemporary art stars. Boucher was not a crap artist. He shared, as we shall see, many of the virtues of “decadent” art. He swept aside the yellowing palette of Poussin, Claude Lorrain and other history painters. The pompous battle scenes of Le Brun gave way to charming rural flirtations. Machismo was replaced by effeminate playfulness. The quality of Boucher’s production – his painting – was high. One of his most interesting paintings is of his most important patron, *Madame de Pompadour at her Toilette* (1756). The famous mistress sits in front of her mirror applying the thick white powder and rouge that was de rigueur at court at the time. But this is not just a court portrait; it is work, which in a style comparable to contemporary “conceptual” painters, ironically folds into itself the criticisms made about it. In 18th-century France, there was a well-known critique of painting as “make-up.” In a distant echo of Plato, the 17th-century thinker Roger de Piles criticized painting as an exercise in deception, akin to cosmetics – “*Le beau fard*” (“The beautiful makeup”). Boucher himself received frequent criticism for painting women who had already “painted” themselves with makeup. There was particular objection made to his use of unnatural pinks and violets. In this painting, however, Boucher embraces this critique by painting the “making-up.” In a further twist, Madame de Pompadour is

positioned looking at the reflection of herself and holding her powder brush as if she is an artist painting her own self-portrait. Here is a work of art that celebrates its own superficiality and, in doing so, absorbs any criticism made against it, like one of Warhol’s celebrities or Koons’ vacuum cleaners – or Hirst’s *Golden Calf*, which ironizes the adulation his art receives.

Yet these Rococo paintings were deliberately frivolous, devoid of strong emotions or values. The rape victims are compliant, and in these rural idylls, you won’t find a dying soldier who has laid down his life for his country or the heroic victory of a Greek warrior over a many-headed serpent. The French revolution was a few decades away, yet here was an escapist art form that contained no trace of the social tensions or liberal politics that the philosophers and reformers of the day were already discussing.

This was visual escapism for the ancien régime and liberal-minded critics knew it. “We have rightly bemoaned seeing our salons governed by a coquettish mannered elegance and a precious and flowery tone, which one might call the Doratism [i.e., the gold-plating] of painting,” wrote the contemporary writer Robert-Martin Lesuire. Meanwhile, the opinions of the French Enlightenment philosopher Diderot were so scathing that they could only be published after his death in 1784: “His elegance, his affected winsomeness, his novelistic gallantry, his coquetry. His taste, his facility, his made-up complexions, his debauchery necessarily captivate fops, little women, young men, society people, the crowd of those who are strangers to real taste, to the truth, to just ideas, and to the seriousness of art: How could they resist the ostentation, the libertinage, the brilliancy, the pompons, the bosoms and the bottoms, Boucher’s licentious epigrams?”

### The Academic Painters

Boucher is still regarded as one of the defining artists of his century, but not all mannerist artists have enjoyed such a fate. In the mid-19th century another decadent era in art arose. This time there was an international art boom, comparable to our own. Paris, London, Vienna and New York witnessed an unprecedented craze for (what was then) contemporary art – neoclassical academic painting. Half a million people visited the annual Salon in Paris, where more than 2,000 works were on show. Caricatures of the most famous or controversial works appeared in the newspapers the day after the opening. A network of dealers sprang up for the first time (just as hundreds of new galleries have been established across the world’s cities in the last ten years). Newly rich and relatively uneducated American retail entrepreneurs and industrialists went on spending sprees, trying to build up collections in years to rival ones assembled in Europe over centuries (similar to Ukrainian oligarch Victor Pinchuk today). The demand was so great that collectors bought pictures before they were finished – or without even seeing them – paying occasionally by wire transfer. (Compare the way, in the contemporary art boom, works of art were bought on the basis of e-mailed JPEGs.) There was a new generation of celebrity artists: William-Adolphe Bouguereau, Jean-Léon Gérôme and Thomas Couture in Paris; Hans Makart in Vienna; Lawrence Alma Tadema, John Everett Millais and Edwin Longsdon Long in London. Prices shot up for the best-known names, doubling year on year. The British art critic John Ruskin bought Meissonier’s painting of the Napoleonic War 1814 in 1871 for 1,000 Guineas and sold it in 1877 for 6,000 Guineas.

No matter which country they worked in, all these artists produced similar kinds of work:

#### Images

##### Jeff Koons / Balloon Dog (Yellow)

1994-2000, high chromium stainless steel with transparent color coating, 307.3x363.2x114.3 cm

© Jeff Koons

The entire article is available in **programma** issue 02.