

NEW IMAGES

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Even before the idea, the artist had the title for the piece. He was writing an essay about the work of Robert Longo, and in one part he wrote it was about *the physical impossibility of death in the mind of someone living*. It was poetic—all the clumsy Bs and Ps in it, and how it tried to explain something that wasn't there, or was there. He liked the way it went bubbada-bubbada-bubbada. It really stuck in the mind.

He'd always looked at pictures and read stories about sharks. They had this really powerful horror. He thought if he could actually get a shark into a gallery—because he didn't want to paint one, and he didn't want to have, like, a really beautiful Cibachrome light-box, or a photograph—if he could get one in a space, actually in liquid, big enough to frighten you, so you feel you're in there with it, feel it could eat you, it would work.

He went down to Billingsgate Market and said to the guy, "Oh, can you get me a shark?"

The guy said: "Oh yeah, any size you want."

He said: "You can get me a twelve-foot shark?"

"Yeah."

The fisherman told him how much it was per pound and he thought he'd worked it out. But then later the fisherman said he couldn't get it, which really fucked the artist up, because he had planned to put it in a big show. It was also an extra cost for him. It meant he couldn't make a lot of money on it.

Looking at a map, the artist took down the names of all the towns on the coast of the Great Australian Bight. Then he got the phone numbers of the main post offices in the towns, and started calling them one by one. When someone answered, he asked them to put up a poster with his number on it saying he wanted a shark. The phone never stopped ringing. Mad fucking crazy shark fisherman calling up.

There was a system the artist had used when he'd worked as a telemarketer at a company called M.A.S. Research, and he realized he could use the same system to rank the fishermen calling him from Australia. It was like: Good, Maybe, Slightly possible, Idiot, Madman. He gave them all a grade. Both the artist and his gallerist's number were on the poster, so he'd be at his gallerist's house drinking at four in the morning, getting drunk, and the gallerist would go, "It's a bloke from Australia." They narrowed it down further and further. One day, a friend of the artist said he'd heard of this great guy in Australia, a shark hunter called Vic Hislop. So the artist and the gallerist got a load of information on him too. In the end, Vic Hislop was the best, so they just chose him.

The shark hunter said:

My son and I have risked our lives many times, just the two of us against the ocean and the big sharks. We've drifted around in swamped boats for days and been pulled overboard at night tangled in ropes. When I was thirteen, my friend's father flipped his trawler and disappeared, along with six other men. Two days later an arm and a leg washed up on the beach. After that I decided I had to learn more about killer sharks.

If you want to catch a shark, you have to get the right bait. I use stingrays, which are a treat for a big shark. I've got plenty of them in the freezer. Once the shark takes the bait, it'll tow the boat, sometimes for hours. That's why I only have a small boat, a little aluminum one. The shark circles and fights until it's too tired to go on. Sometimes you can just shoot them, but I couldn't shoot Hirst's sharks because he wanted them to look pristine, so I towed them in. Once another shark came along and bit the tiger I was towing in and wrecked it. That was a sore point, even though England still wanted the tail. He was a big bastard.

The next thing to do, once the shark was back on land, was to freeze it, stomach contents and all. I used hooks and strings to hold the shark in a swimming position, and then I used a screwdriver to pop the jaws to expose its teeth. Sharks have no bone structure, so I slid a long piece of timber down its mouth and into the stomach to support the cartilage and lift it into place. The whole thing was frozen at minus twenty-five degrees Celsius, wrapped in plastic bags to keep the shark from losing size. If not it would probably lose about a fifth of its size from dehydration.

I used to preserve sharks in formaldehyde thirty years ago. I made a steel hose out of brake line and filled it every twelve inches. That's the way to do it. I don't do it anymore because one day I was pumping away when the line burst and it sprayed in my eyes. I went to hospital, and they flooded my eyes with saline. I've had some near misses for sure.

Later, the shark hunter said that he'd sent Hirst a great white shark that he'd had for years on his property in a makeshift freezer. He'd caught it before the great white became a protected species. To get it through customs, he had to prove the date of the kill by showing a picture of his son, who was twenty-six, as a nine-year old, posing with the shark. That shark became *The Immortal*, exhibited at the Oceanographic Museum in Monaco. The show horrified wildlife experts. But the shark had been long dead and frozen. He hadn't broken any laws. It was a job well done.

When the artist first started out, he wanted to be a painter, but he couldn't do it. A painter has to start from a white void. It used to screw him up completely. He tried everything to do it, but he never could. After that he started making little collages. If he could go around on the street and find little objects that were already organized, he could arrange them brilliantly.

The collages were good, but something still felt wrong. He spent his days wandering around, going, "I have to make something that's about something ... I have to make something that's about something ..." Because otherwise he was going to end up dippy-dapping around the art world before he'd even got started. He kept chewing on it, repeating the same sentence, "It has to be about something important."

When he was really young, he wanted to know about death. He went to the morgue. Seeing the bodies made him feel sick. He thought he was going to die. It was awful, but he went back, again and again, until he was comfortable enough to draw the bodies. The point where death starts and life stopped, for him, in his mind, before he saw the morgue, was there. Now he was holding them. And they were dead bodies. Death was moved a bit further away.

He didn't know where the idea came from, but one day he said to himself, "What if I had a life cycle in a box? And what if it was a rotting fucking head, and it was real, and it had flies on it?" It was by far the best piece he'd ever thought of.

Later the artist met Lucian Freud, who came up to him and said, "I've seen the fly piece. And I think you started with the final act."

Not only had Lucian Freud seen it, but Francis Bacon too. The artist heard about it over the phone from his gallery. The person calling him said, "I don't know if this is interesting to you, but Francis Bacon's here, and he's been in front of your piece for an hour." He didn't know what to say. It actually embarrassed him a little. At the time he thought it was probably best for him to play it down.

The artist told people in interviews he'd seen the fly piece mentioned in one of Francis Bacon's last letters. Francis Bacon wrote, "Hi blah blah I'm not feeling well blah blah it was great to see you the other day. Just went to the Saatchi Gallery and saw this show of new British artists. Bit creepy blah blah. There's a piece by this new artist"—the artist didn't remember whether Francis Bacon mentioned his name—"and it's got a cow's head in it and a fly-killer and loads of flies and they fly around. It kind of works." It kind of works! Like: "Nice toilet upstairs." It kind of works. *Fantastic*, said the artist.

The shark piece and the fly piece were the centerpieces of the artist's big show at the Saatchi Gallery. When he exhibited the fly piece before he did it with a real cow's head. It stunk the place out. People wouldn't go in the room. The head was rotting, and had maggots under the skin. The artist said, "Leave it!" But people were freaking out. In the end, he had to compromise. He took it out, nearly retching. Flaps of skin were peeling off, and the head was covered in maggots. He put it in a dustbin and lit it on fire. The head burned until it was a black mass. Then he took the black mass out of the dustbin and put it back in the vitrine, because he still wanted it to be real. The room stank for weeks.

The artist toyed with the idea of doing a certificate for Saatchi, stipulating that he had to have a real head in the vitrine. He wanted a real cow's head in there. The problem was that if you have a real cow's head, no one goes and looks at it. That much he was aware of. The artist thought, "I'm not into stinking everyone out of the gallery. I'm into drawing them into the gallery." That made it less of a compromise. So what if they go, "Fake head!" He didn't give a shit, so long as they thought it was real. If they didn't know, he didn't fucking care. He had a fake cow's head made, and spent hours in the gallery, dressing the head up with dog food, ketchup, mayonnaise, and lard—stuff that flies would eat. Everyone asked "Is it real or isn't it real? What the fuck is that?" No one knew, not even Francis Bacon.

On top of the fly piece, Saatchi had offered to fund whatever new artwork the artist wanted to make. The result was the tiger shark suspended in formaldehyde in a vitrine, *Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living*. Saatchi bought it for £50,000.

After the artist sold the shark, he realized it was simple as that. Saatchi says he wants it; they invoice him; someone collects it. Once you put a price on something, you don't really decide who buys it. If Saatchi were to sell it, on the other hand, he would have a problem. And he will eventually, because Saatchi sells everything. He's interested in money, and that's probably why he spent all that money on the shark piece.

He's got all this work—he bought about six pieces, even more maybe—and then he thinks, “If I can pay sixty-thousand for one, all this goes up in value.” Then it gets to a point where you can't get it up any more so he flogs it all off and finds another artist. The artist didn't mind all that though.

Right from the beginning, people told the artist he was selling out. There was this one guy who told him: “You're selling to the fucking Saatchis. How can you do that? Morally?” It was always “the Saatchis” even though Doris, Saatchi's wife, had passed away. The artist took it seriously, at first. He thought, “God, I've fucked up. I've fucked up.” He had been caught up in the whole world of it. The guy was right, he was going that route.

The thing was, Saatchi also bought something from the righteous guy's degree show. This made the artist come to realize that the whole time he was the only one losing sleep over it. The other guy just didn't give a fuck. He spent a year bending the artist's ear about it, and then, bang—sold immediately, like that. There was no discussion, nothing. The artist thought, “Oh I see. That's all there is to it.”

Eventually the artist won the Turner Prize, and after that, he had the best two years of his life taking drugs and drinking with his friend Keith. For him it was all part of the art. It was a big celebration. Every night, when the drugs wore off, instead of going to bed on his own, hating himself, feeling like shit and wanting to commit suicide, he'd sit together with Keith. “This is the best bit!” they would say, and they would force themselves through it and fight it out. The other people would be asking if there were any more drugs, and the artist and Keith would say no. The people would say they were going home. “Well, fucking go home then,” the artist and Keith would say. “We're not. We're staying out, because we love this bit. The best bit.”

Not too many years later, the artist started blacking out. He figured he liked to mix his drinks, not sticking to one drink. He thought, why not cocaine and drink? It turned him into a babbling wreck overnight. He would be walking around in the morning and people would be telling him, “You did this,” even though he had no memory of it at all.

The shark hunter was of course aware of the artist's success. He thought it was brilliant when he saw pictures of the sharks he'd supplied splashed over papers around the world. He didn't care how much the artist's work sold for. It has the artist's name on it. He's famous. The shark hunter had to take his hat off to him. Of course, the sharks wouldn't last. They were bound to decay, and it wouldn't even take all that long. Formaldehyde is not a perfect form of preservation. The difference was that the artist wasn't using formaldehyde to preserve his artwork for posterity. He was using it to communicate an idea.

He got it right reminding people of what's out there in the deep. There could be a person in one of the sharks and you wouldn't know.