

Cutting-edge young artists put the knife into Damien

Alice O'Keeffe, arts and media correspondent
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On the face of things, Kate MccGwire and Damien Hirst have a lot in common. They are both British artists and, like Hirst, MccGwire's career got off to a flying start when Charles Saatchi bought one of her student works. They also share a fascination with animal remains - Brood, the MccGwire work purchased by Saatchi last year, is made from the wishbones of 22,000 battery chickens arranged in a spiral. The differences between them, however, indicate a growing schism between the generations of artists in Britain. MccGwire, a mature student, graduated from the Royal College of Art last year, and she is far from impressed with the legacy of the (now not so) Young British Artists.

'I don't think the YBAs have anything like the same impact as they once did,' said MccGwire. 'The people who used to be new and cutting-edge are now part of the establishment. It seems almost like they're just churning things out, especially people like Hirst with his spin paintings and all the works he doesn't actually make himself. It's a bit of a factory really.'

The continuing obsession with the YBAs, MccGwire said, makes things all the more difficult for those trying to break through now. 'It does feel like quite a closed market,' she said. 'You just slog on hoping to get noticed, and it's very difficult to find your space. I've been luckier than some - I'm doing five shows this year. Selling the work to Saatchi has been a fantastic launch pad but it's difficult.'

MccGwire is currently participating in a new exhibition, 'Peculiar Encounters', which markets itself as 'The Rebirth of Young British Art'. But those expecting festering cow carcasses and smelly bedsheets will be disappointed. 'It's very difficult to shock people now anyway - you can't compete with the news,' said MccGwire. 'When everyday life is so shocking, art has to be different.'

Nevertheless the works by 23 'emerging artists', including Katy Moran and Sarah Douglas, who were both named in Art Review's list of top 25 emerging artists, will be displayed in a disused abattoir in east London. 'We wanted to exhibit in a challenging space,' said Sarah Dwyer, who is co-curating the show with her fellow Royal College of Art graduate Laura Green. 'But the work is certainly not as sensationalist as that produced by the YBAs. I think in art circles that has really gone out of fashion. Some of the YBAs did fantastic work, but I'm from a fine art background, and in those terms they didn't make a such a significant contribution.'

The YBAs still have their defenders in the art world. Clarrie Wallis, curator of contemporary art at Tate Britain, has been putting together the Tate Triennial 2006, which opens next March and showcases the work of 35 new British artists. 'Sarah Lucas' latest exhibition at Tate Liverpool highlights the fact that the YBA generation continue to make significant works,' she said. 'In my experience many young artists are revisiting more conceptual practices rather than thinking about the kind of finished objects which Damien Hirst did so brilliantly. But he continues to be a very important artist.'

Tim Marlow, arts presenter for Five and curator at the White Cube Gallery, which represents the Chapman Brothers and Tracey Emin, agrees. 'I'm not so sure British art needs a rebirth,' he said. 'Every few months someone will say that the YBA generation is over, and it's always complete rubbish. The irony is that this "next generation" is still piggybacking on their reputation to get attention.'

'It's inevitable, and in some senses a cliché, for young artists to put the boot in to the generation which came before. But I would advise them not to be so hung up on the YBAs and get on with their own work.'

· 'Peculiar Encounters' is at 187-211 St John St, London EC1, from 18 November to 2 December.