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DO THE YOUNG BRITISH ARTISTS RULE
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POSTMODERN ART FROM NEW YORK?):
EVIDENCE FROM THE AUCTION MARKET

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, some English critics have claimed that Damien Hirst and his fellow young British artists have made London the new center of the advanced art world. As Hirst reaches the age of 40, this paper uses auction results to measure the importance of the YBAs compared to their American peers. Auction prices show that the YBAs do rule over their American rivals: both Hirst and the English painter Chris Ofili have had individual works sell for more than \$1 million, a level no American artist under 40 has achieved. Whether London can continue its success will depend in part on whether it can match New York's ability to attract important artists born in other countries.

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Introduction

These Americans have had it all their own way for far too long.
Damien Hirst, 1999¹

As early as 1948, the American critic Clement Greenberg made the shocking declaration that “the main premises of Western art have at last migrated to the United States,” and that New York had replaced Paris as the center of the world of advanced art.² During the early 1950s, the growing recognition that Jackson Pollock, Willem de Kooning, Mark Rothko, and their fellow Abstract Expressionists were the leading artistic innovators of their time led to a widespread acceptance of Greenberg’s proposition among American observers.³ The subsequent revolution, which began in the late 1950s, in which the experimental approach of the Abstract Expressionists was overthrown by a series of conceptual innovations made by Jasper Johns, Robert Rauschenberg, the Pop artists, and the Minimalists, was carried out entirely in New York, and only served to emphasize the American dominance of the contemporary art world. By 1983, the preeminence of New York was so obvious that even a French scholar, Serge Guilbaut, conceded the point and wrote a monograph explaining *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art*.⁴

Within the past decade, however, a number of English critics have claimed that New York has been displaced as the center of the advanced art world by London, as a result of the achievements of the young British artists, or YBAs. The YBAs burst onto the art scene in 1988, in *Freeze*, a group exhibition held in an empty warehouse in London’s Docklands. The show was curated by Damien Hirst, who was then an art student at Goldsmiths’ College, and nearly all the exhibitors were fellow students of Hirst’s.⁵ *Freeze* was soon followed by a series of similar group exhibitions, and the artists involved, with some others of their generation, gained a

common identity as a new movement in art. The label for the group was cemented by a series of shows presented by the collector and dealer Charles Saatchi, beginning in 1992, titled *Young British Artists*.⁶

In 1995 Richard Cork, the art critic for *The Times*, observed that “New art in this country enjoys an outstandingly high reputation today. Curators, critics and collectors in many different countries are excited about the vitality of British artists.” Cork observed that the YBAs “have proved that Britain is capable of producing a remarkably self-assured and inventive generation busily redefining accepted ideas about what art can be,” and speculated that “they may well go on to win for modern British art an even higher reputation than the one it already enjoys.”⁷ In 1997 Norman Rosenthal, the Exhibitions Secretary of the Royal Academy of Arts, London, cautiously but firmly raised the possibility that London had already overtaken New York:

Can London become the unchallenged center for the practice and presentation of contemporary art? In the past, Paris, New York and even Düsseldorf have been able aggressively to claim this role, by virtue of the density of activity in each city over considerable periods of time, with many artists, as well as collectors and galleries, contributing to the debate with originality and daring. If London could now claim such a position, that would be a first, and surely grounds for celebration.⁸

And in 1998, in an early example of the definite assertion of English preeminence, the critic Matthew Collings, who received an MA in Fine Art from Goldsmiths’ College, flatly declared: “Always remember, New Yorkers, young British art now dominates the world, even your world.”⁹

In the long run, artistic importance depends on influence: the most important artists are those who have the greatest impact on the art of the next generation. In the past, gauging artistic

influence might require decades, for there could be substantial lags in the diffusion of significant inventions. As will be discussed below, however, these lags are generally shorter today, for the nature of contemporary art allows innovations to diffuse quickly, and allows new methods to be adopted quickly by other artists. It is still possible for influence to manifest itself over longer periods, so an assessment of the importance of the YBAs made today cannot be final. Yet as Damien Hirst arrives at the age of 40, it is of some interest to see how the YBAs are doing, based on the returns to date.

The Market Test

The art world's about money.

Damien Hirst, 1996¹⁰

The auction market provides a vast amount of information about the relative importance of different artists. Many in the art world are dismissive of this evidence, claiming that auction outcomes are uncorrelated with genuine artistic importance, but recent research has shown that this claim is wrong.¹¹ And interestingly, although it has long been fashionable for artists to express a lack of interest in the market, in recent decades some leading contemporary artists have openly pursued and embraced success in the market. Perhaps most succinctly, Jeff Koons declared that “The market is the greatest critic.”¹²

This study will use auction outcomes to measure the importance of the YBAs compared to that of their American peers. Each artist will be ranked according to the highest price for which his or her work has ever sold at auction.¹³

Most of the YBAs were born during the 1960s. For comparison to American artists, they will be divided into two 10-year birth cohorts: those born during 1955-64, who are currently

between the ages of 41-50, and those born during 1965-74, aged 31-40 in 2005. More of the YBAs are in the second of these cohorts than the first, and the comparisons will therefore indicate whether British artists have gained in importance relative to Americans over time. A further important point involves who will be considered an American or British artist. These designations will be assigned not by place of birth or by citizenship, but by place of residence.¹⁴ The justification for this is that the interest of this study is not legal, but cultural. Where an artist lives and works determines where he is most influenced by, and most contributes to, the artistic innovations of his time. The analysis will furthermore not be restricted to living artists, for the interest of this study is not exclusively in where the most important art is currently being made, but rather in where it has been made by artists in the relevant birth cohorts.

Tables 1 and 2 rank the top ten American and British artists, respectively, of the first birth cohort, by the measure described above. The comparison clearly favors the Americans. Six Americans have realized higher auction prices than any of their British contemporaries, and nine of the top 10 artists in the two tables combined are Americans. Four Americans have realized auction prices over \$1 million, and nine over \$500,000, compared to no British artists over \$1 million, and only one over \$500,000. One other interesting feature of the tables is the presence of five foreign-born artists among the top 10 Americans, compared to three among the top 10 British artists.

Tables 3 and 4 provide the rankings of the top ten artists from both countries for the second birth cohort. This comparison yields sharply different results. The highest two prices in the two tables are for British artists, as are five of the highest six. Two artists in these tables have realized auction prices over \$1 million, and both are British, as are three of the four artists in the

two tables who have realized prices over \$500,000. The only clear American advantage is in depth, as the tenth American artist has a price more than twice that of the tenth British artist. And as in the earlier comparison, there are more foreign-born artists among the top 10 Americans (three) than among the top 10 British artists (one).

Do the YBAs Rule?

All us lot, we ... caned the ... art world. Absolutely totally
phenomenal. We caned the art world as ... *kids*.
Damien Hirst, 1999¹⁵

As the YBAs enter middle age, the auction market does support the claim that Damien Hirst and other British artists of his birth cohort have made greater contributions to advanced art than American artists their age. The greater depth of the American ranking of Table 3 may provide little comfort for American partisans, for most scholars and critics recognize that a few major artists usually have a disproportionate impact on the art of their time.

Table 1 confirms that the YBAs entered an art world dominated by Americans. Although Koons, Basquiat, and Haring were not much older than the YBAs, they had all had early success that made their examples, and their innovations, available to the British artists before the latter had finished art school. So for example Hirst's celebrated works with dead animals suspended in glass tanks owed a direct debt to Koons' earlier use of glass tanks for his floating basketballs.

Table 4 similarly confirms that Hirst and his fellow YBAs currently hold a clear lead over their American counterparts. Hirst's position in the table supports critical judgments that he has made the greatest impact on the art world of any member of his generation. Table 4 further suggests that Chris Ofili may be emerging as a leading representative of the impact of globalization on fine art, for he traces his influences to the art of Africa. Tables 2 and 4 also point

to a number of other YBAs, including Rachel Whiteread, Jenny Saville, and Tim Noble and Sue Webster, who are already important artists.

Interestingly, this conclusion about the YBAs is supported not only by British critics, but by a leading American critic. In 1999, when Charles Saatchi's collection of the work of a number of YBAs was presented at the Brooklyn Museum as *Sensation*, Arthur Danto declared that it displayed "an exuberance, a confidence, a swagger unfortunately not to be found in the demoralized American art world of today." Danto observed that "virtually everything in this gallery is the kind of reflection on art in which so much of modern and contemporary art consists," and specifically praised the work of Damien Hirst, Jenny Saville, and Rachel Whiteread.¹⁶

Does London Rule?

The center of the ... art world's in England. You know that, don't you?

Damien Hirst, 2000¹⁷

The question of whether London has passed New York for the leadership of the advanced art world is more complicated. It is unlikely that New York will soon be replaced as the business center of the art world, and its major market. Yet the intriguing question is whether London will become established as the central place for the production of new art. The English critics quoted earlier believe that it will, and they are not alone. So for example Iwan Wirth, a leading dealer in contemporary art, who might be considered neutral not only because he is Swiss but also because he owns galleries in both London and New York, recently compared the two cities by observing that although New York "will remain the art capital of the world," London "has more creative energy, the most interesting potential."¹⁸ In similar language, Michael Hue-Williams, an English

dealer, observed that “New York is still the much bigger market and has many more artists, but London is full of energy and enthusiasm and certainly giving New York a run for its money at the moment.”¹⁹

During most of the modern era, at any given time there has been a single city that dominated the production of advanced art. Yet because of the nature of contemporary art, it is possible that this will not necessarily continue to be the case. A brief examination of the evolution of modern art will indicate the logic behind this proposition.²⁰

In the late 19th century, major contributions to advanced art were made only by artists who worked in Paris. Vincent van Gogh recognized the connection between Paris and artistic innovation after he had gone to the city to advance his career, as he wrote to a fellow artist who remained in Holland that “There is but one Paris... What is to be gained is *progress* and what the deuce that is, it is to be found here.”²¹ Even the most gifted artists who did not travel to Paris could become only regional figures in art history.

Advances in art, as in other intellectual disciplines, can only be made by those who have a firm understanding of the most advanced work of their time.²² In the late 19th century, this was Impressionism: all the major innovations of the decades after 1880 either built on or reacted against the discoveries of Monet and his colleagues. Impressionism was an experimental art, with goals and methods that could not easily be described precisely, and it could be learned well only through direct contact with its practitioners. Paris consequently was the breeding ground for the movements that constituted the most advanced art of the late 19th century, from Neo-Impressionism and Symbolism to Cézanne’s form of Post-Impressionism.

Paris’ monopoly of advanced art ended in the early 20th century, not only because of the

impact of World War I but also because of the changing nature of advanced art. The conceptual art of the central movements of the first decade of the century, Fauvism and Cubism, could be transmitted much more readily than the experimental art of Impressionism. So for example in Moscow Malevich could make his dramatic conceptual departure into Suprematism without traveling to Paris, because he could understand the recent conceptual developments in Paris merely by seeing paintings by Picasso, Braque, Léger, and others. The conceptual Dada movement also originated outside Paris during World War I, and spread rapidly: in the words of the German Dada artist Hannah Höch, in 1919 when the Dadaists developed photomontage, one of their key innovations, “it happened, strangely enough and simultaneously, in a number of quite diverse countries.”²³

Paris never fully regained its artistic vitality after World War I, and New York’s ascension to the central position in advanced art was accelerated by the migration to America of many important European artists who were fleeing from the Nazis. With the maturation of the experimental art of Abstract Expressionism in the late 1940s and early ‘50s, New York became a necessary destination for the most ambitious young artists, for Pollock, de Kooning, Rothko, and their colleagues produced the major art of their time, and understanding their goals and methods required direct contact with them.

This changed in the late 1950s, when Johns and Rauschenberg introduced new forms of art that initiated an era of conceptual art that has continued to the present. The clarity of this art generally meant that innovations could diffuse more rapidly. So for example in the early ‘60s Richter and Polke could produce important innovations in painting that built directly on those of the American Pop artists in spite of the fact that they had not been to New York, and had seen the

work of Warhol and Lichtenstein only in reproduction. Since the '60s, New York has remained the primary center for the production of advanced art, but it has not had a monopoly even within the US, as for example Nauman, perhaps the most important artist to emerge in the late '60s, has never lived or worked in the city. And the conceptual nature of important recent American art, including that of Nauman and Koons, meant that Damien Hirst, Rachel Whiteread, Sarah Lucas, and the other YBAs could assimilate it and build on it without ever going to New York.

The analysis outlined here explains why the art world will no longer necessarily have a single dominant central location. As long as conceptual approaches predominate, London can continue to be an important source of new art, without requiring that New York decline into a subsidiary role. There remains the question, however, of whether London will in fact continue to produce important new art in generations after the YBAs. It is still too soon to look to the auction market to identify the important artists of the next cohort, who are currently under 30. There is an implicit warning in the statement quoted earlier by Norman Rosenthal, who named Düsseldorf as a previous center of the art world. He was evidently referring to the remarkable period in the early '60s, when Richter and Polke were among the students of Beuys at the Düsseldorf Academy of Art. But that period was an isolated episode, as Düsseldorf did not become a continuing source of artistic innovations. It is too early to tell whether London will be able to continue its success. One relevant issue pointed up by the tables examined above is whether in future London will be able to match New York as a magnet for important artists born in other countries. It has not done so in the past, but the current excitement over London's art scene may serve to change this in future.

Why do the YBAs Rule?

Art's popular. That's my generation. It wasn't before.
Damien Hirst, 2000²⁴

The work of the YBAs is extremely diverse, and is not marked by a common style. A number of critics have attempted to generalize about their art. Thus for example Richard Shone wrote that:

None was motivated by didactic, socio-political issues; all took for granted the lessons of conceptual and minimal art; none was... a legibly figurative artist; and many introduced autobiographical and personal elements into their work. Materials used were invariably demotic, drawn from their immediate environment... Most difficult of all to characterize is perhaps a shared directness and confidence in their imagery, whether dealing in grand, universal themes or in more particular observations from contemporary life.

Shone furthermore observed that “the work of Damien Hirst epitomizes the general change in sensibility... [S]imple, powerful presentation, derived from aspects of minimal art, was the framework for subject matter of a highly charged and, for some, shocking content. He tackled head-on the eternal themes of life, death and regeneration, freedom and liberty, beauty and ugliness.”²⁵

Michael Craig-Martin, an artist and teacher at Goldsmiths' College who is often considered the mentor of the YBAs, stressed the conceptual clarity of their work in explaining its broad appeal: “It never occurred to artists of this generation to make art that people wouldn't get and wouldn't like. They thought that if people didn't get it, then they must have done something wrong. Now that is not what artists of my generation behaved like. There is now a transparency to it all.”²⁶ Damien Hirst agreed, explaining that one of his aims has been to “make art that everybody could believe in.”²⁷ Rachel Whiteread told a critic that “one of the reasons my work is kind of popular is that it's connected with everybody's lives.” The familiarity of the objects and

living spaces she uses in her plaster casts serves to overcome the distrust that so many people have of modern art: “Because so many of my pieces are connected with what everybody has in their homes or relates to in their daily lives, they make them think twice about something.”²⁸

Douglas Gordon stressed that he wanted his work to engage its viewers: “My interest in art is not so much to create valuable or beautiful objects as to create situations that people can go home from and tell stories about.”²⁹

In 2001 an American critic, Jerry Saltz, wrote of the YBAs as a group in a way that is reminiscent of the accounts of American Abstract Expressionists, an earlier group of major artists who also did not share a common style: “the British have something we lack, and that is community, by which I mean a small group of people who spend a fair amount of time together, stay up late, and probably drink and argue about art with one another... [T]here’s a sense of camaraderie that’s absent here.”³⁰ The YBAs may thus be the most recent example of a phenomenon remarked on by Sir Alan Bowness, the former Director of the Tate Gallery, that “Most truly original new art is the result of group activity. It appears that the conjunction of several exceptional talents results in something that is greater than the parts.”³¹

Conclusion

What I do affects the course of art.

Damien Hirst, 1999³²

The auction market provides considerable evidence that the YBAs do rule over their American counterparts. During the past decade the East End of London appears to have become as central to contemporary art as Greenwich Village was in the 1950s: “The Chapmans run a tiny gallery out of Jake’s house, next door to Chris Ofili’s, a block from Gilbert & George’s. Tracey

Emin lives nearby; so do Peter Doig, Marc Quinn, Gary Hume, Wolfgang Tillmans, Tim Noble and Sue Webster, and Rachel Whiteread. Locals boast the area has ‘the highest concentration of working artists in Europe.’³³ In spite of London’s recent success, however, it may be premature for Americans to concede definitely that London has replaced New York as the major generative center for contemporary art, for it will require at least another generation to demonstrate that London will become the next New York rather than the next Düsseldorf.

In the conceptual art world of the past five decades, young geniuses have typically made their main contributions at early ages, and have then quickly been replaced by younger innovators. The YBAs are aware of this, as for example Damien Hirst reflected in 1999 that “Probably the most major piece I’m ever going to make in my lifetime I made right at the beginning.”³⁴ Yet as Hirst recognized, importance in the art world is a function of influence, and his importance seems considerable. So also in 1999 he observed that “The position I’m in now, I’m responsible for a hell of a lot of things to do with the art world.”³⁵ Who is influenced by the YBAs, how, and where, will ultimately determine whether the YBAs will genuinely rule, and whether London will successfully steal the idea of postmodern art from New York.

Notes

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2. Clement Greenberg, *The Collected Essays and Criticism*, Vol. 2 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), p. 215.
3. For references see David W. Galenson, "The New York School versus the School of Paris," *Historical Methods*, Vol. 35, No. 4 (Fall 2002), pp. 141-42.
4. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983).
5. Henry Meyric Hughes and Gijs van Tuyl, editors, *Blast to Freeze: British Art in the 20th Century* (Ostfildern-Ruit, Germany: Hatje Cantz, 2002), p. 292.
6. Duncan McCorquodale, Naomi Siderfin, and Julian Stallabrass, editors, *Occupational Hazard: Critical Writing on Recent British Art* (London: Black Dog Publishing, 1998), p. 134.
7. Richard Cork, *Breaking Down the Barriers: Art in the 1990s* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), pp. 121-28.
8. Brooks Adams, et. al., *Sensation* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1997), pp. 8-9.
9. Matthew Collings, *It Hurts: New York Art from Warhol to Now* (London: 21 Publishing, 1998), p. 33; Louisa Buck, *Moving Targets 2: A User's Guide to British Art Now* (London: Tate Publishing, 2000), pp. 216-17.
10. Hirst and Burn, *On the Way to Work*, p. 63.
11. E.g. David W. Galenson, "Who Are the Greatest Living Artists? The View from the Auction Market," NBER Working Paper 11644 (September 2005).
12. Anthony Haden-Guest, *True Colors: The Real Life of the Art World* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1961), p. 151.
13. All auction prices reported in this paper are nominal. They cover all auctions held through September, 2005.

14. On the place of residence of artists not born in the US or Great Britain, see the following: Table 1: for Cattelan, Gonzalez-Torres, Murakami, and Rondinone, see Uta Grosenick and Burkhard Riemschneider, *Art Now* (Cologne: Taschen, 2002), pp. 88, 180, 320, 440. For Cai see Gilda Williams, *Fresh Cream* (London: Phaidon Press, 2000), p. 172. Table 2: for Tillmans, see Louisa Buck, *Moving Targets 2: A User's Guide to British Art Now* (London: Tate Publishing, 2000), p. 96. Table 3: for Uklanski and Mori, see *Art Now*, pp. 516, 304. For Beecroft, see *Fresh Cream*, p. 124. Table 4: for Mueck, see Brooks Adams, et. al., *Sensation* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1997), p. 203. For Demand, see *Art Now*, p. 112. For Raedecker, see *Fresh Cream*, p. 490.
15. Hirst and Burn, *On the Way to Work*, p. 100.
16. Arthur Danto, *The Madonna of the Future: Essays in a Pluralistic Art World* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), pp. 393-400.
17. Hirst and Burn, *On the Way to Work*, p. 165.
18. Jackie Wullschlager, "Iwan Wirth," *Financial Times*, October 1-2, 2005, p. W3.
19. Susan Moore, "Works Burst out of Cork Street Bottle," *Financial Times* (March 5-6, 2005).
20. For more detailed discussion, see David W. Galenson, *Old Masters and Young Geniuses: The Two Life Cycles of Artistic Creativity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), pp. 86-93.
21. Vincent van Gogh, *The Complete Letters of Vincent van Gogh*, Vol. 2 (London: Thames and Hudson, 1958), p. 515.
22. Clement Greenburg, *Clement Greenburg, Late Writings* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), p. 15.
23. Jaison Gaiger and Paul Wood, *Art of the Twentieth Century* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), p. 113.
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25. Hughes and van Tuyl, *Blast to Freeze*, pp. 293-94.
26. Rosie Millard, *The Tastemakers: U.K. Art Now* (London: Scribner, 2002), p. 21.
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30. Jerry Saltz, *Seeing Out Loud* (Great Barrington, MA: The Figures, 2003), p. 200.
31. Alan Bowness, *The Conditions of Success: How the Modern Artist Rises to Fame* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1989), p. 51.
32. Hirst and Burn, *On the Way to Work*, p. 98.
33. Saltz, *Seeing Out Loud*, p. 200.
34. Hirst and Burn, *On the Way to Work*, p. 134.
35. Hirst and Burn, *On the Way to Work*, p. 98.

Table 1: Ranking of American Artists Born 1955-64

Artist	Place of birth	Date of birth	Highest auction price	Date of sale
1. Jeff Koons	US	1955	\$5,615,750	2001
2. Jean-Michel Basquiat	US	1960	5,509,500	2002
3. Maurizio Cattelan	Italy	1960	3,032,000	2004
4. Felix Gonzalez-Torres	Cuba	1957	1,656,000	2000
5. Christopher Wool	US	1955	848,000	2004
6. John Currin	US	1962	847,500	2004
7. Keith Haring	US	1958	630,619	2004
8. Takashi Murakami	Japan	1963	624,000	2004
9. Cai Guo Qiang	China	1957	562,395	2005
10. Ugo Rondinone	Switzerland	1963	273,600	2005

Source: This and subsequent tables are based on auction data obtained from Artnet.com.

Table 2: Ranking of British Artists Born 1955-64

Artist	Place of birth	Date of birth	Highest auction price	Date of sale
1. Peter Doig	GB	1959	\$632,000	2005
2. Ron Mueck	Australia	1958	531,200	2005
3. Rachel Whiteread	GB	1963	478,400	2004
4. Gary Hume	GB	1962	278,304	2001
5. Sarah Lucas	GB	1962	198,059	2001
6. Thomas Demand	Germany	1964	180,000	2005
7. Tracey Emin	GB	1963	157,936	2001
8. Yinka Shonibare	GB	1962	153,284	2005
9. Mark Wallinger	GB	1959	135,899	2002
10. Michael Raedecker	Netherlands	1963	120,000	2004

Table 3: Ranking of American Artists Born 1965-74

Artist	Place of birth	Date of birth	Highest auction price	Date of sale
1. Elizabeth Peyton	US	1965	\$800,000	2005
2. Matthew Barney	US	1967	400,000	2004
3. Tom Friedman	US	1965	352,000	2005
4. Kara Walker	US	1969	329,600	2005
5. Piotr Uklanski	Poland	1969	168,000	2005
6t. Vanessa Beecroft	Italy	1969	156,500	2002
6t. Mariko Mori	Japan	1967	156,500	2002
8. Ellen Gallagher	US	1965	115,750	2001
9. Doug Aitken	US	1968	114,000	2004
10. Barry McGee	US	1966	113,525	2003

Table 4: Ranking of British Artists Born 1965-74

Artist	Place of birth	Date of birth	Highest auction price	Date of sale
1. Damien Hirst	GB	1965	\$2,225,899	2004
2. Chris Ofili	GB	1968	1,001,600	2005
3. Jenny Saville	GB	1970	537,500	2002
4. Tim Noble & Sue Webster	GB	1966/7	452,800	2005
5. Glenn Brown	GB	1966	402,919	2005
6. Sam Taylor-Wood	GB	1967	142,400	2004
7. Jason Martin	GB	1970	111,317	2005
8. Jake and Dinos Chapman	GB	1962/6	98,555	2001
9. Douglas Gordon	GB	1966	96,000	2002
10. Wolfgang Tillmans	Germany	1968	50,190	2002