



A KINGDOM OF CRYSTAL SKULLS

Artist Laura Kikauka's cut-rate craniums are designed to tweak the nose of the big-money, Damien Hirst-loving art establishment



AVENUE

Questions & Artists



It's been said that imitation is the sincerest form of flattery. But it can also be an ironic, not to mention ingenious, form of criticism. The latter are qualities that shine through — sometimes gaudily so — in Ontario artist Laura Kikauka's low-rent, dollar-store versions of Damien Hirst's mega-expensive diamond-skull masterpiece. Here, on the occasion of a Toronto gallery show at MKG127, Kikauka tells Leah Sandals about the connection between cloning, condemnation and creativity.

Q Your crystal-covered skulls recall Damien Hirst's diamond-covered piece *For the Love of God*. When did you start making them and why?

A I actually started making these shortly after Hirst's skull was released in 2007, when it was being pitched in the media as "the most expensive artwork in the history of contemporary art." I thought, that's interesting ... maybe I can make one. [Laughs.] I consider it a kind of visual satire. Sometimes I'm inspired by things I like, but sometimes things I don't like I can get inspiration from.

Q How many skulls have you made so far?

A I've made about 150 pieces in Canada, and 50 or so in Berlin. Now it's hard to stop! Many artists can be a bit obsessive that way. I used to collect items of a certain colour, like turquoise or red or beige. And it took me years not to see that colour anymore. So this is my personal skull period, as well as a comment on the art world in general.

Q What kind of commentary would you like people to take away from your work, then?

A Well, to me the best is happiness and joy. People come into the gallery who normally wouldn't, because the presentation and style catches their attention.

I guess I'd also like people to be aware of the way that presentation affects the perceived value of an artwork. I sometimes joke that if you hired security guards to stand next to my work it would make the worth of the art go up. Same if you have a humidifier in a corner; it emphasizes a precious aspect in art. But I like my non-precious, low-budget outcomes.

Q So that's why your exhibition in Toronto is so crowded, kind of like a garage sale?

A Actually, for me, this show's exhibition design is pretty minimal! When I do other shows they're often large-scale installations, and I hire assistants to help for a few days; it's floor to ceiling, nothing left untouched. But I like this for a change.

Q Hirst was asking £50-

million for his skull. How much do yours cost?

A Well, they range from \$20 to \$3,000. Normally you can't buy earrings and things like that as art, but I wanted to actually have some things in my friends' price range in case they dropped by.

Q Where do you get the materials for your skull artworks?

A A lot comes from Dollarama. People also donate jewellery to me. Some skulls were from Halloween-type displays.

Q It was recently reported that a box of pencils stolen from a Hirst installation has been valued at £500,000; the teenaged thief seems to be seeking retribution for a previous conflict with the artist about the use of his skull image. What do you think about that?

A I've thought about it, because it makes me wonder if he'd sue if he knew about my skulls. That could be interesting, but that's not the kind of attention I would want, really.

Q Your sculptures, as you've suggested, can be thought of as critical of Hirst. But is there anything you admire about him?

A I think he's an excellent businessman. I really liked how he auctioned his own work at Sotheby's last year, making his gallery buy it from him at top dollar. I thought that was a smooth move. His way of working in the art world goes against the grain, but I think it can be good to shake things up. What kind of artist can get attention these days not by splattering blood, but by actually having something to say?

Q Have you ever met Damien Hirst?

A No, but my dealer in Berlin has met his dealer — and that's about as close as it's probably going to get. I think we go to different dinner parties. And I don't play snooker.

■ Laura Kikauka: *For the Love of Gaud* (Damien's *Worst*) continues to Oct. 10 at MKG127 Gallery in Toronto. Visit mkg127.com for more information.

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