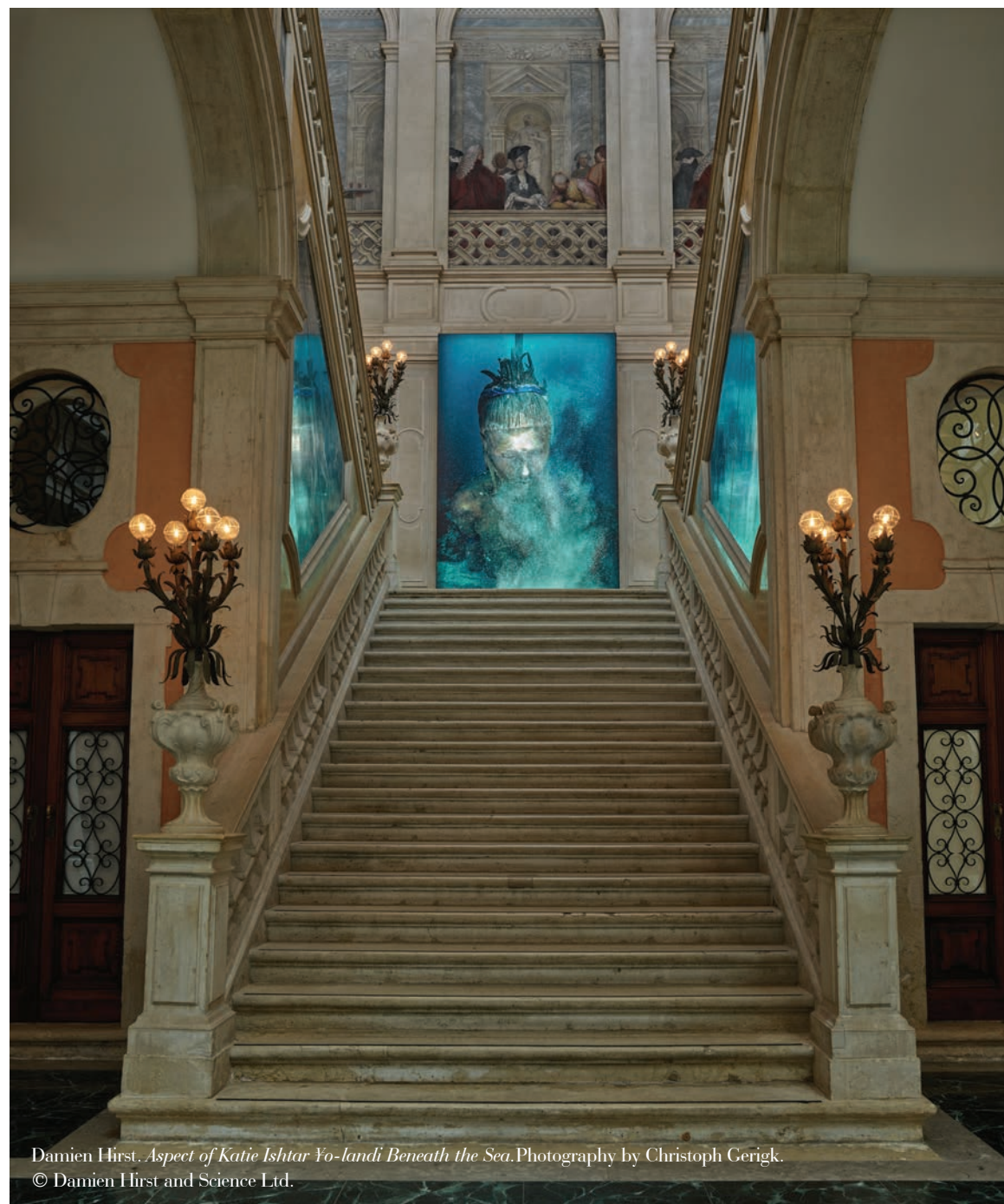


# A COLOSSAL COMEBACK



Damien Hirst. *Aspect of Katie Ishtar Yo-landi Beneath the Sea*. Photography by Christoph Gerigk.  
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Damien Hirst's wildly ambitious foray into fake history, *Treasures from the Wreck of the Unbelievable*, is jaw-dropping and perhaps the biggest, loudest – and probably the most expensive – single show of 'art' treasures ever to land in Venice. **James Parry** finds himself staggered and spellbound by the extravagance that's on offer.



Damien Hirst. *Pair of Masks* (left), *Sphinx* (right). Photography by Prudence Cuming Associates.  
© Damien Hirst and Science Ltd.

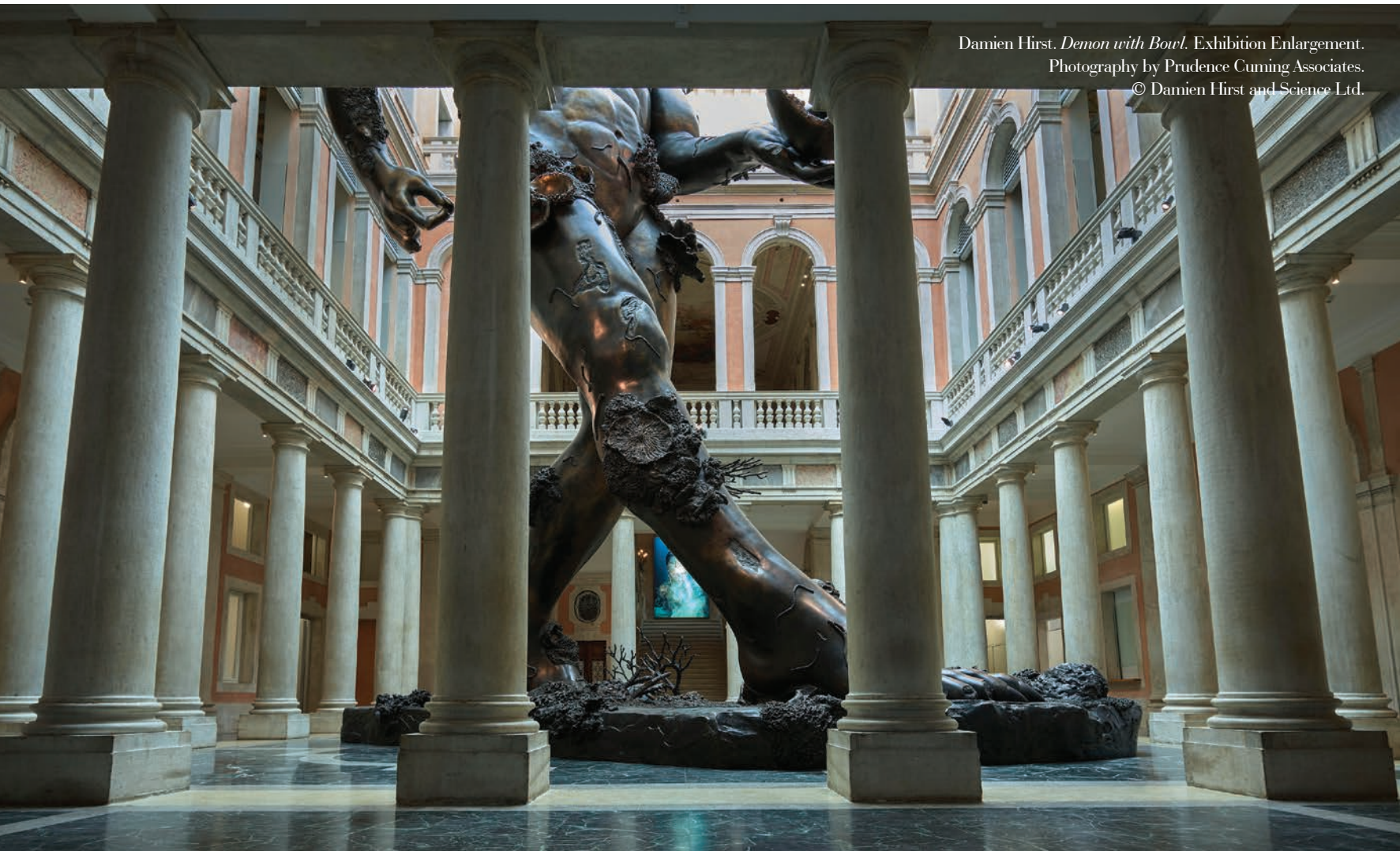
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rstwhile *enfant terrible* and now fully paid-up member of the establishment, Damien Hirst has been working on this project for almost a decade and it shows. The exhibition is vast, comprising almost 200 individual pieces and divided into two halves – the first occupies the former customs house, Punta della Dogana, and the second fills the grandiose 18th-century Palazzo Grassi. Both are contemporary art venues owned by mega-collector François Pinault.

The premise of the exhibition is straightforward enough. In 2008, the wreck of a massive 2,000-year-old ship called *Unbelievable* was discovered on the seafloor off the coast of East Africa. Loaded with priceless artefacts, largely undamaged but now caked in coral and other forms of marine life, the ship appeared to confirm the story of a wealthy ex-slave and collector Cif Amotan II, whose fabled collection was lost at sea on its way to a new purpose-built temple. Now recovered and mostly restored, these amazing treasures are on public display for the first time in over two millennia.

So far, so good. The exhibition crashes open at both venues with monumental tone-setting pieces at the points of entry – the 18-metre-high headless statue *Demon with Bowl* filling the atrium of the Palazzo Grassi in a defiant statement by Hirst that he is back in town and we had better take notice. What follows is a barrage of tantalising works from ornate sculpture and carvings to coins, weapons, jewellery and household implements. As unbridled historical fantasies go, this is a highly embellished one and the wealth of materials to gawp at includes gold, silver, bronze, jade, malachite, crystal, marble and agate. Some of the pieces are shown coral- and barnacle-encrusted “prior to undergoing restoration”, others after being conserved and restored, alongside a series of museum copies showing the works “in their original, undamaged forms.” All are presented in museum-like conditions and supported by wall texts on materials and provenance, with catalogue descriptions and attributions.





Damien Hirst. *Demon with Bowl*. Exhibition Enlargement.  
Photography by Prudence Cuming Associates.  
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Photography and videos tell the visually elaborate backstory of how the works were discovered by divers and brought to the surface, before being taken away for assessment and conservation by a team of specialists. Interviews with archaeologists bring in a folksy yet professional dimension. Academic credibility seemingly abounds – there’s even an introduction by historian Simon Schama in the catalogue.

But of course, in true Hirstian outlandishness, this is all pure sham, a brazen invention totally in tune with our post-truth, post-reality times. The ship and its treasures never existed, and nor did the purported collector: Cif Amotan II is an anagram for “I am a fiction.” Hirst isn’t the first artist to plunder the potential of pseudo-science – it pops up repeatedly at this

year’s Biennale, notably in the national pavilions of both Australia and New Zealand – but rarely has it been done with such roaring *élan* as here.

The clues are there from the off, and become increasingly cheeky as Hirst gets into his stride. There’s the inevitable dash of pop culture – artefacts of that infamous twosome, Goofy and Mickey Mouse, are here – and a pharaoh has a pierced nipple. Goddesses and mythological characters from different times and geographies appear together in spurious cameo scenes. In some of them, you’ll see definite resemblances to Kate Moss and Pharrell Williams. One work even has a “Made in China” on the back. Meanwhile, Hirst inveigles himself into proceedings directly through his self-portrait as the collector



Damien Hirst. Three versions of *Grecian Nude*. Photography by Prudence Cuming Associates.  
© Damien Hirst and Science Ltd.

(of course he does). Some pieces are decidedly more successful than others – the eerily memorable *Skull of a Cyclops* serves a leitmotif of the whole show, but the jury is surely always going to be out on the overblown and somehow nauseating *Andromeda and the Sea Monster*. Apparently, the works will be offered for sale for prohibitive amounts once the exhibition closes in December, although one imagines that many of them are already red-stickered.

It’s not all plain sailing, though. The show is too big (why two venues?), and there’s an ultimately irksome level of repetition – take the seemingly endless busts of Medusa, for example, albeit in different materials. One wonders if such output was simply to fill both venues to

capacity. It’s also curious that in his art of excess, Hirst didn’t take the opportunity to present some of his treasures “in context”, underwater, in gilded aquaria adorned with tropical fish and live coral mini-reefs. Surely this must have crossed his mind.

Even so, the exhibition confirms Hirst’s position as the art world’s glitziest showman. Whether or not these works have genuine artistic value is debatable and, as ever with Hirst, there’s a whiff of controversy in the air. This time, it’s articulated by those who consider that in this show he is ripping off the ideas of artist Jason deCaires Taylor, who created the world’s first submarine sculpture park off Grenada in 2006. Taylor uses his underwater sculptures to help restore damaged coral





reefs and, in a moment of delicious irony, they are featured at this year's Biennale in the official national pavilion of Grenada – a mere five-minute stroll from the Punta della Dogana. Such has been the furore over claims that Hirst is guilty of plagiarism that Taylor felt moved to respond to the debate himself. "Over the past 11 years working underwater I have always hoped my work was about giving something back, creating new life and providing glimpses into a fragile imperilled world," he said. "After viewing Hirst's latest exhibition it seems I have certainly created an art genre that has been responded to, but his marine facsimiles are very different in context from my living installations."

So there, Damien. Meanwhile, Hirst's phantasmagorical presentation storms on as arguably the greatest show in town, its wow factor eclipsing even the Biennale in the eyes of some. Its ability to mesmerize is undeniable

and the artful blurring of fantasy and potential fact is pure Hirst. What is reality anyway, in this fake-news age? Deception is often of our own making, and to have a decent time at this show you have to buy into Hirst's storytelling. There are limits though. As I entered the final room of works at the Palazzo Grassi, I overheard a fellow visitor say to her companion, after having seen almost the entire show already, "Jeez, I really would love to go and see the place where the ship sank." So, this is a place where fact and fiction coalesce, a show of pure theatre. Whether of the absurd, or the sublime, is perhaps best left unsaid. 📍

*Treasures from the Wreck of the Unbelievable* continues at the Punta della Dogana and Palazzo Grassi until 3 December 2017. More information at [www.palazzograssi.it](http://www.palazzograssi.it)