

# Telegraph magazine

The new generation of British artists championed by Charles Saatchi: (from left) Neil Rumming, Christian Ward, James Hopkins, Conrad Shawcross, Ian Monroe and Matt O'Dell.

**Below** Saatchi at the Royal Academy's Apocalypse party in 2000



## ADVENTURES IN S

Charles Saatchi, tireless spotter of young British artistic talent, is putting his vast collection on show in his own highly controversial career of contemporary art's most voracious collector, while the artists themselves talk about

for \$2,000 each. Dismayed, Schnabel described the *Art in Our Time* book as nothing more than a 'mail order catalogue'. Saatchi has produced countless catalogues of his collection since, which is nice for the artists but serves the same purpose. 'You can just ring up Charles and ask him how much he wants for something,' said one dealer. At the same time, driven by his obsession with the new and the competitiveness to be first at everything, Saatchi was looking at the younger end of the market on his doorstep – the YBAs. After all, this was a man who went go-karting in middle age. He spent £50,000 in one year on the hobby. He was also courting and then married the glamorous American art dealer Kay Hartenstein. He had something to prove.

Contrary to popular belief, Saatchi didn't catch on to the YBAs at the beginning, although it was his series of exhibitions for 'Young British Artists I-VI' that inspired the acronym. In 1988 he visited Freeze, the student warehouse exhibition organised by Damien Hirst, but didn't buy anything. It was only in 1990 that Hirst, who is credited with steam-rolling Saatchi into the YBA scene, sold him two of

**'He's not after good taste, it's all about cultural relevance. He has to keep up-to-date, which is unusual for a collector'**

his medicine cabinets. This was the start of the 'Saatchi Decade' – so christened in 1999 by a publication that illustrated hundreds of works by British artists that he bought during the Nineties.

What he did, in effect, was spend small amounts of money tapping into a new wave of youthful vigour and helping to promote a new brand of art that would bring him even more publicity. Displaying a phenomenal amount of energy, he made daily visits, often unannounced, to shows before they opened. He would visit established Cork Street galleries as well as exhibitions in the East End, graduate schools, artists' studios, and a small circle of dealers, including the young Jay Jopling, whose gallery, White Cube, now represents the majority of successful artists showing at County Hall. His everywhere-and-nowhere reputation made him an enigmatic figure; he famously never attends his own parties. He became renowned for driving hard bargains. Whatever the asking price, he expected a discount. He also wanted art that had instant appeal. One dealer noted how if Saatchi didn't 'get' a work 'just like that', he wasn't interested. The largest investment he made at this time was £50,000, advanced to Damien Hirst in 1991 to buy, transport and preserve a tiger shark for his seminal sculpture *The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living*. Experts believe it would now fetch around £2 million. But the majority of work was bought for a few thousand pounds or less. By the time of Saatchi's Sensation exhibition at the Royal Academy in 1997, he had acquired nearly 900 works by YBAs. 'He is the only person in the world collecting on such a scale,' said the London dealer Victoria Miro, at the time. No other collector had bought entire exhibitions.

He also had an eye on history. For Sensation, which he regarded as an opportunity to summarise the ethos of an era, he paid a premium to buy works by artists such as Tracey Emin and Michael Landy, whose work he had missed early on. To his delight it was one of the most popular and most controversial exhibitions ever held at the RA.

**CHRISTIAN WARD** The 25-year-old artist was tipped as one of the brightest painting talents at the Royal Academy Schools postgraduate degree show last summer, which Saatchi visited. His first solo exhibition, held at MW Projects in Clerkenwell last month, consisted of a group of hallucinogenic paintings ('Disney meets sci-fi,' said one critic) inspired by the rainforests, rock clusters, waterfalls and caves found in Yakushima, a World Heritage Site on the Pacific coast of Japan. Saatchi came to his studio with Nigella and Alan Yentob a few days before the show opened and bought seven paintings, including *Inside the Island* (below), for up to £7,500 each. Afterwards 'we talked a lot about sci-fi,' Ward recalls. 'He really likes *Star Trek*.'



A perceptible Saatchi style began to proliferate in art schools. Jake Chapman thinks 'the speed with which some artists have gone from art school into the Saatchi collection has been too quick. When I teach, I notice students who have a clear notion of the path to success, and this can produce uninteresting work. There's a danger that they become too obsessed with the Saatchi collection.'

Still, the obsession remains, in spite of the number of artists whose work has been sold cheaply or given away. Since 1998, when Christie's held a sale of works from the Saatchi collection, hundreds of works by young British, American and German artists have been drip fed through the auction system, often for derisory prices. 'We don't feel singled out any more because there are so many of us,' said one. 'Artists now know that when you sell to Saatchi, being dumped comes with the territory.'

The £1.7 million Christie's sale also heralded a

**JAMES HOPKINS** 'It's daunting to be in the Saatchi collection,' says Hopkins, 26, a postgraduate from Goldsmith's, who accepts unquestioningly that Saatchi is the most important contemporary art collector around. 'It's like being catapulted into the art world. You feel you've arrived. The audience is going to be massive, but there could be criticism.' *The Band* (below), a group of unplayable musical instruments made from MDF, was bought by Saatchi in February after a private viewing at MW Projects. 'He's enormously curious considering how much he sees,' says Hopkins.



spate of charitable activity in which Saatchi sought to benefit arts institutions in this country: £10,000 was given to four London art schools to establish bursaries for students. Cynics said that this was a way of extending his power base, but the colleges were unanimously grateful. Unfortunately, the gifting expired after two years. Colin Cina, head of Chelsea School of Art, believes Saatchi was unhappy with the way some of the colleges used the money, but no official explanation was given.

Also, since February 1999, Saatchi, who is estimated to be worth \$200 million and to own a reported 3,000 works, has given more than 220 works to the Arts Council, to provincial museums and to the charity Paintings for Hospitals. Again, cynics could respond by pointing out that many of these works had been at auction and not found buyers and that the purported overall value of £1.2 million for the gifts was grossly exaggerated. But these are all institutions that have little money to buy art. Perhaps, if the Government would allow tax concessions on gifts of cultural objects, Saatchi and others would be more generous.

Perhaps he might even consider giving something to the Tate. That would ensure him a measure of immortality. Saatchi's only gift to the Tate was in 1992, and not that significant. Since then, relations between the two have clearly become strained. Last November, Saatchi was uncharacteristically outspoken in his criticism of the Turner Prize as 'pseudo-controversial claptrap', and his choice of venue for the new gallery has been widely interpreted as an attempt to steal Tate's thunder.

But will it? 'The danger is that it might be seen as a memorial to the YBAs,' worries Jake Chapman. 'When it was in Boundary Road, there was a sense of discovery about it, it was marginal and off the beaten track. Now it will be more available. That might take the melodrama out of it.'

Not if Saatchi can help it. None of the shows he has mounted since Sensation has created the quite same excitement, but Saatchiland, with its YBA trophies and new discoveries, could do just that. >