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HE FELL ON HIS ASP

New York City

■ In his brilliant review of the work of Damien Hirst ["Art," Nov. 20], Arthur Danto offers up a useful if inadvertent example of the difficulty

both sides continue to have in talking across the fence that separates Science from Art. He wonders at the connection made by Hirst in the title of a painting between a small molecule—argininosuccinic acid—and the bite of the asp. Danto's explanation builds up to a notion of painting as a form of pharmacology. Perhaps. But there is a simpler link between the asp and argininosuccinic acid, a link that goes deeper than the toxicity of the former or the pharmacology of the latter. ASP is the standard abbreviation for the common amino acid aspartic acid, also called aspartate. So the reason Hirst had for linking the title of his work to this snake may have been a simple pun.

But perhaps he had more in mind. When an excess of the four-carbon amino acid ASP must be gotten rid of—after one eats a fleshy meal, for instance—it is dropped into a set of enzymatic reactions called the urea cycle. There, the ASP is grabbed by the enzyme argininosuccinate synthetase and hooked onto the five-carbon amino-acid derivative citrulline to form Hirst's compound, argininosuccinate. This is then broken down into a set of compounds including urea and citrulline, which closes the cycle that dumps urea into urine. So beyond the pun, we have been given the notion of pissing as an antidote to poisoning. Not quite pharmacology, but clearly Hirst knows his biochemistry!

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