

BP Portrait Award 2007 Opens At National Portrait Gallery, London

By Graham Spicer | 13 June 2007
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Preview



Tamara by Johan Andersson. © the artist

Now in its 28th year, the BP Portrait Award is one of Britain's most prestigious art prizes, with the winner receiving a whopping £25,000 plus a commission worth £4,000.

Second place gets £8,000 and third £6,000, which should be enough to attract a wealth of entries, however this year the judges have been snowed under after relaxing the entry requirements.

The prize had formerly been for under-40s only, but is now open for all artists over the age of 18. To ensure that young artists are still championed, a separate BP Young Artist Award for £5,000 will go to the best portrait from an artist aged between 18 and 30.

Zuzana in Paris Studio by Hynek Martinec. © the artist



A total of 1,870 artists submitted work to the competition, up from 1,113 in 2006, and this was whittled down to 60 to be shown at the National Portrait Gallery until September 16 2007.

The four shortlisted pieces, two of which are also eligible for the BP Young Artist Award, are dispersed among the other works, and although this is the first year explanatory labels have been placed beside the exhibits, these do not distract from the works themselves.

Indeed, one of the most refreshing aspects of the exhibition is the freedom you feel of viewing paintings of ordinary subjects.

There are no celebrity portraits or historical figures, just people known intimately to the artists themselves, or occasionally self-portraits. Without lengthy interpretation you are left to appreciate and judge the paintings for yourself.



Michael Simpson by Paul Emsley. © the artist

Works range from the highly expressionist and abstract, through the more traditional to amazingly detailed photographic-style paintings. With so many styles and subjects, there is bound to be something to catch your eye.

Having said that, while you may find your own favourite from the 60, it is impossible not to gravitate towards the four shortlisted works, and, thankfully, the judges' choices don't disappoint.

Tamara, by Johan Andersson, makes you feel almost embarrassed to be so close to this evidently shy model, a friend of the artist. Indeed Andersson is said to have painted it to challenge attitudes to voyeurism, and it certainly makes you empathise with the sitter.

Stephen by David Lawton. © the artist



Hynek Martinec chose an incredibly realistic technique using acrylics to create Zuzana in Paris Studio. The contrast between the tones of her skin, hair and sunglasses are expertly executed, as is the effect of differences in focus throughout the piece, which is of Martinec's girlfriend.

Both Martinec and Anderson are up for the BP Young Artist Award and are joined by David Lawton and Paul Emsley in contention for the main prize.

Emsley's portrait of Michael Simpson, a fellow artist from his home in Bradford on Avon, captures the subject's somewhat mournful, timeless eyes and strong presence.

David Lawton's Stephen depicts his friend Stephen Player, a San Francisco illustrator. Darkly personal, you are unsure whether you are staring into the sitter's soul, or he into yours.



Portrait of Christopher Darroux-Xavier by Rupert Alexander. © the artist

Along with the shortlist, many other works stand out, from the powerful and uncluttered simplicity of Portrait of Christopher Darroux-Xavier by Rupert Alexander to the incredible 'photo-realism' of Chrisea by Jamie Valero Perandones and the abstraction of Time to Talk by Lynn Ahrens, at first glance impenetrable, on closer inspection revealing a deeply expressive face and posture.

Miriam Escofet's portrait of her father, Jose Escofet, perfectly captures the sitter's wise, intensely thoughtful stare, while Nisha by Darvish Fakhir is reminiscent of Velasquez's 17th century portraits of the Spanish court's young princesses.

As an attempt to make the exhibition more family-friendly the National Portrait Gallery has teamed up with award-winning children's author and illustrator, Lauren Child, the creator of popular children's characters Charlie and Lola and Clarice Bean.

Jose Escofet by Miriam Escofet. © the artist



Kids can look out for the special text around selected portraits to encourage discussion about portraiture and art and then try an interactive game called Making Faces.

The game is a nice idea and although tucked away in a rather dark corner should keep young ones interested for a while before the inevitable visit to the gift shop.

The winners of the Portrait Award and the Young Artist Award will both be announced on June 20 and following the exhibition's stint at the National Portrait Gallery will be visiting Laing Art Gallery in Newcastle-upon-Tyne and then the Scottish National Portrait Gallery.