

The Northern Art Prize at the Leeds Gallery

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Dubbed the 'Turner Prize of the North', this prestigious exhibition, now in its second year, is one of the newest highlights to the contemporary art calendar. Four up-and-coming artists are selected by a panel of judges, and their work is subsequently erected in the Leeds Art Gallery until January when an overall winner is selected. The prize is £16,500, in addition to recognition and acclaim by the public and some of the biggest pioneers of British Modern Art.

The director of the award, Pippa Hale, wants to prove that "it is possible to sustain a creative and relevant practice in the regions whilst engaging with a global art world." The calibre of the work of the four artists and the worldwide success they are achieving certainly proves her to be correct. The show has put Leeds on the map; international names from the art world flocked around the installations on display.

The first nominee, Clare Charney, focuses her work upon our nation's ignorance of other cultures. Speaking to an audience in a language she does not comprehend, and delivering a speech which she had not prepared herself, she removes herself from the pride of our own culture and shifts herself into a position of unease. The recorded demonstrations were highly engaging, as the viewer empathises with the artist's own lack of comprehension. Her other pieces, however, were somewhat ambiguous. Photographs of people lying in the snow in amusing positions did not seem to provoke a direct reponse from the public.

Richard Forster provided an interesting amalgamation of different artistic mediums, combining a sculpturally idyllic housing block with minute, beautifully accurate drawings of seascapes and nudes. He contrasted practical urban art with delicate natural images. The artist's work aims to examine 'meanings and contingencies' from different medias.

According to the artist, "each one has a baggage, a set of meanings, properties, a semiotic, and I am trying to fuse a new set of relationships between them." The fusion of media enabled a contrast of urban and natural beauty. There is no solid meaning behind either artwork, instead a variety of interpretations are imposed upon the pieces, the choice is left entirely to the beholder. Forster breaks with traditional and encourages new perceptions.

The third artist, Imogen Stidworthy offered me sheer confusion. The aesthetic of the large screen, the room-dominating audio curve and the flashing letters was visually effective, did not come across conceptually as it possibly did when conceived. The 'labyrinth' of sound and graphics was focused around language learning and its effective communication. I confess I remained a little 'lost in translation'.

Paul Rooney's films, however, spoke volumes. His work cannot be skimmed past, you are obliged to stop

walking and sit in a reserved area for his films. The most striking was the 'Lost High Street', which features the narrative of a tour guide in Edinburgh as he describes the city and its significance in his life.

As the story progresses he realises that he is stuck in a time-loop, forced to circulate the bus' route as he has failed to escape his memories. He is merely a fragment of his own imagination; he no longer exists in our time.

Rooney's work gives a voice to those who we would not usually consider. 'Anybody can be interesting' states the artist. His artwork aims to collaborate different ideas, ones which wouldn't typically be thought of together, and 'mould them' to unity. His ideas are interesting and engaging because they deal with diverse topics in an unconventional manner. The artist intends his work to be 'rich in meaning' and it certainly is. It is refreshing to drift into a world within film so very removed from our own.

The exhibition probes and pushes perceptions on the admittedly clichéd, yet pertinent question, 'what is art?' Today the artistic world revolves around multi-media platforms and has strayed far away from the Sistine Chapel. Talent is not restricted to manual ability; instead it often relies solely upon the impact with which a concept is presented to an audience. The Northern Art Prize is meant to enable members of the surrounding communities to appreciate pieces which are often only displayed in London. Yet some creations were isolating, proving difficult to understand. That said, both male artists presented challenging ideas which were clearly delivered to the audience. Indeed if the criteria for judging is based upon quality, accessible artworks, I feel the reward should be handed to Paul Rooney for his innovative films.

On display at Leeds Art Gallery until 1st February 2009.



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