

Review of the John Moores 24 and New Contemporaries exhibitions, Liverpool Biennial of Art 2006.

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The John Moores and New Contemporaries exhibitions are two strange and quite particular beasts. Seeing both on the same day is like visiting two generations of an eccentric family; each unintentionally informs the other, allowing for deeper insights, but the turf wars leave you feeling a bit sick.

It's easy to conceptualise the John Moores as the grandfather of New Contemporaries; the weight of traditional values set against the shallow cult of youth. Except the John Moores, like trendy grandparents, would prefer to see itself as moving with the times, of having the flexibility to recognise and show works that speak of now.

But therein lies its difficulty: painting is no longer the mass contemporary medium of choice. The emergence of new media technologies and the growth in time-based and performative work, has given rise to painting's second prolonged major crisis. The first of course, was with the advent of photography. Then, the medium and its artists were robust enough to carve a new niche within the avant-garde and the expressive. But what is the response now? Where do painters situate themselves within this new landscape? How do they present the case for continued relevance in the face of other tools that can have greater impact and be more versatile? To be a painter in 2006 is to make a significant statement of choice. Where is the argument that painting can still carry content and visual excitement in ways that make it unique and important?

You might think that the John Moores would be a good place to start looking for some answers to these questions. After all, it's one of the few institutions left that deals specifically with painting, and it selects via a national open submission process. Now in its 48th year, it was established when painting was still in the ascendant, and its mission is the same today as it was then - to show the best and most exciting current work in the medium. Surely these are the contemporary questions that it could be expected to engage with?

Sadly, not so. This year as in recent years, the John Moores disappoints. At a basic selection level, there are too many mediocre and even chronically bad works, and not enough truly excellent paintings. And in terms of overall curatorial themes, it rarely engages with the problems of painting, or with any wider context.

There are highlights. Two perfectly executed, finely resolved images: Eliza Meath Baker's exquisite and soulful "Bird", a depiction of beauty, aloneness and stoicism; and 'Scene from a Contemporary Novel' by Nicholas Middleton, a constructed photo-realist back street scene, in which every element is meticulously placed to realise a narrative that would take 1000 words or more to describe.

There are some pieces that actively enjoy the medium of paint, such as the slick and dazzling 'A Slice of Desert' by Paul Thomas; prize-winner Graham Crowley's 'Red Reflection' which disrupts the cosy tweeness of a traditional English village scene; 'Broca's Area' by Andy Harper, a luxuriously verdant image of undergrowth, full of thrusting phallic shapes and dark holes to get lost in, and the Gary Hume-esque 'Madame Bridgette' by Clare Woods, which luxuriates in the qualities of paint, colour and surface. David Mabb has the most intellectual piece in the exhibition, one that is about process, artifice and fabrication, questioning what a painting is and can be.

But for each work of interest, there are two that fail to excite. Why is this? The judging panel is changed each exhibition and always includes artists – although not necessarily painters – along with institutional representation. This year the artists have been Sir Peter Blake, Tracey Emin and Jason Brooks, an unusual combination of personalities perhaps. Were the voices too diverse, unable to cohere around three or four central ideas?

Or alternatively, are these 52 paintings genuinely the most interesting and exciting out of the 2300 works submitted? It is hard to believe that this can be the case. If it is, then we need to expect more from our painters and the people teaching them. But if it isn't, then as informed audiences, we should be expecting sharper focus from our institutions when they are curating painting exhibitions. Curatorial practise is one of the last opaque corners in the public sector; it would be illuminating indeed to shine a light on the process. But whatever the cause, the result is that John Moores 24 is unable to articulate an optimistic future for painting.

In contrast, the young artists in New Contemporaries mostly do understand the contemporary landscape - they've grown up with it and are working hard to make it their own. It's a big lively show in a cavernous space that does justice to the range and size of work. But you have to look at student art differently, accepting that except in rare cases, it is unlikely to have the maturity, scope, and possibly the depth of artwork created by older more experienced artists. What you get instead is excitement, freshness, an energetic and determined focus on one idea that has caught the imagination, made it take flight. You look to student work as an indication of the directions

art might take five or ten years hence. On this year's evidence, painting will still tread an uncertain path, but sculpture will be in satisfying shape, while AV work becomes increasingly polished, complex and diverse.

Some pieces truly do fly – the dynamic and dazzling time-based work 'Ed's Spiral Piece', for instance, and Douglas White's 'Counsel', two vandalised recycling bins, hulking alien presences brooding over the exhibition. A video performance by Kiran Kaur Brar, 'Passport Lahloh', makes uncomfortable viewing as she sits in a street on the Indian sub-continent, offering obviously fake British passports to a quickly gathering crowd. The crowd responds with calm dignity, but it's an unsettling, quietly powerful work referencing the complex politics of place, foreign policy and economics. The physicality of some sculptural pieces is immensely satisfying, for example 'Spacebase' is a walk-around deconstruction by Dafni Barbageorgopoulou, while '2nd Floor' by Youngmi Chun edges towards the performative.

The most substantial works are those that are genuinely informed by art history and theory, taking inspiration while transforming the message and medium. 'The Yellow Pages (Rake's Progress)' by Chiho Kato is delightfully brilliant, with advertisements like: 'Is your life a mess? Professional Cleaning for All Human Relationships' and the 'Harlot's Escort Agency' amongst many satirical entries. Salvatore Arancio's beautifully drawn etchings show detailed mythic landscapes through which you enter a new world of fantasy and exploration.

But there are also a number of duds. Youth uninformed by history, theory and tradition becomes free but shallow, weightless but unanchored. There are two pieces that constitute conceptualism for beginners, as if the avante garde, Yoko Ono and Fluxus had never happened. Everything this work points to was said thirty and more years ago. This is like reinventing the wheel: self indulgent, derivative and pointless.

It is noticeable that New Contemporaries consists of the art object, a range of gallery-sited artefacts that can be bought and sold within the marketplace. There are no examples of socially engaged practise, or work that can't be shown in the white cube. It is also conspicuous that 31 of the 36 selected artists are from the London schools of art. Why are art schools from the rest of the country so under-represented? What does this indicate? Perhaps that the London schools are exceptionally good at gearing their students towards commercial success.

The Independent strand of the Biennial originally had a mission to platform regionally based artists, especially those living and working on Merseyside. Four Biennial's on, it still has a big

constituency and is a magnet for artists across the country. There are eighty events, exhibitions, performances and talks taking place as part of the Independent during this year's Biennial. Unfortunately, all this frenetic activity has been tidied away from the main Biennial venues, and you have to work hard to search out the things you want to see, but events at The Royal Standard and the Arena Art Studios are worth catching. Both show some quality established artists - Leo Fitzmaurice, Rebecca Reid, Marcus Coates, amongst others. But there is a sense that the Biennial and its major funders would like to distance itself from this unruly offspring, cutting it loose in the hope it will become truly independent: there's an appropriate Philip Larkin quote to insert here.