

Arsethetic

In light of the Turner Prize nominations, [Deborah Lam](#) looks at the current state of art

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Image: Liam Mullally

The plot to 'The Emperor's New Clothes' is not an unfamiliar one. A rather naïve ruler is tricked by con-tailors (note: not artists) into parading around in a set of clothes that they claim cannot be seen by stupid subjects. As a result, he flashes an astute child and gets embarrassed instead of his name on the sex offender registry.

A lot of art, but more recently, modern art in particular, gets a bad reputation for resembling said clothes. Perhaps not to the extent that all art is literally empty – although Oscar Wilde does declare that all art is useless – but in the sense that it is not easily understood and often seems to pride itself precisely on this opaque quality. Cultured elites may argue that what is essential is appreciation and not apprehension. Which is a fair, but a highly unsatisfactory evasion of the incomprehensibility that art nowadays seems to

revel in.

The Turner Prize, as an annual award given to British artists (people who work in Britain, are from Britain or are British) under the age of 50, is a paradigm for the paradoxical problem that modern art faces today. Hosted by Tate Britain and adjudicated by a panel of judges chaired by its director, the Turner Prize is an important institution in the art world, shaping contemporary tastes and values. Yet, it is, in turn, heavily influenced by the pressures of a rapidly changing industry constantly under pressure to reinvent itself and come up with innovative ways of expression.

In this obsession with remaining relevant and new, the prize, which has seen the rise of winners such as Martin Creed and Damien Hirst (the latter artist bringing us memorable, shocking installations displaying the cross section of cows, innards and all) and nominees such as Tracey Emin, the prize has neglected the value and merit of what is perceived as traditional or old-fashioned mediums and their ability to adequately represent modern issues and themes.

The last winner who worked strictly in a traditional medium was Tomma Abts in 2006, and even then, her oil paintings were prized for their unique three-dimensional quality that challenged conventional uses of oil paints. And while some may see Josephine Pryde's nomination for lapses in *Thinking By the person i Am* where viewers ride on a model train while looking at her photographs as recognition of photography as an artistic, creative medium, the way the images are viewed places equal emphasis on staging the experience of seeing as on the pictures themselves.

Other nominees include Anthea Hamilton who works with sculpture, performance and installation art with her eye-catchingly risqué centrepiece of an entryway consisting of a huge wooden bum with two hands firmly grabbing each cheek. And viewers get to walk through the narrowly spread thighs. Newcastle artist Michael Dean also works with sculpture and installation, posing an array of what are commonly seen as 'ugly' materials in interesting positions.

Finishing the list of four shortlisted nominees is Helen Marten, again working with various, often-incongruent materials, who creates sculptural-mixed-media collage-installations.

All four nominees are extremely varied, and yet, surprisingly and invariably all 'modern'. Exciting as the artists' explorations of new forms and mediums are, the celebration of art that embraces technology with multi-media presentations like Laure Provoust in 2013 and Duncan Campbell the year later or sculptural installations places the modern art world in a position that is intolerant to drawing, painting and photography sans toy train rides. This is also especially dangerous because these mediums are often the most accessible and affordable ones, leaving awards inaccessible to some.

The values that the Turner Prize affirms in its shortlist send a message to young, budding artists who work with easily available traditional mediums. It insists that emerging, relevant art must either be shockingly outlandish with grotesque depictions; a usurpation of beauty; undermine ways of experiencing art or require bafflingly long hyphenated compounds to describe it. It says to them, "It's nice, you're good, but your work has no place in contemporary art."



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