

Portraits that show our



Above: first prize-winner Double Single by Clive Smith, a divided composition with skilful shadow

Right: Andrew Tift's old-fashioned, intensely likeable portrayal of Tony Benn, which took third prize



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THE BP Portrait Award is one of the few events in the calendar of the art world that encourages us in the belief that there is life in painting still. The brazen Turner Prize has nothing to do with art, even less to do with painting and is now anticipated only as a subject of ridicule for the amount of incomprehensible jabberwocky it engenders from art critics. The Jerwood Prize, now currying favour with those at the fashionable cutting edge of connoisseurship, itself makes mock of its once worthy intentions. The NatWest Prize now falls into the hands of ignorant extremists, and even the prizes at the dear old Royal Academy are awarded for reasons of age, Buggins' Turn, propaganda and hoped-for public popularity — anything rather than virtue and sound quality. The BP Award, however, even if most of the prizes have on most occasions been awarded to disappointing candidates, has invariably been an exhibition of young and youthful talent (as well as dross) working in paint on canvas rather than in video, formaldehyde and the turds of elephants, constrained by the traditional requirements of likeness, character, insight and interpretation. The discipline of the genre has kept it largely within these bounds, and if there has been considerable evidence of struggle against them, it is of attempts to make the portrait function as a subject picture too, so that it may carry an anonymous title — as with Double-Single and Night Painting this year.

The Award has for all the 19 years since its inception, first under the sponsorship of John Player, been remarkable for bringing to public notice more good, workmanlike painting, technically sound, more refreshing ideas, more earnestly professional young painters, and more promise than any other annual event in Britain — and this without a whisper of support, interest, patronage or purchase from the Gauleiters of contemporary art at the Tate Gallery and the Arts Council. Last year, however, the standards slipped a little, and this year they have slipped even more, and though we may still be able to point to a dozen or so good painters well worth watching — a comfortably high percentage of the 51 whose work is included — the remainder are an unpromising and even distasteful crew. The number of portraits submitted was up to average at 650 or so (one for each artist at a handling charge of £8), but as the number hanging is down from 70 to 51 we are compelled to ask an explanation for so severe and alarming a reduction that the exhibition as a whole suffers a great loss in substance, importance and influence.

Its general weakness leads us to suppose that the aesthetic level of submissions must have been poor, but this is denied by the NPG — "Well up to standard this year, as well as number." So, should we then blame the judges for poor judgment? The last possibility is that the meagre hanging affected by the Tate Gallery and the paucity of exhibits there (an affectation funded, oddly enough, by the same sponsor, BP, very ill-advised and now deeply unpopular) — yards of empty wall so that we may the more concentratedly contemplate what few things can be seen — has now infected display at the NPG: if this is so, then it is to be deplored, for we can see yards of empty wall at home and in the office, but this is an exhibition to which we come in high expectation of paint on canvas.

CLIVE Smith, aged 32, is the winner of £10,000 this year with Double-Single, in which a sulky saturnine boy broods on half a double bed, apparently lying on a duvet placed atop a ghastly silk coverlet. Some symbolism or a meaning is implied by the title; the studied separateness of the two equal upright halves of the composition, the left nothing but the bed-head, pillow and immaculate coverlet, the right the boy seen *à la* Kodak Brownie from large feet to small head, suggest something of the awkwardness of bed-sharing by people who are not sexual partners, or the melancholy of one who wishes to be such a partner when the other does not, or the sense of trespass rather than loneliness that sometimes overtakes the traveller when given a vast double bed instead of the single in which he'd prefer to be cocooned. This divided composition is nicely pulled together with the skilfully placed shadow, the curved rumple in the duvet and the neat counterbalances of tone and colour. Other critics have damned it as an imitation of Lucian Freud, but it is nothing of the kind — the touch of precise detail and the coherent equality of paint and texture are entirely alien to Freud, and there are no passages in which urgency, impotence or laziness have driven Smith to do what Freud so often does and merely fill in with ill-judged paint and brushwork: criticism has reached a hapless state if every pale figure lying on a pale bed must be dubbed School of Freud.

The second prize has been given to Rebecca Driffeld for her Boyish Boo. I suppose worse pictures have been painted by middle-aged Australians, but they must be difficult to find. This is an underserving crib of an undistinguished English painter popular with the Serota Tendency, Tony Bevan — as



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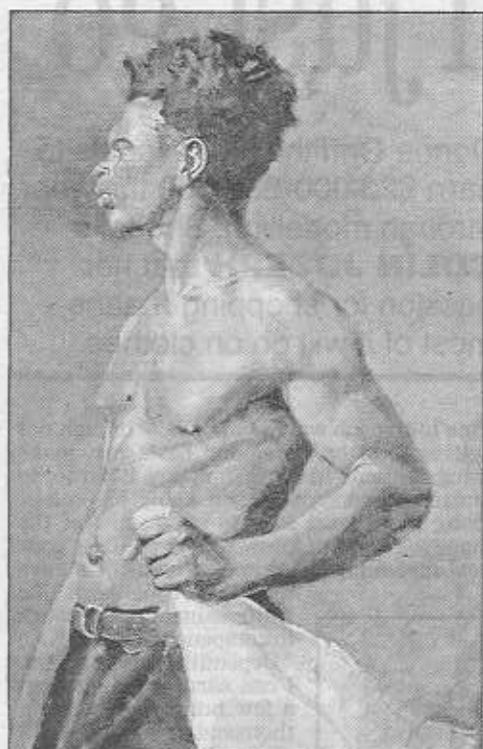
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finest hidden talents



Above: Standing Figure, a self-portrait by Desmond Haughton — "he really must try to fall in love with some other man's body"



Right: Vanitas by Benedict Henriques — "perhaps too ambitious, its portrait element submerged in the trappings of still life"

will at once be recognised by everyone who went to his 1993 exhibition in Whitechapel: to give £5,000 for such a poor second-hand thing of tiresome tricks and mannerisms is a betrayal of the Award's objectives.

The third prize, £3,000, was given to Andrew Tift for a far better picture and a true portrait to boot — a charming, old-fashioned, famous-man-among-his-possession portrait of Tony Benn. This is not the swagger portrait some of us think he deserves, but Benn as he has matured, mellowed and wishes to be remembered, the not altogether unselfconscious reconstruction of the minister who has been there, done that, and now cares not a damn for Downing Street or pomp and circumstance; this is Benn the cunning old buffer in his cardigan among sentimental bits and bobs carefully staged to give him and them absolutely equal emphasis; this is Benn down-at-heel and out-at-elbows, drinking sweet tea from a Woolworth's mug and challenging the spectator to a duel with recollection as his chosen weapon. It is to grace the House of Commons and is intensely likeable.

So too is Lewis Chamberlain's Night Painting — a girl uncomfortable on a sagging couch next to an open door, a very Slade or Royal Academy Schools awkward piece of diligence, with wonderful stripes in a length of cloth and a seam in her jumper that the viewer could unpick. I have commended Chamberlain before (though he moves on very slowly), and Paul Benney and Nick Botting, and all three receive £1,000; so too does Michael Gaskell, but I am not convinced that his Jonathan is anything more than a ring-through-his-nose exercise in hyper-realism long after its day and really rather nasty. As for Akash Batt's £1,000 — this is for a barber's shop of nobodies, the quite appalling stuff of the cartoonist without a hint of wit in the subject or understanding in the medium he so badly abuses. There are, alas, other corny pictures with grotesque heads and other nonsenses equally alien to serious portraiture, and the

largest picture, occupying the place of honour, bids for the booby prize — Susan Eaton's dull triptych of a woman, three equal parts more or less life size, three equal portraits insignificantly varied, none worth showing singly, let alone in triplicate.

The very able Diarmuid Kelley does himself no justice with a picture that is simply not up to scratch — a pity, for he has shown extraordinary promise and doesn't need the BP exposure if portraiture is not one of his natural genres. The equally able Ben Henriques is perhaps too ambitious with his Vanitas, its portrait element submerged in the trappings of still life; Desmond Haughton's flashy and knowing portrait of himself is the mixture as before — he really must try to fall in love with some other man's body; and Mark Shields and Gareth Reid too are well worth a second glance. The whole exhibition is dominated by the accumulation of paintings by Stuart Pearson Wright through which we must pass as through an ante-room — images of such eccentricity and even madness that they fit perfectly the English tradition of the odd man out, the Blake, Spencer, Cecil Collins line, and the largest of them (very large and very mad) should at once have been bought by the Tate; but the best piece of painting, in the sense that the painter is so at ease with the medium, so swift and deft with it, so aware of economy and when to stop, is the sketch largely in vermilion and black by Tom Ellis, perceptive, lively, and as old-fashioned and foppish as a Sargent.

The Portrait Award may not be the most valuable of prizes to the painter, but it is so to the rest of us, for every year it brings into view a small number of skilled and intelligent young men and women of staying power and lasting quality and helps them to find the patronage that enables them to stay in the profession. It is, as they say in the most famous of history books, a Good Thing.

●NPG, St Martin's Place, WC2. Mon-Sat 10am-6pm. Sun noon-6pm. Admission free. Until 26 September.

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