

Faces are back on the artists' agenda

William Packer is impressed with the standard of the entries in the BP Portrait Award

The BP Portrait Award, set up originally under the sponsorship of John Player some 20 years ago, seemed a good idea at the time and has proved itself to be so. It was not entirely uncontroversial then: in the late 1970s the painted portrait was commonly seen as little more than a sop, offered yearly at the Academy, to the vanity of bishops and city types – hardly the stuff of any serious artist's agenda. And with the life-model all but banished from the art schools, would any young and ambitious painter, his head full of issues and concepts, give it a

There is less reliance on photographic reference than is often the case, and there is a good body of smaller works

thought? It was encouraging then and remains so now that so many of them did, and still do, and mostly with the technical accomplishment to make a fair fist of it.

Perhaps a first prize of £10,000 outright, with the bonus of a £3,000 commission from the National Portrait Gallery for another face for its collection, has something to do with it – to say nothing of the £5,000 or so to assorted runners-up, commendees and the winner of the Travel Award. But the real achievement of the exercise has been the gradual drilling into the consciousness of artists the simple point that, for all the current orthodoxies of modernism, the portrait, one of the great subjects and glories of the European tradition since the Renaissance, is still available to engage their interest, whether they call themselves portrait painter or not.

The award is now a firm fixture of the calendar, and long may it continue so: but I do have one minor quibble. I can see that at the outset it was thought particularly useful to encourage and support young artists; but that

point has been made well enough by now, and attitudes have changed. An age-limit of 40 is all very well, but is it not now time for a portrait award open to all-comers?

After all that, to say that this year's competition is unexceptional may seem rather hard. As with any regular show, its very regularity becomes its justification, so long as the overall standard remains high enough. And this year, while it celebrates no manifest eccentricities or controversies, it is strong and steady enough in its quiet way. There is less obvious a reliance on photographic reference than is often the case, and there is a good body of smaller works. Indeed it is good to see a comparatively small work, at least by modern standards, win First Prize; and for once I have no quarrel with its award to Clive Smith for his strongly-lit, cool-toned and moody youth sitting alone on a double-bed.

Of the other prize-winners, I would have favoured Andrew Tift, who won the third for his disarmingly conventional formal portrait – I say "formal" advisedly, for with pipe, cardigan and mug of tea, he is hardly the picture of formality – of Tony Benn. And it was good to see Jennifer McCrae, a recent winner of the Hunting Prize, picking up this year's Travel Award for her small, rather intense study of a seated woman.

Of the rest, I particularly liked Lisa Stokes's slabby, Gilman-esque self-portrait, and a charmingly free image of a bespectacled young girl clutching a white cat, by Merrilees Brown. Stephen Shankland's closely-worked half-length of a young woman behind a chair; Kelly-Anne Cairns' strong and simple head-and-shoulders of "Jean"; Tom Ellis's rather moody and old-fashioned New English Art Club portrait of Peio Arzak, Alan Parker's wild "Chef", and Sarah Taylor's finely-modelled self-portrait head were also notable.

All of these were on the small side, and of the larger, more obviously ambitious compositions, I would pick out Benjamin Henriques' young woman in a grey



Strongly-lit and cool-toned: 'Double Single', award-winner Clive Smith's moody youth sitting alone on a double-bed

silk dress sitting among the still-life clutter of the studio; Nicholas Archer's low-toned study of two girls at a table; and an elderly, evidently celebrating couple, she in fur coat, he with tie loose and holding a parcel, by Darvish Fakhr.

Another estimable fixture of the summer calendar is "Artist of the Day": the fortnight-long festival of one-day solo exhibitions that Angela Flowers set up happily continues at Flowers East at London Fields in Hackney. By its

very nature it is impossible to review, each individual display a mayfly, to be caught only by personal attendance on as many days as possible. It is, however, that rare thing, something that I am happy to recommend unreservedly, sight unseen. Today is the second day, and the second show of 10 artists, with a summary of the week's exhibitions on show over each weekend.

The principle is simplicity itself: a young or neglected artist is nominated by one of his more established peers as worth this

opportunity. Thus this first week has four painters and a sculptor, four figurative and one abstract – Catherine Lockwood, Anthony Key, Jennifer Jones, Gisél Carri-conde-Azevedo and Louis Nixon, the choice respectively of Graham Crowley, Ken Kiff, John Virtue, Laurence Preece and Ainslie Yule. Next week has more abstracted fare, four to one, with John Dougill, Owusu-Ankomah, Kallopi Lemos, George Blacklock and Carl von Weiler, put up in turn by Norman Ackroyd, Sokari Douglas Camp, Ann Dowker,

Carol Robertson and Antony Gormley. We may know some of the names and so guess at the quality, but must go along to see them. All of them, with such recommendations, are sure to be winners in their way.

The BP Portrait Award 1999: The National Portrait Gallery, St Martin's Place, London WC2, until September 26, then on to the Aberdeen Art Gallery; sponsored by BP, part of the BP Amoco Group. Artist of the Day: Flowers East, 282 Richmond Road, Hackney, London E8, until July 11.

THEATRE

Heady mixture of farce and philosophy

Which old Stoppard plays stand up today? Tom Stoppard's *The Real Thing* (1982) as revived in the Donmar Warehouse's new production is the most readily recommendable theatrical production in London at the moment. Yet Stoppard's *Jumpers* (1972) in a new production at the Birmingham Rep seems creaky. How come?

The Real Thing is the easier play to love; and it is the first play in which Stoppard wrote seriously about love. *Jumpers* is by the seemingly heartless younger Stoppard, the astonishingly inventive virtuoso who knew how – as in *Travesties* – to juggle several completely separate objects with crazily elegant panache in a single play. *Jumpers* is an elaborate farce in which Dorothy Moore, a former musical star, tries to hide the corpse of a murdered acrobat in her bedroom while her philosophy-don husband, George, tries to prepare a lecture on the existence of God downstairs.

It has all the panicky feeling of farce – Stoppard gets an impressive amount of men in and out of the wife's bedroom for an impressive variety of reasons – while also making us pay real attention to the philosophical theories that, downstairs, the prof is trying to dictate to his secretary. At some strange level of thought, upstairs and downstairs connect. (The strange events in the bedroom are just as likely to make us wonder about the existence of a supreme deity as any dreamt of in George's philosophy.) Newcomers to theatre who know Stoppard only as the *Shakespeare in Love* chap would not find it too hard to believe that the man behind the hit movie once wrote *The Real Thing*, but they may well find it impossible to believe that he once wrote *Jumpers*.

Stoppard is an irrepressible jokester, and the jokes of *Jumpers* keep most of the Birmingham audience chortling with increasing happiness. Still, it does not enchant; and at times it seems too contrived for comfort. But I don't think that this means that *Jumpers* has passed its sell-by date. It is a tricky play for the awkward acoustics of the Birmingham Rep: the upstairs scenes do not