

Developing your *competitive streak*

They might be a logistical nightmare and impossible to judge, but art competitions remain more popular than ever. National Open Art Competition chairman Neil Lawson-Baker discusses the benefits and the concerns of staging a major art prize. Words: Steve Pill

THE PHRASE “ART COMPETITION” should be an oxymoron. Whether art is your pastime or your passion, taste is subjective and one man’s masterpiece is another man’s waste of good paint. The Olympics don’t pit sprinters against marathon runners, so why should we be prepared to compare a landscape with a still life?

Of course, all of this doesn’t stop the mailboxes here at *Artists & Illustrators* being inundated with all manner of submission requests, from local society competitions to national events. And artists continue to enter them because they remain one of the most successful ways of bringing work to new and prestigious audiences.

“It’s a wonderful thing for an artist to get up on a major wall,” says Neil Lawson-Baker, the chairman of the National Open Art Competition. “It does make a difference, not only to their confidence and their self-esteem, but also their marketability, and that’s not an easy thing [to achieve] in this day and age.”

It isn’t just the artists striving for future successes, either. The National Open Art Competition has recently undergone a revamp in order to extend its audience and increase the quality and quantity of works submitted. Originally titled the Chichester Open Art Competition, it was founded 12 years ago by the Duke of Richmond, reflecting his vision that Chichester should be “The City of the Arts” by 2012. However, when Lawson-Baker took over as chairman last year, he installed his mother-in-law as a PR officer and she immediately encountered problems.

“Every time she made a call and said this is the Chichester Open Art Competition, people would say: ‘I’m sorry, I don’t do Chichester...’”

And so the National Open Art Competition was born and with the name change came an expansion of operations and increased interest in the prize. Regional collections now extend as far as Edinburgh and the website has received an unprecedented number of hits.

“I think tenacity and hard work is the key,” says Lawson-Baker. “Networking is what it is all about though and getting your name out there. I’ve been to maybe 10 or 15 graduate exhibitions this year and been to see every artist at Wimbledon, St Martins and the Slade.”

Artificially encouraging interest such as this helps bring competitions to a wider, more talented audience but it is not without its disadvantages.

“Obviously, when you go upmarket a little bit and you have bigger prizes, you are going to get bigger artists and it does cut out people getting on the wall who are the weekend artists. It’s a difficult one to decide where you are. You can’t cater for everyone because the walls aren’t big enough. We received about a thousand entries last year and we showed 150.”

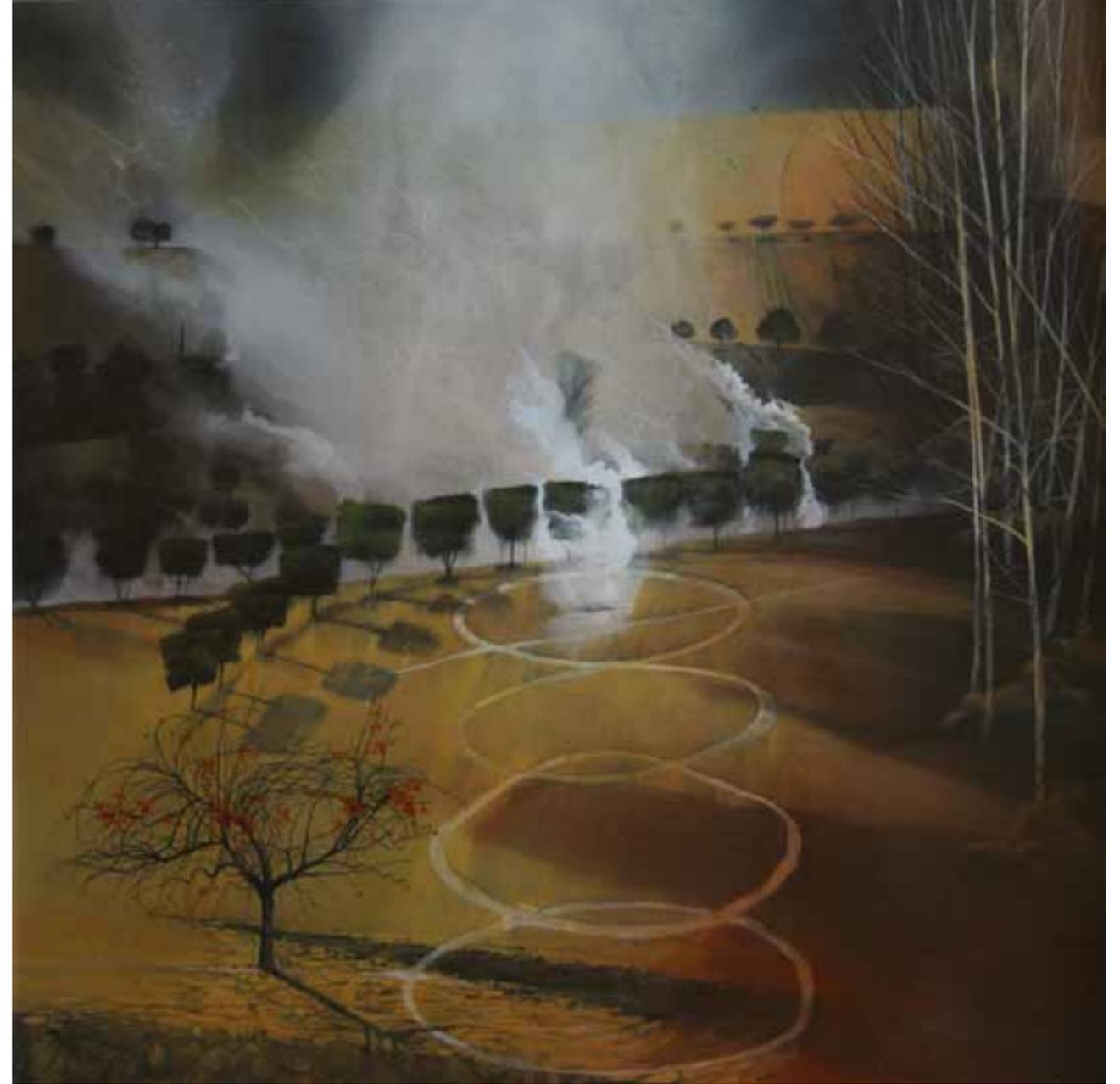
Selecting a winner can have a huge bearing on the public perception of a particular competition. This year’s BP Portrait Award went to Craig Wylie for a large canvas depicting his girlfriend that evidently relied heavily on photography, a technique that was prevalent elsewhere in the show. Our own Artist Of The Year 2008 competition revealed a wide mix of figurative, painterly and abstract works, reflecting the wide-ranging tastes of our readers.

With so much at stake, Lawson-Baker agrees that the selection of representative judges is crucial to the success of a competition.

“It’s a difficult one. You end up probably having to change your judges every year or every other year. I think that’s an inevitable problem. We do a panel for public discussion and we have different artists and different people discussing the works, including judges. I think we are definitely on the contemporary side of things and of course you get criticised for that.”



ABOVE Amy George’s *Autumnal Fire*, winner of last year’s 21 And Under prize
OPPOSITE David Firmstone’s *Persimon Tree*, the overall winner in 2007



This year, they have welcomed back the Royal Academy’s Professor Maurice Cockrill and Financial Times art critic Richard Cork, alongside newcomer and conceptual artist Gavin Turk. Cockrill is the chair of the judges and a veteran of countless competition panels but still holds reservations over the whole process.

“I am not sure, even now, about prizes for art or setting in judgement upon the work of fellow artists. It is all a bit problematic.”

Ultimately though, he has very particular criteria: “There are many factors to be alert to when judging competitions – craft, intelligence, and an informed vision, i.e. an awareness of art history, remote and recent, some degree of originality, obsessiveness, and ultimately excellence, however defined.”

One person to consistently meet these criteria is Amy George, a young painter from Felpham, West Sussex. Amy came highly commended in the 2006 competition before winning the 21 And Under category last year for the richly textured *Autumnal Fire*.

“She is having her university completely funded by the person who bought that work of art,” says Lawson-Baker. “She has recently done the Affordable Art Fair and even had a few commissions too.”

And despite his experience, balancing success stories such as Amy with more ambitious plans is something that is causing headaches for

Lawson-Baker.

“I’d like to be finding new talents but the problem with increasing the prize money is that you are going to get established artists. There is definitely a conflict of interest and I don’t quite know how to get around that one yet,” he admits. “Watch this space.”

HOW TO ENTER

The deadline for receiving entries to the 2008 National Open Art Competition is 22 October at Goodwood, with regional collections starting in Newcastle-upon-Tyne on 11 October.

Each artist may submit up to three works, all of which must never have been exhibited anywhere else before. The maximum size should be 183x183x10cm including the frame. All submissions must be available for sale, and the Chichester Arts Trust will take a 30% commission.

The overall winner will receive £10,000, with a further £16,000 of prizes, including an under 25s category and visitor’s choice award. For further details and entry forms, visit the website at www.thenationalopenartcompetition.com.