



Holly Frean - A Pack of Women Artists

Master class

LAURA CARTLEDGE discovers the remarkable man and competition helping to celebrate art.

If an accident with a needle saw you contract hepatitis B, told you couldn't work for months and were put in quarantine, chances are a new career in art might not be the first thing on your mind.

However for dentist Neil Lawson-Baker it was the perfect chance to explore a lifelong interest.

After one sculpture lesson he went about making his own, in wax, in his bedroom.

With help from a friend his first project followed, producing 26 sculptures to accompany each poem in Kahlil Gibran's *The Prophet*.

While the virus thankfully cleared, and Neil returned to dentistry, his art wasn't left behind as patients became purchasers of his work.

The 'most amazing commissions' followed with Neil turning his talents to creating everything from the entrance to the offices of the Houses of Parliament and the Channel Tunnel to the National Stadium in

Kuala Lumpur.

Two years after the injury, in 1989, Neil moved to Chichester when a conversation at the then Chichester Open Art Exhibition presented him with a long desired opportunity to 'give back' to the industry.

"I met the guy who ran it, got chatting and he asked if I would like to join the board," recalls Neil, who is now the chairman.

The Chichester Open originally launched in 1996 and was part of an 'amazing vision' for the city, as team member Cloe Barrett explains.

"The Duke of Richmond, who owns and lives at Goodwood House, and his contemporaries had an amazing vision for Chichester which was to make it a city of the arts by 2020," she reveals.

"And it has, kind of, been realised to some extent. We have Pallant House, we have the Oxmarket, the Revival..."

The exhibition has grown year on year,

and 'about four or five years ago', the name changed to reflect just that.

"My mother-in-law said it doesn't work," Neil admits, saying how it became the 'National Open Art'. "And then it took off."

So much so, in fact, that it is now largely regarded as the UK's leading open art competition.

"We had almost 4,000 entries this year and only 133 exhibit," reveals Cloe, putting this into context.

So what makes it so popular, and so different to other competitions?

"We are open to anybody and it is anonymously judged so anyone can enter, no-one is invited, it is about talent rather than connections," Cloe replies.

"One of the most brilliant things about it is, rather than there being a theme, the range and breadth of work we get is mind-blowing.

"It does make a really eclectic show.

"It is about talent and uniqueness whereas



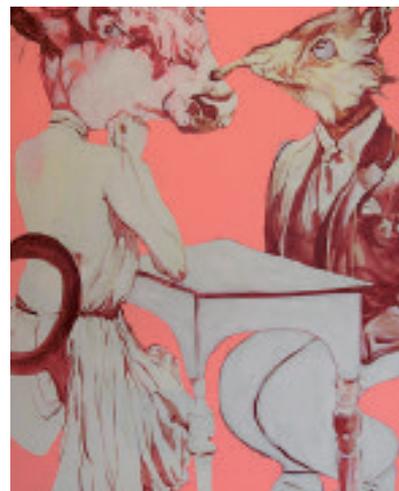
Kaye Song - Asleep



Chris King - HP Tree



Neil Lawson-Baker



Lauren Alderslade - Plenty of Fish

galleries run on sales," she adds. "This is a very different world to be in, and a very nice world, all we are doing is helping."

The lucky artists who make it through the gruelling judging process certainly get great assistance as they are exhibited in London before the winners are shown at Chichester's Pallant House – this year between December 1 – 13.

"It is prestigious to have on their CVs," says Cloe, who admits it is hard not to get involved.

"We all find ourselves vying for works and if the judges say no your heart breaks a little bit, but it is a competition at the end of the day."

The benefits to those involved are also financial, with Neil estimating there to be

'£60,000 in prize money' with £1,000 awarded to the artist who wins the viewers' vote.

There are also chances to get inspired by some of the art world's most influential individuals.

"Last year we had Antony Gormley and the artists were so starry eyed to meet him," Cloe reveals. "It is incredible for us for them to come and show that support."

"This year we have Will Gompertz and everyone is really excited about that."

The charity is also 'branching out' to create the NOA collection so exhibitions can run throughout the year, plus there are plans to build an 'Art Map' to highlight work in different areas.

Plus, with the competition marking 20 years in 2016 it really is a case of watch this space.

The prize winners at Pallant House will include Brighton-based artist Lauren Alderslade who has been named 'best artist in the South East' for Plenty of Fish – a comment on the modern dating game.

Lauren was one of 43 finalists from the south and a 2015 NOA judge, Hughie O' Donoghue, admitted it was both a 'challenge' and a 'privilege' to be involved.

"I'm impressed with the strength and diversity of the submissions," he confessed. "What comes through for me is a sense of invention and a seriousness of intent, sometimes along with irreverence and humour. It's a healthy picture of the art in these Islands."

For more information on the competition, visit www.thenationalopenartcompetition.com More about the Pallant House exhibition, December 1 – 13, can be found at www.pallant.org.uk