

# Dust and Bones : Turner Prize 09 Musings

Christopher Collier, artist & writer

We have proof of the Turner Prize's influence conversely in the very art stories that have somewhat over shadowed it of late. Even if the prize itself has not snatched the limelight quite as much as has been the case in previous, more controversial, years, the fact that the two big art stories in the mainstream media currently come from previous winners of the award is testament to its enduring relevance. So whilst we read about Anthony Gormley's Plinth or Damien Hirst's sudden conversion to painting in the newspapers we must remember what a boost the prize was to their careers, especially in making them known to the wider public outside of the art world itself.

Now there are arguments for and against the prize in terms of whether it is valuable or indeed helpful to 'British' art in general. Whilst the prize is indeed effective at conveying contemporary 'British' art to a wider audience it also raises a great deal of hostility in the press and public at large. It undoubtedly increases access to art through the publicity that it generates and it is definitely beneficial to the careers of the artists shortlisted. It has proven itself a good indicator of artists that go on to sustain long term success, however as Sarah Thornton argues in *Seven Days in the Art World*, this may be something of a self-fulfilling prophesy. Critic Dan Fox of *Frieze* has argued that the prize operates as a good barometer for the mood of the nation citing Hirst's win in the era of 'Cool Britannia' and Mark Wallinger's victory at the time of the Iraq war in support of his case. This is somewhat an matter of stating the obvious however; anyone familiar with Marxism will also be well acquainted with the idea of the Superstructure reflecting the Infrastructure of society, ie. culture directly reflecting the conditions of the socio-economic base. What we have is a rehash of Plekhanov a century later, although to be fair I am sure that Fox is well aware of this and was merely presenting the case to a wider public. However if we are to take a Plekanovian standpoint (of a crude reflectionism) then in fact the prize is unnecessary in this respect as contemporary art will necessarily reflect the nature of contemporary culture in any case.

Critics opposed to the prize have been numerous and not naturally the kind of people with whose opinions I would care to associate myself. Brian Sewell of the *Evening Standard* has referred to it as a 'farce' and compared it to a pantomime, Critic Jonathan Jones was apparently (as quoted on Wikipedia – although I can't seem to find a source anywhere so that makes me slightly suspicious) critical of the prize stating that

Turner Prize art is based on a formula where something looks startling at first and then turns out to be expressing some kind of banal idea

however he has since gone on to serve on the jury of the prize this year so if this quote is accurate perhaps his job title should contain the prefix 'hypo' and the suffix 'al'. Whether accurate or not he was extremely critical of last year's shortlist whereas he now states

Turner prize is a beacon of intelligence. It aspires to select the best and most ambitious examples of British art at the present moment and at the same time to enhance the authority of that greatest and most enlightened of institutions, the museum

Which sounds just about as big a turn around as you could imagine. In fact his praise of the prize is more likely to persuade me against it in any case, contrary as I am. The latter quote is definitely accurate as I got it directly from his blog and is pretty banal in itself. The Prize

could hardly be described as 'a beacon of intelligence' which implies that it stands out from a generally unintelligent field which I do not agree with. Indeed last year Jones was criticising the shortlist for placing too much emphasis on 'intelligence' calling it 'overthought, overtalked, pseudo-intellectual culture'. Whether it selects the 'best' of 'British' art (whatever that is) is also highly questionable. As critic David Lee has argued that the shortlist has tended very much to be dominated by artists represented by a small number of London dealers namely the Lisson Gallery and others closely linked to Saatchi. Also Jones' point about employing art to 'enhance the authority' of the 'enlightened' museum is bluntly hegemonic and ridiculous (as if the Tate didn't already contain a few pieces of art).

Conversely, whilst Jonathan Jones praising the prize might lead me to towards being critical of it, Kim Howells' idiotic intervention in 2002 inclines me to be consider it more favourably, in short anything that a moron like Howells can label 'cold, mechanical bullshit' can't be all bad. Howells is well known for his cultural pedigree, the same Howells who is a friend to Columbian right-wing paramilitary death squads, voted strongly for Iraq (which he implied was better off as 'a mess'), for Trident and for Student top-up fees. The same Howells that claimed the UK and Saudi Arabia had 'shared values', labelled films that bore a distinctively Welsh cultural outlook as 'fascist' and claimed that the idea of listening to folk singers was 'hell', this from a culture minister.

I do believe that the Turner prize does encourage an unhelpfully canonical view of contemporary art practice in the UK and that it does ultimately fail to reflect the diversity and value of practice, particularly that which operates outside of the commercial London-centric art world. However I would concede that it does raise the profile and legitimacy of contemporary practice as opposed to the tired canon of traditional art that still predominates in the majority of public institutions (I have to say that my recent visit to Tate 'Britain' (urgh) did little to assuage my view that it should be renamed the 'Turner museum' showing as it was the 'Turner' prize, 'Turner and the Masters' and the Turner Collection, the Turner Wing, the myriad Turner rooms with the other Turners spread throughout the other rooms of the gallery, indeed Turner seems only rivalled by the shops/ticket desks in the Tate's list of priorities). Having said that however, I feel that the deliberate courting of controversy, no doubt to stimulate ticket sales, of past years has probably done more harm than good in affecting public perceptions of contemporary art.

But what of this years show? Well after arriving I was first struck and slightly amused by the fact that the exhibition had even succeeded in tacking on its own little shop knocking out no end of spin-off merchandising tat that mainly and possibly slightly illogically seemed to be largely Tracy Emin based (Emin having never won the prize and indeed not been shortlisted for ten years). I was also somewhat incredulous at having to part with my extortionate entrance fee for what is essentially a small exhibition, paying for Radical Nature at the Barbican last week didn't bother me so much as I spent a good three hours looking around, this exhibition is over in half an hour absolute maximum. Oh well, I suppose I'll have to pay entry to the whole gallery once the Tories get in with their unpleasant fervour for applying discredited Neo-liberal economics to even the most inappropriate scenarios.

As for the work, well on the whole it is generally of a very high standard. The headlines will no doubt fixate on cow brains and piles of dust but there is some beautiful and thoughtful work on display here. Richard Wright takes the ephemerality of street art and mixes it to great effect with the high culture of fresco, hinting through his use of gold leaf at the religious iconography of previous ages and the decorative embellishments of Rococo palaces. His painstakingly produced gilded patterns bloom from the white walls with a rich

and visceral immediacy along with a delicate and fragile beauty that is compounded by the knowledge that they will be painted over after the exhibition. The work forms an interesting comment on the nature of art and the transience of beauty that gets us into theoretical territory concerning instability, flows and Deleuze's plain of immanence. Wright does not consciously reference such theories however, preferring to anchor his work in terms of traditional art history and established techniques. Curator Sophie Karamani has been eagerly feeding the press tales of Wright's studious boyhood odysseys over night from Edinburgh to London just to see a single work of Blake, Turner or Mondrian at the Tate (of course). Whether Wright truly fetishised such works to this extent or whether this is a bit of mythologising on the part of the Tate marketing department is a matter of conjecture.

The ephemeral is a theme that carries through into the work of Roger Hiorns with his impressive dust installation comprising the atomised engine of a passenger jet. The work is unsettling in its resonances with air disasters and terrorism and brings to mind Shelley's *Ozymandias* with its 'lone and level sands' in the way that it suggests how even the most impressive and seemingly substantial works ultimately come down to nothing but dust in the end. One of humankind's greatest engineering achievements, enabling a 365 tonne mass of metal to fly through the air, is here brought to flows of dust. Hiorns' other works, created from bovine brain matter suspended in a plastic medium, echo similar concerns and are similarly unsettling. This once sentient material is now transubstantiated into lifeless sculptural matter. Again the work throws up theoretical angles that engage with entropy, such as Deleuze's ideas concerning flows of intensity, multiplicity, fragmentation and the converse illusions of separateness and individuality that these engender, Hiorns, like Deleuze, seems to be postulating that everything is actually existent upon a plane of immanence, from sentient life to aircraft engines.

My least favourite work, that of Enrico David, also engages with concepts fragmentation drawing as it does, magpie fashion, upon various cultural reference. Typically Postmodern in this respect the work ultimately failed to move me emotionally or particularly to challenge me intellectually. In this respect I felt it was the least successful of the offerings.

If my opinions counted for anything my own personal accolade would go to Lucy Skaer whose work I very much enjoyed at Doggerfisher in Edinburgh earlier this year (see my earlier review). Skaer is the second Scotland-based artist on the shortlist, hinting either at a strong showing from the Scottish art scene or a conscious effort on the part of the selectors to refute allegations of London-centricity. Whilst I wouldn't put this past the selectors it would be unfair to suggest that Skaer and Wright are here on anything other than merit. Skaer's lyrical style shines through in some beautiful work here, the intricate and complex drawing of a whale skeleton again suggests fragmentation and deconstruction, multiple tiny marks only forming a larger, coherent whole when viewed at a distance. Her sensual and elegant coaldust forms express a similar theme, of fragmented, disparate elements coming together into larger scale assemblages and arrangements. Her centre piece, the huge whale skull on loan from the National Museums of Scotland occluded and partially blocked from viewers by a series of screens, draws these concepts up to the next level. Here we are not only faced with fragmented materials, entities in a state of flux assembling into larger seemingly coherent forms, but we are also forced to consider the act of looking and by implication interpretation along similar lines. Whilst Hiorns deconstructs Skaer deconstructs, reconstructs and then deconstructs once more. The glimpsed whale skull shows us that our vision, by which she implies not merely our empirical senses but also our language is unstable and in flux. If language and signs are always relative and partial then this brings into question the nature of our very being in an ontological sense, our mind, our identity, our interpretations, our ideologies. Again

classically Postmodern, what Skaer appears to be suggesting is that it impossible for us to experience the bigger picture as it were (or even that there is no bigger picture, no grand narrative) and that our attempts to grapple with it must necessarily be fragmentary and a problematic process of induction. For this reason I would chose Skaer as the most interesting, engaging and impressive of the artists on the shortlist and in my view deserving of the prize. Of course the work does not express these ideas to everyone, to some no doubt it is the sheer impressive, dare I say spectacular, nature of the whale skull that is the main attraction however I feel that truly great art should operate on many levels and it is not for me to prejudge its affect. I'm not at all convinced that Skaer will win, in fact my money would probably be on Hiorns, I'm just saying that in my opinion she should.