

BP Portrait Award 2018 Winner: The best of the rest

BP Portrait Award 2018 at the National Portrait Gallery, 14th June to 23rd September 2018

One of the great pleasures of the BP Portrait Award is that it sparks debate. In the first article, I took a detailed look at *An Angel at my table* by Miriam Escofet that justifiably earned first place. Now in this second article, I'm going to appraise more critically the paintings that were awarded the other places as well as mention some of the others that caught my eye.



Time Traveller, Matthew Napping by Felicia Forte © Felicia Forte

The second prize went to *Time Traveller, Matthew Napping* by Felicia Forte. This is a large eye-catching canvas, fully six feet square, that captures the moment the artist returned home to find her boyfriend asleep in bed on a sweltering Detroit night. The warm red light of the bedside lamp fills one side of the painting and combines with the cooler evening light from the bedroom window to capture the essence of that particular moment. This is a bold painting, at once vivid and atmospheric but also personal and intimate.

But is it a portrait? All the other paintings in the exhibition feature a likeness of the sitter (or at least some part of the face). In *Time Traveller, Matthew Napping*, the sitter's face occupies the centre of the painting as the picture's focal point but is only roughly rendered. No doubt the treatment suits the time of night and the low level of light in the room. No doubt too that the term 'portrait' lacks clear boundaries and is a definition of some elasticity. I'm just not sure though that a competition that aims to

feature the world's most accomplished portrait painting is a place to test the stretchiness of this definition when so many fine paintings that are clearly portraits are vying for recognition. What's more, the absence of the sitter's face deprives us both of any real sense of his character or his relationship with the artist.



Broken Bodies by Jamie Coreth © Jamie Coreth

Contrast this then with *Broken Bodies* by Jamie Coreth. Another large-scale canvas, the painting features Mark the artist's friend and a former soldier who sustained an injury so severe as to end his army service. Instead Mark began to focus on his career as a sculptor and the painting places him in his studio in front of an old broken statue. As subdued and monochromatic as the second placed painting is vibrant, *Broken Bodies* is also conversely full of details that tell us about the sitter's past and present, and mind and body.

The setting suggests a monastic cell, redolent of the search for redemption, while Mark the sitter with his shaven head and troubled eyes holds our gaze like an El Greco saint. His hands – the one detail that perhaps is not well rendered in the painting – are folded in his lap in contemplation. His shadow falls over the statue in the background that is cracked across its heart and hips mirroring the damage Mark

has sustained. Around him are reminders of his past life. He wears army boots. The statue is of Zeus the destroyer throwing a thunderbolt. On the floor is an ass's jawbone with which Samson killed a thousand men and beside this, if I am not mistaken, is an anamorphic image of a mask of the type worn by special services soldiers on night missions.

In truth, this is not an easy picture to like but it is certainly one that repays careful attention and succeeds in revealing both the mental and physical state of its sitter with extraordinary clarity.



Simone by Tongyao Zhu © Tongyao Zhu

The third place went to *Simone* by Tongyao Zhu. This portrait is of the adolescent boy that lived next to the artist during his time studying in Florence. The inspiration for the painting was a visit by the boy one sunny afternoon that awoke in Zhu the desire to repay the kindness of Simone's parents by way of a portrait of their son. Completed in a week, Zhu comments that he strove hard to capture 'the inner nature and beauty' of his model. Painted in a hyper-realist style like Miriam Escofet's winning portrait, Zhu certainly replicates, even exaggerates, the flesh tones of the slightly podgy face of Simone's early adolescence with extraordinary precision and remarkable technique.

But unlike Escofet, who uses a hyper-realist approach to depict a reality beyond the tangible, I'm not sure Zhu's meticulous depiction of his sitter adds much beyond a superficial representation. Neither does the idealized setting with its American and Italian churches representing the boy's dual nationality tell us much about Simone's place in the world. As a result, I find the painting bland and empty; it is not a photographic representation of Simone, but neither does its contrived alternative reality provide much insight into the boy's character or relationships.



Finn by René Tweehuysen © René Tweehuysen

Contrast this then with *Finn* by Renee Tweehuysen. This shows the artist's son, a slightly older adolescent at 17 than Simone, and depicted with less precision and formality, but with far more insight and affection. Deliberately posed against a neutral background and dressed for the street, Finn stares into space, poised between the dependency of childhood and the independence of adult life. Tweehuysen comments 'as parents, we must learn to gradually let go of our teenagers' and one senses that physically Finn is still present posing for his father, but mentally is preparing to take his own place in the world.



A portrait of two female painters by Ania Hobson © Ania Hobson

The BP Young Artist Award went to Ania Hobson for *A Portrait of Two Female Painters*. Another large canvas, the painting features the artist herself and her sister-in-law, Stevie Hix, another painter. Both work at the same studio in Suffolk and the painting aims to capture the buzz Hobson feels when working surrounded by other artists. She comments 'I wanted to introduce a narrative about my relationship with Stevie as painters and how it is to work in the studio together'. Painted with a direct style reminiscent of early Hockney and Freud, the painting communicates a sense of female emancipation and power through the dress and the pose of the sitters, and especially through the angle of the composition that highlights their boots. But at the same time, there is also a sense of mystery as to the relationship between the two artists – we're intrigued and want to know more.

It is easy to imagine why a painting of female confidence and strength might find favour with the judges but to my eye again, there is a certain roughness to how Hobson handles the paint. The shin of the sitter to the left - presumably Ania Hobson herself – is painted flat for example with minimal shading or detail. A small thing perhaps but this occupies our eye line and sets the tone for the painting as a whole. And there are many other fine paintings on display – Nathan Ford's *Dad's Last Day* for example painted on the day his father died. Or *Sister* by Zack Zdrade of his mother/scientist sibling.



Mrs Anna Wójcik by Monika Polak © Monika Polak

But I'd like to finish with *Mrs. Anna Wójcik* by Monika Polak. Painted on the day of her 100th birthday, this is a marvelous painting in both concept and execution. Painted on patterned fabric, the old lady looks cheerful and reflective but at the same time, physically seems to be fading from view before our eyes, with only her face and hands fully realised. Having chosen one portrait of old age for the first place prize, not doubt the judges felt reluctant to consider another. But this painting is worthy of more attention for the sensitivity and skill of the artist.

So there you have it – not a vintage year perhaps but certainly worth a visit to enjoy the best that contemporary portraiture has to offer.

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