

HUFFPOST ARTS & CULTURE

Royal Academy Summer Exhibition: The Show Critics Love to Hate (PHOTOS)

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The equally beloved-and-berated Royal Academy Summer Exhibition is back, now on view from June 7th-August 17th. It is the world's largest open-submission contemporary art show, and has been for quite a long time - 243 years, to be exact. This year's Summer Exhibition saw over 12,000 submissions from 27 different countries, and the vetting committee selected around 1,000 of those works for the show. When the exhibit started in 1769, 136 paintings were on display; by 1820 that figure exceeded 1,000. A generous variety of artists - from William Powell Frith to Tracey Emin - have submitted works that have graced the walls of Piccadilly's Burlington House during the summer months. The featured artworks are submitted by the public, as well as the Royal Academicians themselves, showcasing the creations of new and established artists working in every kind of media including painting, printmaking, sculpture, film, architecture, and photography. All proceeds from the exhibition (including art sold, ticket sales, and submission fees) finance the training of young artists at the Royal Academy schools - a proud tradition that has stood the test of time.

Yet despite its long-standing history, the Royal Academy's Summer Exhibition once again returns to a mixture of (mostly) jeers and (some) praise from critics. The jeering is to be expected, as one critic noted, "It strikes me that denigrating the Summer Exhibition is a peculiarly self-flagellating British trait." In its formative years, the Summer Exhibition was hailed as a delight by visitors who flocked to the resplendent Burlington from all corners of the globe, captivated by the array of works by both unknown artists and famous masters, all hung together on the manor's expansive walls. The effect was magnificent, a celebratory tribute to British culture and a new artistic aesthetic. "[The Summer Exhibition] was originally established both to fund the Academy Schools for the training of young artists and also to free the Academicians from what was known in the 18th Century as "the treadmill of portraiture," said 2011's exhibition coordinator, artist Christopher Le Brun, in a recent interview with MutualArt.com. "It enabled artists to appeal directly to the public and to paint and sculpt varied and ambitious subjects."

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Coloring Book by Jeff Koons, 2011. The sculpture was created specifically for the Royal Academy's Summer Exhibition.

But in recent years - perhaps due in part to a shift in the definition of “art” and the ever-expanding range of media in modern art - the tradition of ridiculing the Summer Exhibition has become an art form in itself. Critic Quentin Letts of the Daily Mail is one such scathing detractor of this year’s show, remarking that many of the exhibition’s works consisted of “...anaemic, abstract bits and bobs of not terribly much. Left me as cold as egg mousse.” Overall, he said, the exhibition is likely to leave visitors “a-boil at the crass materialism and sheer ineptitude of today’s culture commissars and their metallic, urban notion of art.” Letts specifically mentioned that his least-favorite works were by shock-artist Tracey Emin, while other critics were left unsettled by an odd photograph by Cindy Sherman, herself as the subject (sporting false teeth, garishly rouged cheeks and a near-catatonic stare). Letts bemoaned the approach taken by both the exhibiting artists and the show’s organizers, lamenting, “Why do they so hate tradition? Why can they leave nothing alone?”

From what Le Brun says, it seems the shift in opinion is largely due to the types of art that contemporary artists are apt to create. “Although the historic structure has hardly changed, the send-in is vastly different. For example, the traditional genre subjects, which would previously have dominated, appear to be in decline.” He added, “The tenets of modern art are now firmly established so there is an enormously wide range of work submitted.” After all, contemporary art in Victorian times is a far cry from today’s version. Which isn’t to say the exhibit is without highlights - Michael Vogt’s industrial juxtaposition

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piece H34 Robert is a favorite, as well as many of the oil works and smaller canvas landscapes. Keith Tyson's apocalyptic painting Deep Impact - despite its doomsday depiction - also has had quite a positive effect on visitors, many of whom are arrested by the vibrantly painted work.

Acclaimed contemporary artists Anish Kapoor, Tony Cragg and Jeff Koons have received mixed reviews, mainly because many visitors felt their works are "predictable" in the given setting. A hotly-debated piece is Simon Brundret's moving dog sculpture - Dog in a Bin - featuring an electric-powered dog chowing down on the contents of a trash bin. This exhibit elicits both gasps of disgust and shouts of laughter, and alternately has been lauded and lambasted by critics.

Plenty of viewers have been equally insulted by the bulletin posted by Tess Jaray RA at the entrance to Gallery V, by way of introducing the works she selected for the room (including four of her own): "Tess Jaray has hung this room in the belief that it is only for people who are sensitive, intelligent and thoughtful. No one else will enjoy it." Unsurprisingly, Letts did not enjoy it, nor was he amused (the "anemic blobs" he mentioned earlier were in reference to Jaray's works). While he says that past exhibitions were a celebration of both "art and artistry," his thoughts on the current show clearly differ, to say the least. "This Summer Exhibition is shattering evidence of how British culture has shrivelled to the brink of its own demise," he declared.

Another critic stated that he agrees with a member of the hanging committee, who purportedly referred to the selected works as "psychotic." And even painter-sculptor and coordinator of the exhibition himself, Christopher Le Brun, alluded to the Daily Telegraph that some Royal Academicians may be "embarrassed" by the exhibition, due to the belief of some of the RA that "there is a question of quality." But, he was quick to add, "we can only show what we've been sent in, so we describe ourselves simply as the 'hosts' of the exhibition." Taken in this light, it appears the fault is at the hands of the artists themselves, though many question why a number of more traditional "Old Guard" paintings - created in a figurative style, mostly in oil - were cut from this year's show; a much smaller selection of these works are displayed in the Weston Room.

On the other hand, there are signs that the exhibit is revamping its image, as evinced by the exhibit in the Wohl Central Hall: this room is devoted exclusively to photography, for the first time in the show's long history. Many have also noted that while there is sure to be mediocre caliber in the summer exhibition due to the sheer volume of works, with a staggering 1,117 pieces on display, everyone is guaranteed to catch something of interest.

The committee of veters is a selection of Academicians representing each discipline - painters, sculptors, print-makers, and architects. "The RA has changed 40% of its membership in the last 10 years so visitors may be surprised to know who the current members are," Le Brun said. He was chosen as this year's "chief-hanger" and also denotes the general framework for the show. In past years, occasionally there were themes - like 2009's "Making Space" Summer Exhibit - but this year Le Brun opted to do without, allowing for a broader selection of works. But a crucial aspect of the Summer Exhibition is the way in which the pieces themselves are displayed. "There has been a

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tendency to make the exhibition more conventional - white walls, spacious hang,” Le Brun said. He wants visitors to make their own way through the gallery rather than being led by curatorial directions.

“Actually, its an opportunity to display paintings and sculpture in a dense and rich way in which we don’t normally see them. For example, I’ve chosen to paint the largest gallery, room III, a mid-toned warm grey. It is based on the final rooms of the National Gallery where the Seurats, Cezannes and Van Goghs are displayed. I’ve also chosen a floor-to-ceiling hang,” he explained. And Le Brun wasn’t alone; he arranged the room with the aid of painter Tony Bevan, “and it contains both framed figurative pictures and large color field paintings. Seeing the large abstract paintings singing out high up on this colour gives the show greater variety. The display was structured around paintings by two invited artists - Per Kirkeby and Keith Tyson. Artists exhibiting here are mostly Academicians including some who rarely show in this very grand room. It’s a rare opportunity for the visitor to see many styles of painting presented together.”

Le Brun’s choice highlights include the picks of artist Michael Craig-Martin, who has also lent a large hand in organizing this year’s show. Additionally, he says, “There are major works from Keith Tyson, Mimmo Paldino, Per Kirkeby and Anselm Kiefer. Edmund De Waal is showing here for the first time as is James Hugonin and Gary Fabian Miller. It is certainly unique to see James Butler’s war memorial shown in the courtyard near Jeff Koons.” The appropriately praised and ‘poohed’ Koons work - a stainless-steel sculpture of Piglet from Winnie-the-Pooh, *Coloring Book* - had critics divided over whether the piece was whimsical or merely “Koons-Kitsch.”

As to comments that the main room is overcrowded, even by the exhibit’s standards (with such a large selection of works, it is reasonable to expect a shortage of space), Le Brun is confident about the way in which the works are displayed. “Despite the relative density of the Room III hang, the response is generally that the show is calmer and more considered, with individual rooms having a stronger identity,” he said. Two such examples are the architecture and photography rooms, both of which adhere to their respective genres. “The press have had their usual fun, but at its heart this is actually a serious show of new art. In fact one critic advised us to stop pandering to the avant-garde - that was certainly surprising,” Le Brun added with a laugh.

Love it or hate it, it’s clear that this year’s Summer Exhibition won’t bore you - something can always be said about the art on offer at Burlington House. And after all is said and done, the Summer Exhibition continues to be a staple of the British art world, with a rich history extending back to the age of enlightenment. Maybe the Telegraph’s Alastair Sooke sums it up best - regardless of what critics say, one crucial fact remains: “The Summer Exhibition is part of our heritage, an essential chromosome in the genetic make-up of our national cultural life. It is part of who we are.”

Written by MutualArt.com Staff

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