

Finally, the abject Turner prize is worth a look

For six years the award was a travelling propaganda tool — but now it has a point (even if it's still stuck in the grip of identity politics)

Waldemar Januszczak | Sunday September 29 2024, 12.01 am BST, The Sunday Times



Claudette Johnson's Young Man in Blue, 2024
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After six years, the Turner prize is back in London. This needs celebrating not because we Londoners have missed it — we haven't — or because anyone believes London is its rightful home — we don't — or because there was anything unworthy about the venues it ended up in on its superannuated tour of Britain — there wasn't. The reason to celebrate is because it marks an end to a particularly dismal run of travelling shows.

Which was the worst? The silly event in Margate where all four shortlisted nonentities “shared” the award? The phoney affair in Coventry when everyone included was in a “collective”? The Eastbourne farrago crammed so uncomfortably into a venue that wasn't suited to it physically, spiritually or aesthetically?

They were all bad. And all featured the Turner being used clunkily as a travelling propaganda tool seeking to inculcate a wider British public with patronising Tate notions of the value of contemporary art.

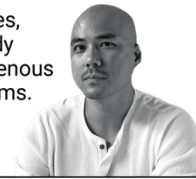
This year's version is a conspicuous improvement. For the first time in six years we have an elegantly installed display, mercifully free of video art, with a shortlist of four worthwhile contributors, all of whom deserve a delve. Most importantly, it's a show that feels as if it actually has a finger on the pulse of 2024.

Mind you, that is not difficult because the main message proclaimed here is the message of identity politics and you would have to be as deaf as Beethoven not to know that identity politics is art's obsessive topic. Everybody's at it.



Pio Abad

41, from the Philippines, takes aim at the greedy appropriation of indigenous art by western museums. It's strikingly minimal and elegantly precise.



For the Sphinx, 2023

Portrait of Pio Abad © Pio Abad
Artwork by Pio Abad: Courtesy the artist. Hannah Pye/
Ashmolean, University of Oxford

Pio Abad, who is from the Philippines and keeps pointing it out, gives us a carefully installed display which turns out to be a rant about colonial power and the greedy appropriation of indigenous art by western museums. But it doesn't feel like it. Not immediately. At first sight, it's strikingly minimal and elegantly precise.

Taking his cue from the layouts favoured by ethnographic museums, Abad has arranged his evidence in glass cases or lifted up on admonishing pedestals, supplemented by lengthy captions spelling out the problems. The Benin bronzes he draws alongside his own quotidian possessions were stolen in barbaric circumstances by the British Army before being given to the British Museum. The tiara on a pedestal used to belong to Imelda Marcos.

The displayed artefacts work well enough as evidence, but they need the lengthy captions to explain them. Also, Abad is a worthy rather than a gripping artist, and the objects he has personally created, rather than borrowed from guilty western collections, tend towards the dull. The exception is a massive concrete bracelet modelled on one owned, again, by Marcos, which looks like a giant jellyfish sprawled across the gallery floor.



Jasleen Kaur

38, from Glasgow, evokes her Indian heritage, and insists we notice it. A vintage Ford Escort parked in the gallery blares out her childhood music, from Sufi devotionals to Grandmaster Flash.



Alter Altar, 2023

Portrait of Jasleen Kaur: © Robin Christian
Artwork by Jasleen: Courtesy of Tramway and Glasgow Life.
Photo: Keith Hunter

[Jasleen Kaur](#), from Glasgow, gives us an installation that evokes her Indian heritage, and insists we notice it. From the moment we step on to the enormous Axminster prayer rug that dominates the room and hear the monotonous drone of an unstoppable harmonium we know we are in an artwork describing a south Asian past.

As with all hit-and-miss installations of this kind, the idea is to surround us with bits and pieces of unformulated cultural evidence — objects, photos, sculptures, scribbings — and leave the audience to join up the dots. Thus Kaur is hoping to simulate the textures of her Indo-Glaswegian childhood, especially with a vintage Ford Escort parked in the gallery that blares out her childhood music, from Sufi devotionals to Grandmaster Flash. The results are warm and fuzzy. But as with so much identity politics, you need to have been there to find it creatively compelling. That's the downside of “me me me” art.



Delaine Le Bas

59, is of Romany stock but the show's captions surprisingly inform us she's of “Gypsy” heritage. Her work is fresh, noisy, exciting and borderline nuts.



Detail from Incipit Vita Nova. Here Begins The New Life/ A New Life Is Beginning, 2023

Portrait of Delaine Le Bas: © Tara Darby
Artwork by Delaine: Courtesy of Secession, Vienna.
Photo © Iris Ranzinger

Delaine Le Bas is of Romany stock or, as the captions surprisingly inform us, she's of Gypsy heritage, because “many people in the community use the word proudly”. There you go.

Her work — another sprawling installation — is surprising, fresh, noisy, exciting and borderline nuts. Mixing up Romany stories with images drawn from prehistory — hands, shamans — plus recurring detours into Greek myths, and further detours into what looks like the mind of the satanist Aleister Crowley, Le Bas has created a journey that feels more like a ride on a ghost train than a Tate display.

Lining her walls with reflective foil, so you keep seeing yourself wobbling in the distance, she has studded the shiny labyrinth with mysterious shrines of billowing white cloth on which are painted magic signs, cavorting nudes, spooky rituals. Here and there, the wacky journey is interrupted by moments of her own story: a stuffed horse her nan used to keep; red shoes from when she was a kid. So the identity politics is present. But it has exploded into exhilarating chaos.



Claudette Johnson

65, of Caribbean heritage, is a superb draughtswoman, the only artist at the event who displays true and unmistakable artistic skills. In a sane world, a shoo-in for the prize.



Protection, 2024

Portrait of Claudette Johnson: © Anne Tetzlaff
Artwork by Claudette: © Claudette Johnson. Courtesy
Hollybush Gardens, London. Photo: Andy Keate

Finally there is the impressive [Claudette Johnson](#), a familiar figure on the art trail these days, with recent shows at the Courtauld Gallery and a potent appearance in the Hayward Gallery's travelling tribute to motherhood.

Johnson is here for two reasons: first, because she is of Caribbean heritage and fulfils the identity politics brief; second, because she is a superb draughtswoman, the only artist at the event who displays true and unmistakable artistic skills.

A series of portraits of tense and thoughtful black faces — no one smiles in a Claudette Johnson picture — implies the struggle and determination of the Windrush experience, without having to mention it. In old-fashioned artistic terms, this is masterly characterisation. In a sane world it would be a shoo-in for the prize.