

## Turner Prize 2001

A pack for teachers, GCSE and AS/A2 level students  
By Miquette Roberts

### Facts

The Turner Prize was established in 1984 by the Tate Gallery and the Patrons of New Art, a group formed in 1982 by Patrons who were specifically interested in encouraging the promotion and collection of contemporary British art. Since 1991, the prize has been sponsored by Channel 4. It is awarded to an artist under 50 years of age who has made an outstanding contribution to art through an exhibition or other presentation during the previous year. The prizewinner receives a cheque for £20,000.

### Why is it called The Turner Prize?

It is named after one of the greatest of all English painters, JMW Turner (1775 - 1851), whose work can be seen in the Clore Gallery. During his lifetime, Turner championed younger British artists, realising how difficult it was for them to achieve recognition and hence to make a living. In 1849 he suggested that a Turner Medal be created and awarded biennially to the best landscape painter of the day - but this never happened. In the last decade of his life he painted works which, in their focus on atmospheric colour, might be considered to anticipate the appearance of abstract painting of the 1950s. Turner may have realised that in such paintings he was ahead of his time and very few were exhibited while he was alive. Despite this, the writer William Hazlitt felt that the only way to describe some of the artist's canvases was "paintings of nothing and very like." With the quality of Turner's work hotly disputed, the "*But is it Art?*" controversy had already begun.

In the Clore Gallery, find one of the most abstract of Turner's paintings from the 1840s such as *Sunrise with Sea Monsters* c.1845 and *Riva degli Schiavone, Venice: Water Fete* c.1845. Compare the way these are painted with an early Pre-Raphaelite work such as DG Rossetti's *Ecce Ancilla Domini!* 1849-50 or JE Millais' *Christ in the House of His Parents* 1849-50.

- What makes Turner's work seem so modern by contrast to his younger contemporaries Rossetti and Millais? Imagine that you are a Victorian critic who likes detailed narrative painting. How would you review Turner's work?

Now you are ready to turn your attention to today's cutting-edge artists.

### Controversy

The media draws public attention to the artists shortlisted for the Turner Prize and attracts visitors to the exhibition which is more popular than any other contemporary art show in Britain. The publicity is not always favourable, however, as journalists enjoy stirring public emotion by referring, for example, to finalists "who've split a dead cow, arranged a soiled bed, demolished a house or even ploughed a field of rice." (Ossian Ward *Hotline*, Autumn 2001) When you read such reviews, try to keep an open mind. Do you agree with the writer? Do you think the journalist is trying to provoke a sensationalist response?

### Things to consider when looking at contemporary art

#### What can be classified as art?

It is all too easy to reach snap judgements when confronted by the shock of the new. Some viewers who saw Damien Hirst's *Mother and Child Divided* (the split dead

cows) in 1995, Tracy Emin's rumpled bed in 1999 and Vong Phaophanit's neon rice field in 1993, dismissed them instantly as unworthy of the name of art. But what are the criteria for assessing art? Are they fixed, and do they remain the same throughout the centuries? What do you think the criteria are (skill, originality, ideas...)? Does some of the criticism directed at the Turner Prize come from critics who can only accept oil paintings and sculpture as art? (None of this year's contenders are painters.) If that is the case, even recognised masterpieces such as Henri Matisse's paper collage *The Snail* 1953 at Tate Modern could not be categorised as art, and nor could much of the work produced by people describing themselves as artists over at least the last forty years.

### **So why visit the Turner Prize?**

The most important function of visiting the Turner Prize may be to make you think about your own criteria for judging or looking at art, and to help you decide what makes an exhibit a work of art.

### **Keep an open mind!**

Remember that as long ago as 1840, critics poured scorn on Turner's work, seeing his most recent work as evidence of the decline of a great mind. They were judging his work against the painting of the past and failing to acknowledge that art evolves. However much you may love Pre-Raphaelite painting, think how terrible it would be if today's art merely repeated this manner of painting and there had been no alternative styles since the 1850s.

### **Probe beyond the surface**

Looking at the appearance of a work is only the first stage. Next you have to think about what it might mean.

- Why has the artist chosen the specific elements that make up his work?
- How can we relate to them?
- Are they meaningful only to the artist or can they be seen as having more general relevance to us, the viewers?
- How do you interpret that meaning?
- Do you find the work beautiful?
- Does it have an emotional impact?
- Does it make us reconsider aspects of our life in a new way?

### **Past Turner Prize Winners**

Previous prizewinners have included:

Howard Hodgkin (1985)

Gilbert and George (1986)

Richard Deacon (1987)

Richard Long (1989)

Anish Kapoor (1991)

Rachel Whiteread (1993)

Antony Gormley (1994)

Damien Hirst (1995)

Gillian Wearing (1997)

Chris Ofili (1998)

The Turner Prize has been described as the art world's answer to the Oscars. Winning the prize or even just being shortlisted can bring fame to a previously little known artist, as sculptor Richard Deacon has explained:

"Actually, being nominated made a big difference to how my work was perceived, particularly internationally: it made an enormous impact on my career."

(Richard Deacon is co-curator of the current display of medieval sculpture in the Duveen galleries.)

### **This year's contenders are:**

**Richard Billingham**, 30, a photographer from Birmingham who came to public notice through *Ray's a Laugh*, a collection of photographs of his alcoholic father and dysfunctional family. More recently he has documented childhood landscapes of the Midlands town of Cradley Heath where he grew up. He was selected for his "poignant return to places of childhood memory."

**Martin Creed**, 33, a conceptual artist from Wakefield, known for his neon light installations, his balloon pieces, music and art objects like No 79 which is a piece of kneaded Blu-Tack, rolled into a ball and depressed against a wall. He was chosen for "the rigour and purity of his work and its characteristic mixture of seriousness and humour."

**Isaac Julien**, 40, born in Bow in the east end of London, is a maker of films which "combine theoretical sophistication with lush sensuality, intelligence, wit and emotional complexity" who has an international reputation but is less well known in England than abroad.

**Mike Nelson**, 34, an installation artist whose large-scale pieces comprise discarded everyday materials with which he "creates places that suggest a sense of threat, danger, or life on the edge."

### **The Selection Committee's Criteria**

#### **The expression of emotions**

According to the *Press Release* from which I have quoted above, three out of the four contestants were selected for the way in which their work handles emotions. They are Richard Billingham, Isaac Julien and Mike Nelson. The expression of emotion is a traditional component in art, very much associated with the work of JMW Turner, for example.

#### **Your initial (emotional) impressions**

- Look at each of these three Turner Prize artists' work in turn and note down how their work affects you emotionally.
- What kind of emotions do they evoke?
- Like Mike Nelson, Turner often dealt with danger in his work. Is there any similarity in the way these two very different artists, separated by more than a century, express this emotion?

- What advantages does Nelson have over Turner by the fact that he uses 3D installations? Is it easier for you to become emotionally involved when you are physically *in* the art work? Or do you find it easier to become mentally involved if you are separated from it?
- Isaac Julien is a filmmaker. Is it easier to become involved in his work because you are familiar with the conventions of filmmaking from going to the cinema? Or are his films quite different from commercial screenings?
- Billingham uses his family as the raw material for his art. (Look at the video projection *Ray in Bed* 1999.) Do you think this is intrusive? Should the private hell of a close relative's alcoholism be made public? Have we any right to witness the personal dramas of other people's lives? Does the artist have any right to intrude in this way?

## The Artists

### Richard Billingham

Richard Billingham was born in Birmingham and brought up on a council estate. His work is rooted in that background. "Images of families living on the breadline in council estates usually present those people as demoralised victims living in a passive, defeated state of misery. .. Not here. Billingham's family images reveal the shallowness of most popular representations of the family, while emphasising the complexity of family issues and social life, not to mention the difficult relation between the viewer and the viewed." ([www.eyestorm.com](http://www.eyestorm.com))

Traditionally, of course, portraits were of the wealthy and aristocratic. Occasional exceptions can be found in the permanent collection displays. Look for:

William Hogarth *Heads of Six of Hogarth's Servants* c1750 –5 in room 4

David Hockney *My Parents* 1977 in room 28

Lucian Freud *Standing by the Rags* 1988-9 in room 30

- Hogarth's eighteenth century study of his servants is exceptional among the portraits of the aristocracy usual at that time. How real do the servants seem? They are looking at the painter. How do you read their relationship to him?
- How does Hockney distance himself from his parents in his painting? Look at the composition – does the scene look natural or contrived?
- Lucian Freud observes his subjects with uncompromising detachment. How would you feel about this portrayal if you were the model?

Although these are paintings of everyday life, the painter views his scene from a distance and we, the viewers, feel separated from what we see.

### An invasion of privacy?

Billingham's earlier snapshots of his working class family (as seen in The Royal Academy *Sensation* exhibition, for example) provided an almost shocking contrast to traditional portraits through their presentation of life in the raw. And that life was one shared by the artist. He had begun taking photos of his family on cheap, out of date film to build up the subject matter for paintings when he was a student at Sunderland University. "The subjects are his father Ray, a chronic alcoholic who rarely leaves the house, his obese and tattooed mother Liz, his unruly younger brother Jason, as well as a menagerie of pets with whom they all live in a cramped lower-class council flat." ([www.artseensoho.com](http://www.artseensoho.com))

## The Presentation of Family Life

Presumably the Billingham family does not object too strongly to the artist's documentation since Richard is able to continue with it. He explains what he is doing as "trying to make order out of chaos."

- What do you think he means by this?
- Do you think he succeeds?

Intrusion into the intimacy of family life is not new. In the late nineteenth century Claude Monet began painting a portrait of his first wife Camille as she was dying. The painting, in the Musée d'Orsay in Paris, goes beyond his personal circumstances to speak to the viewer about the universal predicament of life ending. Can we all identify with Billingham's scenes of his family's everyday life?

## Reality or artifice?

Monet's canvas is covered in a beautiful flurry of blue and white brushstrokes which look like snowflakes, a visual metaphor for the disintegration of the body.

- Do you think that Billingham's videos are equally composed? Do you find them beautiful? What do you notice about colour and forms moving from sharp to blurred focus?
- Does the medium of photography make the work more shocking/moving because we assume that it is a record of real life without any of the filtering through the artist's personality that occurs in the act of painting?
- What do you make of *Untitled Triptych 1999*? Is it a landscape? Is it human? Compare the blurring forms with those used by Francis Bacon in his portraits and *Study of a Dog 1952* in room 24. Is there a similarity? Are there similar undertones of suffering in Billingham's image?

## Drink and Drunkenness

Look at the video:

*Ray in Bed 1999*

Billingham's video of his father, Ray, in this exhibition does not show him drinking. He is in bed in daytime, possibly sleeping off the effects of drink.

- What is going through your mind as you watch?
- How does the floral background go with the sleeping/drunken man?
- Do you feel that it is intrusive? Would you mind being photographed in the intimacy of your own home for other people to look at?
- Is this similar to television programmes like *Big Brother*? Or do you feel that it has been transformed into art?

In the permanent collection displays, look for:

Joseph Highmore *Mr Oldham and his Guests* c1750 in room 4

Gilbert and George *Balls: The Evening before the Morning After – Drinking Sculpture 1972* in room 29

- Contrast these images of drinking. What similarities are there? What differences? Which involves you more in the experience of being drunk?
- How does Gilbert and George's use of photography contribute to the impact of the subject matter?
- Compare the use of blurring forms in Gilbert and George's *Balls* and Billingham's *Ray in Bed*. How do you interpret Billingham's use of blurring? How does it relate to the subject of his father?

## Martin Creed

### The nature of art

Martin Creed's work is less about strong personal emotions and more about questioning the nature of art, often in a humorous way. Significantly, in summer 2000, his work was included in the Tate Britain group show of contemporary British art called *Intelligence*. There he exhibited *Work No.74*, made out of as many 1" squares as are necessary cut from 1" masking tape and piled up, adhesive sides down, to form a 1" cubic stack. This small object exhibited in the centre of an empty wall was easy to pass by when nearby, large colourful surfaces by Julian Opie and Michael Craig Martin clamoured for our attention. It could be construed as mocking the pretensions of these artists, as making their work look self-important. In the same exhibition, Creed also showed *Work No. 220: DON'T WORRY*, a sign in white neon placed at the entrance to the exhibition. Visitors to contemporary art shows often do worry when they don't understand the work on display and feel that this could be an indictment of their own limited intelligence. The sign makes fun of us in that situation and of our petty anxieties at the same time as it makes us question the nature of art exhibitions in general. That Creed's work can also be enjoyed at face value, was demonstrated when an East London community lobbied to stop the removal of one of his temporary neon lights from the façade of an old church because they found its message "Everything is going to be alright" so uplifting!

### What do you think?

- Is Creed's work some kind of test which separates sheep from goats, the in-crowd from the philistines?
- Are the people who protest loudly that new art of this kind is rubbish so vehement because they know that they have failed the test of understanding?

### The value of art

Creed is under no illusion as to the ultimate significance of the work of art in the general scheme of things, as his *Work No 143 the whole world + the work = the whole world*, displayed on the pediment of Tate Britain in summer 2000, demonstrated. According to this formula, art in effect adds nothing to the world, however much it may mean to individuals. He is uncomfortable with the idea that it should be considered unique and precious. To him, what he creates is "just stuff...extra stuff in the world...art galleries are places where I have been able to do what I do...but that doesn't make what I do 'art'". Martin Creed demolishes the mystique of art and cuts it down to size.

### The site of art

What matters to him is the idea of the work and very often that idea is related to the site where his work is exhibited. He makes us think about the place, about the basic elements composing the display spaces at Tate Britain, for example, about elements such as lighting and the way art objects are illuminated. For curators and conservators, this is an important issue, as you will find if you walk through the rooms where the permanent collection is hung. Some rooms are very dark so that the art stands out in contrast. Others have their walls painted white. Because light damages some pigments and makes watercolour fade, the amount of light allowed

into each room is controlled and you will notice it changing as the light alters outside. Rooms in which works on paper are displayed are always relatively dark.

- Do you find *Work No. 227* in this exhibition, humorous?
  - Has it got a target - is it making fun of someone/thing? Could Creed be mocking the pretensions of historic art galleries like Tate, for instance, and their ambition to represent the best art?
  - Could he be mocking the public and their veneration for art with a capital A?
- Note your reactions to the experience of Creed's work. Do you find it disorientating/upsetting? How does it affect the way you view the work of the other artists in the show?
  - Could there be a serious side to Creed's experiments with light that connects his work with that of many other artists? Turner, for example, considered that light was of prime importance as it reveals nature in all its changing hues. His concern with evoking the effects of light in coloured pigments has been subsequently developed in different directions by photographers, video artists and Creed's neon and other uses of light.

### Isaac Julien

Isaac Julien is the first of a new wave of black British independent filmmakers. After studying painting at St Martin's School of Art he turned to film, feeling that "something had to replace painting." "And, like history and allegorical paintings, his films are reference-laden, spectacular presentations." (Adrian Searle, *The Guardian*, Aug 2000). It is as a film-maker rather than an artist that he is best known, his first feature film *Young Soul Rebels* 1991, having won international critical acclaim.

### Films as Art

He sees himself as working within the discipline of film-making in contrast to video artists who come to film as an extension of painting or sculpture. Julien uses narrative in his films, something which is much more common in the cinema than in video art. In contrast to the austerity of some video art, he feels that the multi-screen format used in *The Long Road to Matzalan*, for example, "gives a sort of carnival to the eye," aesthetic pleasure being of great importance to him. His recent photogravures accompanying the film use a complex but rich technique of printmaking to explore desire. Nonetheless he agrees with past Turner Prize winner, video artist Steve McQueen, that the commercial considerations dominating Hollywood films make it necessary to go to galleries to find innovation in film-making techniques.

- Compare the kind of narrative possible in painting with that found in Julien's films. Look at Victorian narrative paintings like RB Martineau's *The Last Day in the Old Home* 1862, Augustus Egg's *Past and Present* 1858 and JW Waterhouse's *The Lady of Shalott* 1888. The greatest problem for these painters was that action becomes frozen when it is translated on to canvas and it is very difficult to convey the feeling of time continuing. In a film such problems disappear, but can you discover other problems absent from painting?
- Do you ever wish that you could stop a film to consider individual images over a period of time in the way you can do in front of a painting?
- Can you find paintings with sensuous appeal in the permanent collection comparable to Julien's film?

### Julien's Turner Prize Exhibits

*The Long Road to Matzalan* is about masculinity and desire and considers the myth of the wild West as seen by Europeans, especially the lone white cowboy and his place within gay culture. It takes the theme of loners and drifters, which pre-occupied Tennessee Williams, whose work is admired by Javier de Frutos, a Venezuelan born

choreographer with whom Julien collaborated both for this film and for *Vagabondia*. That film is staged in the setting of the Sir John Soane Museum in London. Cleo Sylvestre plays the part of a conservator, mediating between the past and the present. Her gestures illustrate her feelings about the past as seen through the objects assembled in his home by the architect John Soane. The dancer, played by de Frutos is an uncontrolled presence in the rarified atmosphere of the museum who refuses to be bound by its strictures.

- In a very different way, Isaac Julien touches on a similar theme to Martin Creed and Mike Nelson in *Vagabondia* when he makes us consider the qualities and limitations of a museum/art gallery. Compare these three artists' attitudes to galleries. Whose take on the nature of a gallery do you prefer?

### **Links with other Art Forms**

Julien is inspired by other disciplines such as literature and dance and collaborates with artists working in other media. This relates his work to that of another British filmmaker, Derek Jarman, with his films *Caravaggio* (about the Italian artist) and *Orlando* (based on Virginia Woolf's novel).

### **Mike Nelson**

#### **Entering the art work**

While Martin Creed draws our attention to the gallery space, Mike Nelson creates an environment within it for us to explore. This environment is the work of art. Inspired by literary and filmic sources, Nelson draws "the viewer into a scenario which does not necessarily have a fixed perspective" and "forces viewers to question their individual or cultural outlook" (description of his *Tourist Hotel* installation in Douglas Hyde Gallery, Trinity College, Dublin, 1999.)

#### **The blurring of boundaries**

When you look at a painting, your involvement with it is all in the mind. You may be looking at a view of Venice on a hot summer's day and imagining what it would be like to be there, and the fact that you are wearing a woolly jumper because it is freezing cold outside does not disturb your enjoyment. You do not consider this anomaly because you know you are separate from what you are looking at. In the case of an installation like Nelson's, the spectator's role changes. You enter a room, which could be a real room containing objects familiar from everyday life, but instead of living in the room in the way you would do if it were real, making use of the objects contained within it and sitting down on the chair, for instance, you walk through it looking and considering while all the other people who share the space with you are doing the same. If you were to behave as if this were a real life setting and pick up an object, let's say a book, and start reading it, perhaps marking a passage as you might do at home, a gallery assistant would come and stop you. In other words this is not a real space in which to act but a pretend labyrinthine space in which to think about the nature of real spaces and about how the artist has manipulated reality to communicate ideas. Because it looks so like a real space but it is not, you may find it slightly disturbing. The boundaries have become blurred between real and pretend whereas in the case of the oil painting, they remain absolutely clear.

## Real and imaginary

The emotional uncertainty created by Nelson's real/unreal spaces allow him to play on our emotions more directly than a painter can. Everything belongs to the real world but which items form part of Nelson's construct? Everything must be questioned. Is this man in black part of the installation or is he a Tate gallery assistant? Will this passage lead you into the 'real' gallery space or into another constructed room? Is either space as real as the kitchen at home or are they perhaps more real in that you can feel things more intensely while you are there.

- How did you experience The Cosmic Legend of the Uroboros Serpent? What do you think Nelson is saying in it?
- Did it relate to your own life in any way? Or did you feel excluded, that it did not relate to anything you knew? Be very honest in deciding this and make careful notes about how you were affected, whether positively or negatively. These could take the form of an art review advising the public whether the installation is worth visiting or not.
- Do you think it is an effective way of communicating? Could Nelson have done it by the traditional means of painting or sculpture?

## Conclusion

The Turner Prize is an exciting opportunity for young people to view contemporary art. Some students will become the artists of the future whose work may develop in part as a reaction to the art of today. This year's shortlisted artists work in a variety of media which may not be available at school. It is important that, even though you may be restricted to painting and sculpture at school, students realise what a variety of other media is there for them to use as artists. You could consider how some of the projects you have worked on at school could have been interpreted in video or installation and whether you think your work would have had more impact in that form. You could debate whether the traditional medium of oil painting is outdated and why it remains so firmly entrenched within the art curriculum.

Finally, of course, you can organise your own Turner Prize debate in which you vote on your favourite artist, giving the reasons for your choice. You should consider whether your approach to your next project is affected by seeing how the Turner Prize artists approached the creation of their art. But, above all, as Martin Creed recommends DON'T WORRY. EVERYTHING WILL BE ALRIGHT.