



Summer Exhibition 2011: The Hangman Cometh



Royal Academy of Arts Summer Exhibition 2011, view of Gallery II from Gallery I

By **Ossian Ward** Posted: Fri Jun 3 2011

The Royal Academy of Arts's much-maligned annual 'Summer Exhibition' is also its busiest of the year. Ossian Ward gets and inside view on the selection process.

After the Royal Academy has spent three weeks sifting through the 12,000 works submitted by the public and a month spent arranging the final selection in the galleries, with additional pieces by its Academicians, I am attending the final 'Hanging Lunch' for the Royal Academy's 'Summer Exhibition 2011'. Artist Christopher Le Brun RA is co-ordinating - 'Chief hangman has a ring of truth to it,' he says. Other notable RAs are present. Stephen Farthing, Tony Bevan, Michael Sandle and Michael Craig-Martin are all presiding over individual rooms, while the secretary and chief executive, Charles Saumarez Smith is also on hand to advise. Or not. Because, after all, the Royal

Ward, Ossian. "Summer Exhibition 2011: The Hangman Cometh," *Time Out London*. June 3, 2011.

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Academy is an institution ostensibly run by the lunatics, I mean, by the artists themselves - not by curators, museum directors or middle managers (although it has its fair share of those, too).

'This is our place,' adds Le Brun, making it clear to me that as an art critic and sometime 'Summer Exhibition' sceptic I am now in the lion's den. 'It's curated by us, not the professionals. You won't see that at the Tate or the Whitechapel.' The 'Summer Exhibition' is indeed the sole provision of the Royal Academy's artist-members, who are collectively judge, jury and executioner for those hoping to have their pictures placed in these hallowed halls. It used to be the eldest RA who was in charge of the final hang but this year the responsibility has landed on Le Brun's sprightly shoulders (he's a mere 60 years old). He relishes the challenge, 'some might call it a burden', he jokes, before noting that some senior art critics palm off their annual slog round the 'Summer Exhibition' to a junior hack or staff writer rather than pen it themselves. I laugh nervously.

Luckily for me, everyone agrees with Tony Bevan when he says: 'It's a tough show to get around,' let alone review, I mutter under my breath, 'but the open submission makes it unique. By its very nature you cannot control the subject,' he adds. Apparently there were a lot of cows, bananas and cats sent in this year.

Next it's the turn of the RAs to squirm in their seats as sculptor Michael Sandle spits out a well-rehearsed line that compares the institution to a hybrid of 'The Kremlin, an old people's home and Fawlty Towers'. Sandle voices what many of us probably already think we know about the Royal Academy.

Of course, the annual 'Summer Exhibition' hasn't much changed since the Academy was founded in 1769, making it as much of a dinosaur as the place itself, yet Saumarez Smith goes as far as to say that the show is the RA's 'core function', rather than the presentation of major blockbusters by the likes of Monet or Van Gogh. In fact, all proceeds from the 'Summer Exhibition' go towards funding the RA Schools, the only free art school in the capital. Beyond its shared symbolic duties, though, the 'Summer Exhibition' does contain moments of individuality, continues Saumarez Smith, 'to the extent that each room reflects the aesthetic beliefs and tastes of the artist who hangs it.' So, this year's invited curator Michael Craig-Martin's room is naturally simpler, more democratic and magpie-like, as his work would suggest. Instead of bringing artists from the outside in, 'I decided to do the opposite and select from existing RAs, but mainly from those who have joined in the past five to ten years', many of them women - Alison Wilding, Tacita Dean, Cornelia Parker, Jenny Saville and Tracey Emin among them - as well as a couple of 'personal debts', as Craig-Martin calls his inclusion of longstanding RAs who have been influential to his career, such as Joe Tilson.

This mixing of old and new continues in the courtyard, where Le Brun has placed a James Butler war memorial, dedicated to the World War I Rainbow Division, next to a giant squiggly sculpture of Piglet taken from a Winnie-the-Pooh colouring book, by honorary RA Jeff Koons. 'This is a good analogy for what we do,' explains Le Brun, 'both artists come from very different traditions but have a history you can follow.' His floor-to-ceiling hang of paintings in the largest room is also a future-facing nod to the past, the

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walls painted a warm grey usually reserved for the Old Masters at the National Gallery. For all it aches to be cooler the Royal Academy and its 243rd 'Summer Exhibition' still feel like part of the furniture, in the same cosy, chintzy way as those other armchair staples of the summer season: Wimbledon, Henley Regatta, Chelsea Flower Show and so on. Then again, I reviewed it in 2010 and I'll come back again this year, only it'll be through the front door this time and not just as an armchair observer.

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