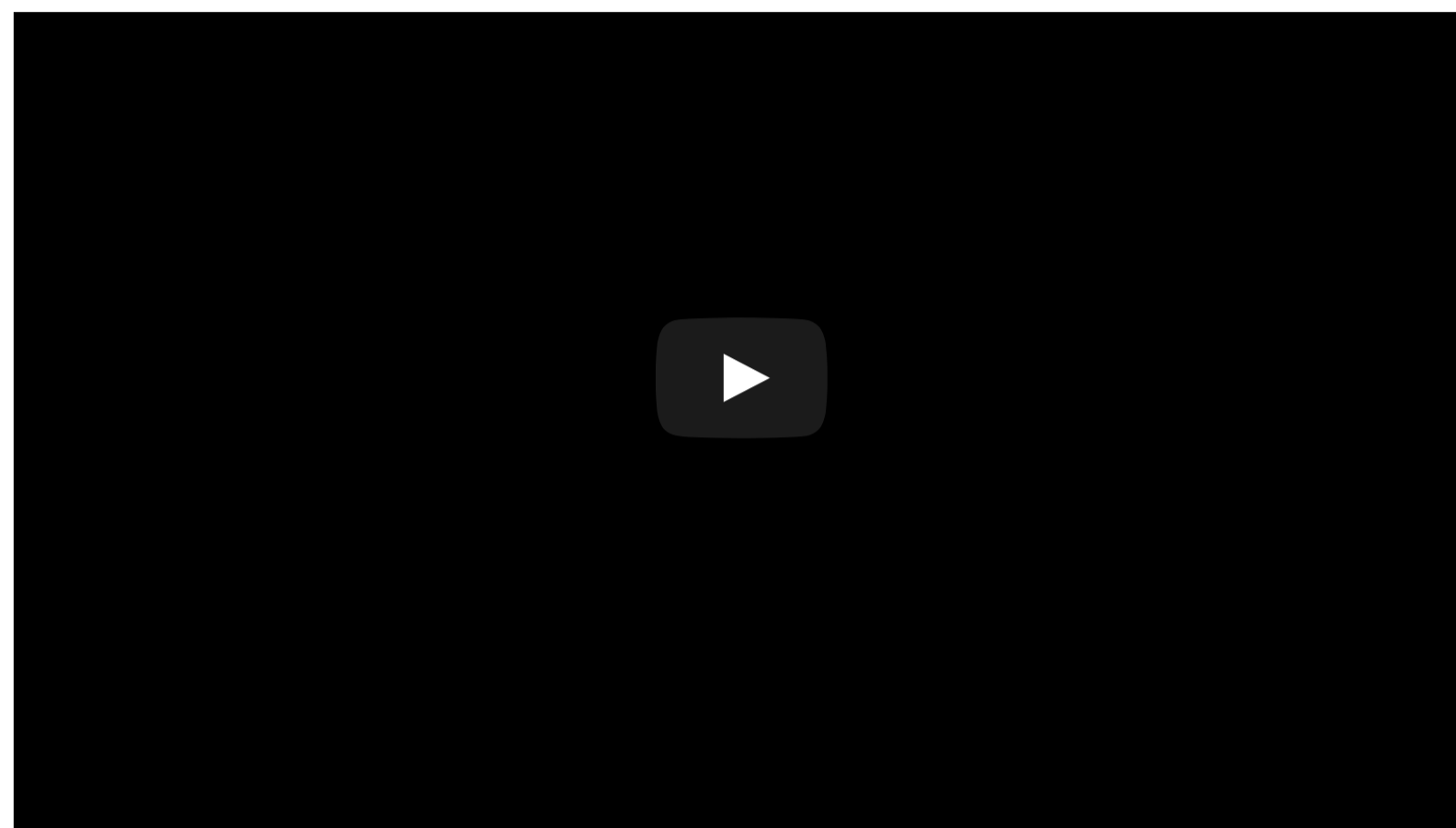




To survive the Royal Academy Summer Exhibition, don't linger — just scan and pounce

EXHIBITIONS Andrew Lambirth 15 June 2013

0 Comments



Culture House WEEKLY EMAIL
SIGN UP NOW

Culture House WEEKLY EMAIL
SIGN UP NOW

Culture House WEEKLY EMAIL
SIGN UP NOW

The 245th Summer Exhibition
Royal Academy, until 18 August

The Royal Academy's biggest annual prize is the Charles Wollaston Award, worth £25,000, for the most distinguished work in the *Summer Exhibition*, this year won by the Ghanaian sculptor El Anatsui (born 1944). Although his preferred media are clay and wood, El Anatsui has taken to making installations from found materials woven together like cloth, and has done rather well with them around the world. He was invited to make a hanging for the façade of Burlington House for the duration of the *Summer Exhibition*, and this junk curtain (composed *inter alia* of aluminium bottle tops, printing plates, copper wire and roofing sheets) now obscures or ornaments — depending on your taste — the Academy's noble brow. Confronted with this gaudy and meretricious bauble, the prospective visitor may well turn away in despondency, but I doubt it. Curiosity is more likely to take the spectator within.

What can you expect to see? A rather uneasy mixture of Old Guard RAs interspersed with a selection of current stylistic orthodoxies. The range of contemporary artistic expression nationwide is actually far greater than suggested, but this exhibition does not reflect it, being too readily the dupe of fashion and political correctness in its steadfast determination not to look

0

Tweet

9

Share

0

8+1

9

Share

PATEK PHILIPPE
GENEVE

You never actually own
a Patek Philippe.

You merely look after it for
the next generation.

BODLES
1798

antiquated and academic. Of course, it ends up being the usual hotchpotch and gallimaufry, though this year perhaps more elegantly installed and hung than in the past. The intrepid visitor enters the exhibition via the Central Hall to be confronted by a vast Anthony Caro sculpture in steel called 'Shadows', and a 'found' carving by Cornelia Parker, of wood used by elephants to sharpen their tusks. Moving through into the main space, Gallery III, a tribute to Mary Fedden, who died last summer, features a bold painting from 1977, called 'Blue Plough and Horse'. Next to it hangs a gentle but subtly expressive group of paintings by nonagenarians Diana Armfield and Bernard Dunstan. After that the eye swivels wildly (why does one think of politicians?) and the game is on: how much competing art can the brain seriously assess before admitting defeat?

The *Summer Exhibition* Experience can be pleasurable, but it has to be taken briskly. If you start to linger, you may as well resign yourself to coming back another day. My advice is to scan and pounce: homing in on the image that stands out or attracts you in a wall of very mixed talents. Let me draw your attention to a few good things in Gallery III: Leonard McComb's small intense 'Rocks by the Sea, Cornwall', intriguingly paired with a Terry Setch landscape. An oil called 'From the Arabian Nights' by Tom Phillips, looking rather like a mosaic, and Humphrey Ocean's characteristically bare canvas punctuated by street lamps. Below it hangs a trio of Sickertian naughties by Jock McFadyen, whose impressive big painting 'Tate Moss' hangs on the gallery's end wall. Here, too, are fine things by Gillian Ayres, Anthony Eyton and Frank Bowling. There's also a group of recent works (the best are in oil on paper) by another nonagenarian, Alan Davie, and a lovely small Mick Moon.

Subscribe from just £12

One year's print and digital subscription.
From £1 a week for twelve weeks

[SUBSCRIBE NOW >>](#)



One of the finest works in this gallery is Per Kirkeby's gloriously vibrant snaky landscape 'Laokoon', with a big watercolour bridge by Michael Sandle nearby. On the opposite side of the room hung high are three large ink drawings by the newly elected RA Emma Stibbon, along with a very blue interior by Anthony Whishaw and a magnificent Barbara Rae landscape of Downpatrick. Next one encounters the print rooms, Galleries I and II this year, and the heart sinks at the crowded walls. Nevertheless there are stalwarts: Joe Tilson and Jim Dine, Quentin Blake and Eileen Cooper, Tim Lewis's kinetic sculpture of a mule drawing a self-portrait (emblematic of the whole enterprise?), and a welcome note of anarchic humour from Glen Baxter with 'Trouble in the Design Museum', featuring beavers gnawing a Rietveld chair. In Gallery I, Stephen Chambers shines out amid strangely archaic echoes of William Nicholson alphabets and McKnight Kauffer Vorticism. I liked the woodcuts by Hilary Daltry and Michael Craig-Martin's supremely elegant etchings.

The spare hang of the Weston Rooms is encouraging, but the work is almost uniformly dire. I make exceptions of Clyde Hopkins and Belinda Cadbury, while Ron Arad's car is quite amusing, as is Richard Long's dandyish spiral of thumbprints on a broken board. Moving swiftly on to Gallery IV, notice the beautiful little canvas by Albert Irvin, yet another artist still working in his 90s. The other painting of note in this room (let's draw a veil over the melancholic Kiefer) is Maggi Hambling's 'War Zone', featuring a terrorist like a stylite saint atop a pillar in a desert of destruction. (I look forward to more of her war paintings at this year's *Snap* at Aldeburgh Festival, until 30 June.) Gallery V holds two grand Nigel Hall drawings, a couple of Bryan Kneale sculptures in polished stainless steel, Ken Draper's evocative pastels and a split and bound large plaster piece (for bronze) by Ann Christopher. Even the Architecture Room looks minimal this year with a real sense of space among the models and sculptures. I particularly liked Phillip King's 'Memory Garden from 1963' in which he revisits his most famous early sculptures in miniature.



PATEK PHILIPPE
GENEVE

You never actually own
a Patek Philippe.

You merely look after it for
the next generation.

BOODLES
1798



PATEK PHILIPPE
GENEVE

You never actually own
a Patek Philippe.

You merely look after it for
the next generation.

BOODLES
1798

Gallery VII looks brighter than usual, illuminated by a large and inventive Philippa Stjernsward painting and mad new tower in vivid fibreglass by Ivor Abrahams — one of his best recent sculptures. Gallery VIII contains some more distinguished visitors: Chuck Close, Alex Katz and Rodney Graham, a big Frank Auerbach drawing and Allen Jones's portrait of Kate Moss in body armour, featuring a return to his Sixties motif of the shelf — no doubt to keep her myriad admirers at bay. Aside from a couple of fine Vanessa Gardiner structural landscape paintings, Room IX contains too many instantly forgettable photographs, with the exception of Jean Macalpine's inkjet inventions, and the intriguing bonus of a couple of Jane Dixon drawings.

The Lecture Room offers the most traditional hang of the whole show, arranged around a lovely centrepiece of floored aerodynamic shapes by Zaha Hadid. Here it's time for the binoculars to decide if any of the skied paintings are good. Among the highlights are pictures by Mick Rooney, Judith Green, Danny Markey, Bridget Keen, Louise Balaam, Eileen Hogan, Shanti Panchal, Sarah Armstrong-Jones and Michael Kirkbride. I liked Anthony Green's triple-layered cake-stand approach to 'A Country Wedding', and Delia Tournay-Godfrey's small oil of Aldeburgh was refreshingly empty. Gallery X is devoted to six tapestries by Grayson Perry of little real interest, but just the sort of thing for a channel-surfing culture not much given to thought. And that's another *Summer Exhibition* over...

This article first appeared in the print edition of The Spectator magazine, dated [15 June 2013](#)

Tags: [Royal academy](#), [Summer Exhibition](#)

There's never been a better time to subscribe. A year's subscription to the print magazine, plus full online and app access from just £1 a week. [Join us now.](#)



0 Comments

The Spectator

Login

Sort by Best

Share Favorite



Start the discussion...

Be the first to comment.

ALSO ON THE SPECTATOR

Welcome to the age of self-love

20 comments • 2 days ago

Inconspicuous — All the "pro-wank" propaganda that is circulated now is really very dangerous. "There's ...

Why Thailand's elite fell out of love with democracy

6 comments • 2 days ago

Andrew MacGregor Marshall — Fully endorse the comment above. This article exhibits very little ...

WHAT'S THIS?

If Nigel Farage is worried about anti-Semitism, he shouldn't be teaming ...

73 comments • 2 days ago

Edoardo CB. — Disgraceful article. A picture portrayed of the 5 star movement which is incredibly biased ...

I may not know much about khat, but I know banning it is crazy

5 comments • 2 days ago

PabloSi — It is nothing but racist. If you hate certain group of people ban their common pleasure. It is exactly what ...

Subscribe

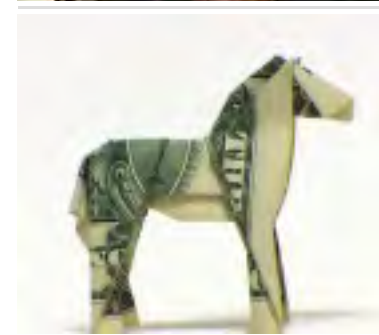
Add Disqus to your site

DISQUS



Adam Boulton's party cheers up Chris Huhne

While Lord Rennard spent the night innocently chatting to ladies



I need ketamine to survive a visit to the vet

Horses are a money-making scheme for vets, says Melissa Kite

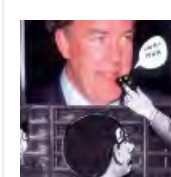


Politically correct wines worth drinking

These bottles will assuage middle-class guilt

MOST POPULAR

Read Shared Commented



Should I report my boyfriend to the police?
Melissa Kite

1



Listen: Could this George Galloway speech save the Union?
Sebastian Payne

2



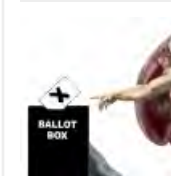
If I were Polish, I'd side with Radek Sikorski — not David Cameron
Charles Moore

3



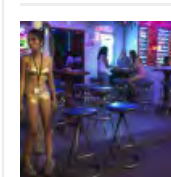
Convict the guilty. Keep the press free
The Spectator

4



Religion is the new politics — but Britain's secular politicians just don't get it
Damian Thompson

5



Why Thailand's elite fell out of love with democracy
Sean Thomas

6