

The Arts

EXHIBITION

Beck's Futures
ICA

Nick Hackworth

THE ICA's love affair with the street and urban cool will be at its most intense tomorrow with the opening of Beck's Futures, the contemporary art prize it has been running for the past three years.

Billed as being "a whole lot hipper than the Turner Prize" by no lesser an authority than The Face, Beck's Futures tends to focus on young artists who engage quite obviously with popular culture — producing work that would be just as at home in a bar or a fashion magazine as in a gallery. Beck's Futures is also the UK's biggest art prize, with total prize money of £65,000. And the ICA is clearly pretty pleased with itself for creating an award not just hipper but bigger than the Turner.

Despite the sense that the show is trying just a little too hard to be hip — Björk has been roped in to announce the winner in May, and the judges have shown a worrying predilection for work inspired by skate culture — there is something to celebrate over here: principally, a lack of pretentiousness.

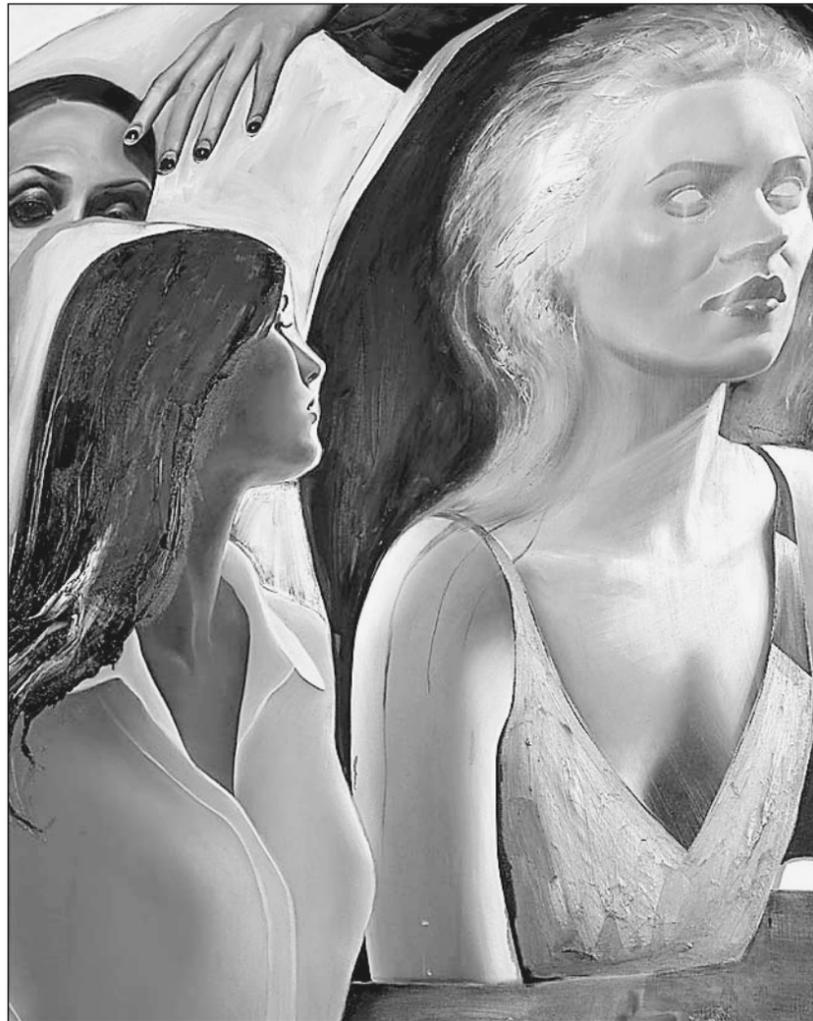
Though much of the work by the 10 short-listed artists is unoriginal and inane, none of it suffers from the embarrassment of having failed to live up to ludicrous claims made for it.

Some of the best work is the most straightforward, produced by the painters Kirsten Glass and Neil Rumming. Glass's sexy, collage-style paintings are littered with models and dominatrices floating in different spaces on the work's surface — compelling images of sinister and attractive women.

Meanwhile, in Stallion, Rumming has rendered Ferrari's stallion logo flatly upon the canvas, but has filled up its insides with a lurid, fantastical anatomy, creating a weird and striking two- and three-dimensional image.

The show is stolen, however, by two art school drop-outs and its youngest participants: Nick Relph and Oliver Payne, the former only 22. Mixtape is their skate-inspired short film backed by a 23-minute remix of the Motown track Poppy No Good, by minimalist composer Terry Riley.

Completely absurd but deeply amusing, Mixtape features, inexplicably, a pre-teen rock band, a couple who alternately stick two fingers up at each other and footage

Models in space: a detail from Kirsten Glass's *Slow Dive* (2002), on show at the ICA

Shots from the hip

of grotesque US rednecks chortling while they blow away deer. The work has no rhyme and less reason, and is too long, but has a brazenness that makes it undeservedly compelling.

Elsewhere there is some attractive photography and less-attractive video and sculpture, but in Relph and Payne one senses that the prize has found an affinity. If Beck's

Futures were a person, it would be a street urchin obsessed with stealing hubcaps in Lewisham — and when it grew up, this is the kind of video it would want to shoot. And since there is no justice in the world, Relph and Payne might even end up with the prize.

● ICA, The Mall, SW1. Opens tomorrow until 12 May.

Northern lights branching out

POP

The Leaves

The Monarch, NW1

David Smyth

IT'S going to be tough to find a flaw in Reykjavik's Leaves. Five childhood friends with a fine line in emotional, soaring guitar rock, they will enrage cynics by being both flawlessly good-looking and excellent at football.

All five play for Bardastrandir, a third-division Icelandic team (lead singer Arnar Gudjonsson was top scorer last season), although they've been forced to retreat into the reserves recently due to their imminent musical success. Imagine Starsailor being a vital strike force for Leyton Orient.

Chris Martin from Coldplay was present at the show, no doubt checking out the competition.

Gudjonsson, too, is capable of sliding into a graceful falsetto with ease, and the Leaves set was filled with slow-burning ballads that bear a passing resemblance to the British bedwetters.

Again like Coldplay, the hype has started very early. The rustle of favourable whispers surrounding Leaves attracted a large crowd to this small venue, and a quiet response to their well-crafted, poignant songs was mainly due to the fact that there was no room to clap. The band didn't say much, which may have been down to nerves. In total they have played only around 15 gigs since their first-ever show in Reykjavik last October.

It didn't really show. The piano-led lament that was Breathe was executed with the style and maturity of a much more established band, and it was clear that this is a group that isn't afraid of being quiet.

They didn't fill spaces with needless riffing, but instead gave their fine songs room to be heard without embellishment.

The crowd could have done with a change of pace here and there.

Race, a new single due to be released next month, was the most upbeat, but even it didn't get beyond third gear. However, it does have a



On the ball: Arnar Gudjonsson

powerful chorus and a plaintive guitar hook that makes it their best bet so far for a hit.

The British music industry seems interested in bands from northern Europe like never before at the moment, although many, such as Sweden's Hives and The Soundtrack Of Our Lives, are significantly more lively than Leaves. But given the time to play a lot more shows, and to write a few more truly gripping songs, this band could well be Premiership material.

Wide boys with plenty of class

ANY bunch of chancers who end their set with a euphoric version of the 20-year-old disco hit Zoom by Fat Larry's Band, having previously presented themselves as a hybrid Northern Kinks, deserves a second glance.

Alfie are that entity. Four years ago, a demo arrived in the Manchester offices of Twisted Nerve from an unknown bunch named after a Michael Caine film. Boss Andy Votel and his number-one act, aka Badly Drawn Boy, were so impressed that, on the day after they signed the unusual quintet, the Badly Drawn one commandeered them to be his support act-cum-backing project. In no time at all Alfie were whisked from leafy Chorlton to Tokyo, Paris and, er, Leicester. The Japanese experience had immediate repercussions for Alfie singer

POP

Alfie
Scala, N1

Max Bell

Lee Gorton. If memory serves correctly, he was arrested in a Tokyo McDonald's following a mock brawl with American rockers Flaming Lips.

On a more savoury note, Alfie have made headlines guesting for acts like Icelandic moodists Sigur Ros, and have subsequently been compared to a flock of top-line groups, the Stone Roses and the Beta Band notwithstanding.

But as they showed us at the Scala last night, Alfie are a hard bunch to pin down. Wilful by design and psychedelic in places, though fuelled on ale



Caine homage: Lee Gorton

rather than acid, Gorton and company have a touch of baggy about their person and a strong undercurrent of English folk-fied whimsy.

Carving a strong case for their promotion to the Doves/Witness league via the two CDs, *If You Happy With You Need Do Nothing* and the recent *A Word In Your Ear*, Alfie showed a full house what they were all about. They are

wide boys yet they've got plenty of class to back up a perky attitude.

As a vocalist, Gorton is steeped in a retro branch of locally grown organic noise. The Pentangle and Incredible String Band might have inspired him when he sings Cloudy Lemonade. By contrast, Not Half and Bends For 72 Miles locate Alfie's excellent use of common parlance, received English and street smarts.

Having buttered this up with trumpet, cello, Sean Kelly's immaculate drumming and Sam Morris's gently whacking bass, Alfie can soon move out of any genre. The new song *Chords* illustrated their ability to turn Ian Brown into Nick Drake.

Maybe they're the new Beatles. Not half, as Alan Freeman used to say.

LYRIC
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