

Bright sparks: dull art

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New Contemporaries, staged annually since 1949, showcases the work of, supposedly, the best artists to have graduated from art school within the previous year. Inclusion is much sought after by graduates: the exhibition can help launch careers and the previous participants include Frank Auerbach, RB Kitaj, Howard Hodgkin, David Hockney, Damien Hirst and Gillian Wearing.

This year, 33 artists working across the full spectrum of media, from painting to sculpture, video and performance art, have been selected for the exhibition that debuted at the recent Liverpool Biennale.

Despite its variety, the work on display mostly conforms to a particular type: "low-fi" in aesthetic, jokey in intent and generally happy to wallow in self-conscious mediocrity. The saving grace for much of this work is the fact that it at least exhibits some degree of humour.

Typical of the array of uninspiring objects on display are Rob Grose's replica trainers made out of parcel tape and Helen Barron's series of silly masks made out of fabric, works that exude a strong sense of being unnecessary. Proof of the better qualities latent in the Blue Peter cardboard-and-stickytape style is to be found in the work of Kieran Brown, whose massive and absurd installation, comprising a cardboard igloo, water-filled paddling pool and

wooden hut, dominates the end of the gallery and elicits amusement.

Inevitably, the work of those who avoided the slacker aesthetic looks good in such company. Charlotte Brisland contributes three reasonable paintings that have a touch of Peter Doig about them. Hiraki Sawa's eight-minute video piece, *Dwelling*, is oddly compelling, depicting a myriad of tiny aeroplanes flying through a domestic environment.

Also good is Nathaniel Rackowe's *Untitled (Light Piece 1)*, an intelligent and elegant sculpture consisting of a long, transparent, rectangular shaft, down which travels a motorised section housing three neon strip lights. Its complex relationship with its environment and pleasing modernist-cum-minimalist aesthetic means it does a good job of highlighting the lack of ambition that cripples the work surrounding it.

Bloomberg New Contemporaries is showing at the Barbican until 12 January. Tel: 020 7628 2326. ■