

Playing to the gallery

NICK HACKWORTH | **EVENING STANDARD** | Tuesday 22 March 2005 01:00 |



Click to follow
The Evening Standard



In May writer and broadcaster Ekow Eshun takes up his new post as director of the ICA. It is an important moment for the institute which, despite its ongoing popularity, is in need of redefinition. Perfect timing, then, to assess the highlight of the ICA's annual calendar, Beck's Futures.

The UK's richest art prize, which awards an equal share of £40,000 to its shortlist and a further £20,000 to the winner, is this year competed for by only six artists, down from the usual 10. The increased selectivity has paid off: it's the strongest show for several years.

The best display is by Glaswegian Luke Fowler, whose two films - exploring the world of an underground musician, Xentos Jones, and investigating psychiatrist RD Laing - are so well put together that the hand of the editor, or artist, if you will, is barely noticeable. Perhaps he should be in a different competition altogether.

But Fowler is the odd man out, for as usual Beck's has its finger closer to the pulse of emerging art than the Turner Prize and, accordingly, a spirit of playful silliness dominates the show.

Here performance artist Lali Chetwynd leads the way. Earlier wildly costumed performance works include *An Evening with Jabba the Hut* and *Bat Opera*, an oblique attempt to culturally rehabilitate rock singer Meat Loaf. For Beck's, she premieres *Debt*, based on mediaeval mystery plays, while a huge cardboard sculpture of a gaping mouth serves as a permanent reminder of her presence.

Sculptress Christina Mackie continues her attempts to describe sensations using odd sculptural assemblages with her installation *My Depression*, a multi-media riff on a stylised petal shape that she associates with stress.

Daria Martin, one of the most hotly tipped young artists around, presents a glib but watchable film about a card trickster and a girl playing around with decks of cards. A loose investigation of the aesthetic of modernism, it could equally well be a TV spot for a hip jeans label.

Most quixotic of all is Ryan Gander's sprawling, difficult-to-pin-down practice, manifest here in a re-creation of a Bauhaus chess set, a sculpture made of fly-poster paper, and an effort to create an anonymous novel through an invitation to the public to take part in a grand game of literary consequences.

As throwaway as much of this art is, it at least exudes an air of self-acceptance. There's a lack of the pomposity that could have carried it over the border from playfulness to pretentiousness. And it has the advantage of capturing something of the frivolousness of the *Zeitgeist*.

The most self-consciously silly installation is the archly camp *Another Graveyard*, by Scots artist Donald Urquhart, who, at 41, is the oldest on the short list. Painted on the walls and freestanding planes of Perspex is a symbolic graveyard, with names and inscriptions memorialising both real, departed friends of Urquhart and dreams from the past that never blossomed.

Accompanying the painting is a curiously sweet perfume with tones of tobacco and whisky, one devised by Urquhart with professional help, to evoke Edinburgh's gay scene in the 1930s. A rather precise ambition, one might think, requiring a smart-bomb level of olfactory accuracy, but amusing nonetheless. "Smell the art," as Alan Partridge might say.

Beck's Futures runs until 15 May. Information: 020 7930 3647 ■