The Arts



Words as weapons: Fiona Banner at the Frith Street Gallery with some of her Concrete Poetry, made up of insulting phrases but provoking only ennui

The art of Scrabble

FIONA Banner has the dubious pleasure of being one of the four artists shortlisted for this year's Turner Prize which promises to be one of the least inspiring of recent times. As with her fellow nominees, Banner is best described — though the phrase is regarded as crude and outdated these days — as a conceptual artist. In her work, as in theirs, it is the impact of the encapsulated idea that matters rather more than the aesthetic effect, which is

all very well, as long as the ideas

expressed prove to be truly engaging.

In the happy pursuit of her ideas Banner employs numerous media and here she presents sculpture, drawing, neon pieces and audio work. She is best known, however, for her text pieces, which are flat, neutral descriptions of what she sees on screen when she watches a particular film. The Desert, for example, is her account of what happens in Lawrence of Arabia, presented as a

EXHIBITION

Fiona Banner

Frith Street Gallery, W1

Nick Hackworth

daunting, unreadable block of text, the size and shape of a cinema screen.

The Nam, meanwhile, is a 1,000-page book containing a continuous and similarly unreadable transcription of six Vietnam war films.

Banner continues in a familiar vein in this show with a blow-by-blow account of the goings on in Arsewoman in Wonderland, a porno loosely based on Alice in Wonderland, recorded onto a vinyl record that sits playing in one of the basement gallery spaces

The steady monotone of Banner's voice reduces the fleshy activities to a dreary,

monotonous sequence of events and is an appropriately world-weary response to the relentless stream of media, whether pornographic or not, that we find ourselves caught up in.

Sadly, ennui is also the appropriate response to the rest of the work on show. Upstairs is infested by Banner's Concrete Poetry series made up of insulting phrases, such as Slapper or Bollock Brain, rendered as foot-high, free-standing sculptures that appear to be made of concrete but turn out, unamusingly, to be made of plaster and polystyrene. Just as uninspired are the two flower-shaped neon pieces, proudly made from parts recycled from broken neon signs, a venture great for the environment perhaps, but no good for aesthetics.

• Until 2 November. Information: 020 7494 1550. An exhibition of the work of this year's Turner Prize shortlistees opens at Tate Britain on 30 October; the winner will be announced on 8 December.

A marriage of comedy and desperation

THEATRE

Dead Funny

Minerva Theatre Chichester

Fiona Mountford

WITH the ninth and final production in Chichester's 40th anniversary season now up and running, it is the moment for a little stocktaking. The shows in this celebratory year have been of mixed quality, with the good — The Front Page, The Lady's **Not for Burning** mixed with the mediocre and the downright poor.
Theatre director Andrew Welch is now leaving after five years at the helm, to be replaced by a 'triumvirate" including Steven Pimlott, formerly of the RSC. Long-term funding has been secured. Chichester's future prospects thus merit cautious optimism.

A positive note is similarly sounded by this neat take fittingly directed by Loveday Ingram, one of the young artists Chichester has encouraged in recent years — on Terry Johnson's Nineties classic Dead Funny.

Set at the time of the deaths of Benny Hill and Frankie Howerd in 1992, it brutally dissects failing middle-class relationships, while

sheltering under a carapace of comedy. Richard, Brian, Nick and Lisa are ardent members of the Dead Funny society, which meets regularly to reminisce about the greats of British light entertainment. Fittingly, in Tim Shortall's design, black and white photos of Williams, Hill, Hancock et al loom out at us from the back of the

living-room set. But as Richard's embittered wife Elly points out, they depend on comedy as their fix of escapism from the difficult issues of the real world.

"If it's something you can't snigger at, you run a mile," she says to her emotionally unresponsive husband.

Just like the comedians they so revere, these five characters struggle with deeply flawed personal lives. Abigail McKern's Elly is by turns fierce and tender as she tries, with increasing desperation, to coax Richard into

impregnating her. Adrian Lukis, a great success in The Front Page earlier this season, turns in another winning performance, filling his Richard with public bonhomie and private torment. Comedy, as any fule kno, is no laughing matter.

● Until 5 October. Box office 01243 781312.



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