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Northern highlights

NICK HACKWORTH

CARNEGIE ART AWARD * Victoria Miro Gallery

LIGHT, its exhilarating presence and oppressive absence, fuelled, for a while, a burst of exceptional painting in the Nordic countries, from the heavy expressionism of Edvard Munch to the softer romanticism of Harald Sohlberg.

A century on, not one of the 22 artists exhibiting in the Carnegie Art Award, which celebrates the best in contemporary Nordic painting, has seen fit to work within that tradition and paint either light or landscape.

While ignoring paintings dealing explicitly with traditional themes, the jury - headed by the ex-director of Tate Modern, Lars Nittve - has selected an eclectic body of work in which no common thread emerges, save for a slight bias towards abstraction.

Walking through what is at least an attractive and colourful exhibition, one can see: minimalist, monochromatic canvases; semiabstract investigations into visual depth; graffiti-inspired "urban" painting; some South American-looking figurative work and work featuring interplay between garish geometric forms. Pluralism is the order of the day and there is certainly nothing distinctly Nordic here.

Indeed, increasing globalisation means that national styles are a thing of the past and national art prizes, such as this one, or, indeed, the Turner Prize, are increasingly artificial in their nationalism.

Ironically, some of the best work comes from one of the two photographers who have sneaked into what is supposed to be a painting prize. Hedevig Anker photographs mundane interior features, such as sections of doorframes, to produce very clean images that can be read as abstract or figurative. The Norwegian painter Kjell Torriset also stands out with a large work comprising of 40 separate, regularly

spaced panels. Half of them are differently coloured canvases, some flat and monochromatic, others containing variation in depth and colour. The other half are glass plates on which silicone has been poured, creating forms that resemble Chinese calligraphic characters and gently record the movement of the hand that created them.

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