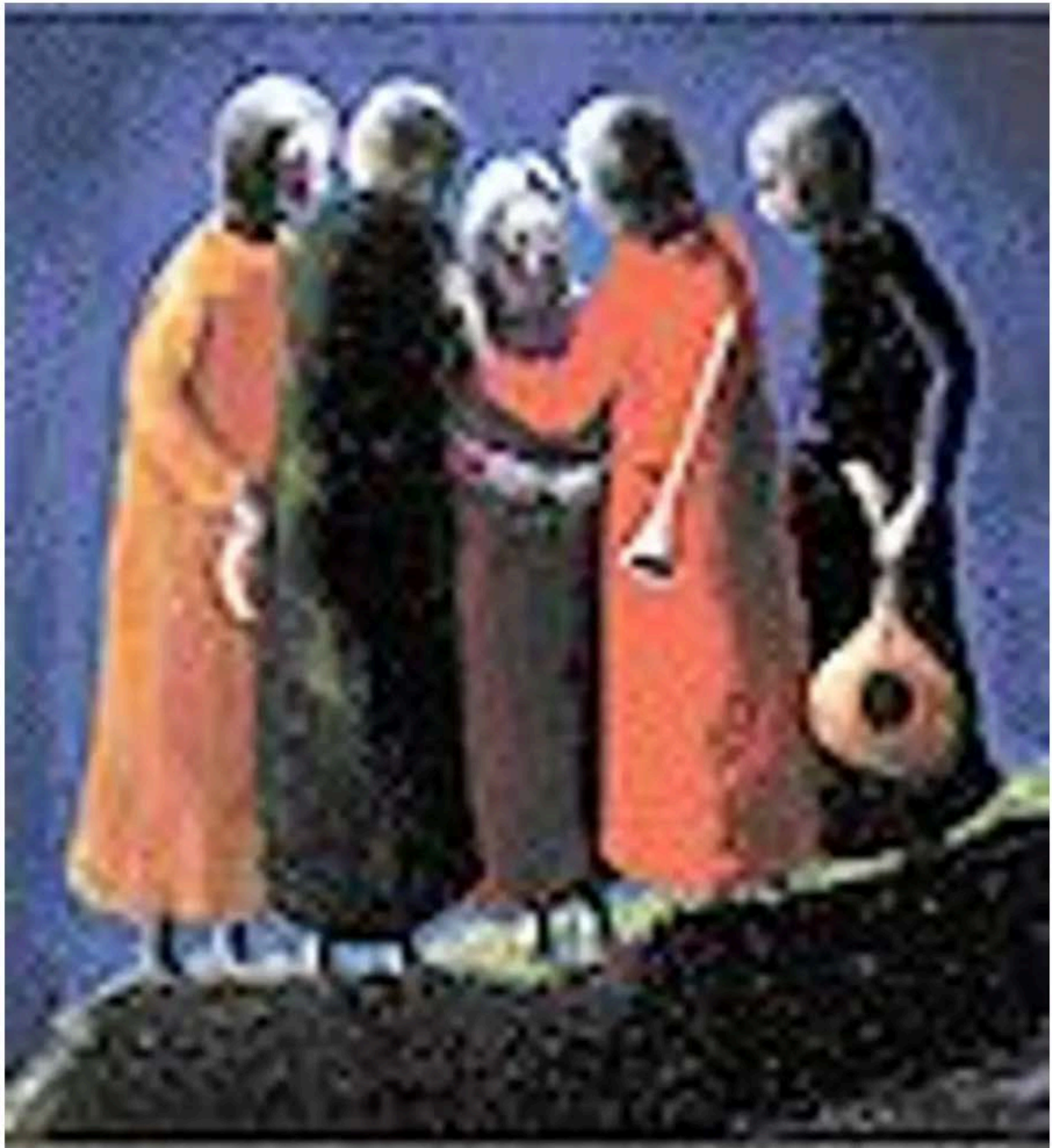


# Turner Prize tosh

NICK HACKWORTH | EVENING STANDARD | Friday 6 December 2002 01:00 |



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Women of Jerusalem, Station no 6, by Gigi Sudbury ( )

**The announcement of the winner of the 2002 Turner Prize, broadcast live on Channel 4 this Sunday, will be an anticlimax rather than a thrill. Critics usually vocal in their support have instead damned the quality of this year's line-up, and the mediocrity of the work has roused none of the entertaining controversy stirred up in the past by Damien Hirst's bisected cows and Tracey Emin's soiled bed.**

If this Turner has failed to live up to the few virtues it once possessed, it has at least succeeded in sustaining its traditional vices. Yet again the prize is revealed to be both absurdly limited in its understanding of what constitutes contemporary art and also to be a closed shop, open only to a small clique of artists represented by powerful galleries.

In truth it has become the very opposite of what its supporters believe it to be, being narrow-minded and orthodox in its excessive promotion of neo-conceptual work, and reactionary in its hostility to the diversity of contemporary art and visual culture. It is surely time, for its own sake, that the Turner changed.

An indication of how it might be transformed was provided by an experimental event that took place last Sunday, The Alternative Turner Prize, which I helped organise. It was, of course, in comparison with the real thing, a humble affair.

I managed to negotiate a room for us to use, in which to display work by seven artists short-listed by a jury that included myself; Ned Denny, an art critic for The New Statesman magazine; Thelma Holt, the theatre producer who was also a long-serving and senior member of the Arts Council under Lord Gowrie; and Brian Sewell.

An invited audience - a mixed, art and non-art crowd of some 250 people - was asked to study the work, listen to the judges and then vote for a winner. In contrast to the Turner Prize our short list was highly catholic, reflecting much of the great range of creative work being produced today: figurative painting and sculpture, graffiti art, extreme performance art and work that employed the latest information technology. That the short list was so eclectic was due to the fact that the nominations made by each judge were not subject to the approval of fellow judges, and that the judges, of course, have different tastes.

A commitment to pluralism and liberalism was thus built into the Alternative Prize, whereas the Turner, by comparison, is awarded by a jury of artworld insiders compliant with the narrow orthodoxies promoted by the contemporary art establishment, invited by Nicholas Serota, Tate director and the Turner Prize jury's chairman.

Our event did not have the strong institutional support provided by the Tate, nor, as it was conceived as a response to the quality of this year's short list, did the judges have the full year that the Turner jury has to select nominees. We did succeed in highlighting the need for the Turner to celebrate the diversity of art being created today, most of which falls outside the narrow criteria held by the judges year-on-year. They have their orthodoxy, and nothing outside it is considered.

It is a deep irony that the root of the Turner Prize's problem lies in the question: What does it mean to be modern? So desperate have Serota and successive judges been to appear modern and cutting-edge that they have been guilty of seriously misreading both the current stage of art history and the nature of contemporary experience - so much so, that they have been rather old-fashioned in their attempts to be hip.

In this age, the succession of revolutionary art movements that drove the history of art forward throughout the late 19th and 20th centuries has petered out and the possibility of a real avant-garde is long since dead. Yet the gurus of the Turner Prize behave as though an avant-garde is still bravely breaking conventions with the kind of neoconceptualist art that dominates this year's Prize.

Since the conceptualism of the Sixties there has been little significant formal innovation in Western art, save for the birth of internet art in the Nineties; consequently the Turner has served us only old ideas reheated and occasionally garnished with a dash of irony. Martin Creed's controversial *Lights Going On and Off* which won him last year's Turner is a prime example: it filled the vast gallery with nothing but light and darkness in a bid to make the visitor aware of nothingness. This, though, was not anything that Yves Klein had not done in 1958 with his exhibition *The Void*, which was simply an empty gallery, painted white.

In a related development, the old distinctions that once separated "high" and "low" art are melting away in the heat of a visually sophisticated but cluttered consumer culture. In this context, the only intellectually honest thing for our nation's foremost art prize to do is to abandon its fruitless and neurotic obsession with the nonexistent "cutting edge" of contemporary art.

Instead it should accept that to be truly modern it must reflect and promote the wide range of contemporary visual culture, even if it means including everything from landscape painting to internet art and halved cows floating in formaldehyde.

### **Nominees**

**Gigi Sudbury:** voted winner of the Alternative Turner Prize, her small figurative works evoke a spiritual atmosphere. **Vasiliki Gkotsi:** a Greek-born painter, her powerful and emotive portraits deal with physical decay and disease. **Sebastian Horsley:** the flamboyant dandy, whose film records his experience of being crucified.

**Maya Arulpragasam:** a young artist whose graffiti work mixes Tamil political street art with images from consumer culture.

**Lisa Autogena and Joshua Portway:** their work Black Shoals uses complex computer programs to represent live stock-market data as a star-studded night sky.

**Sokari Douglas-Camp:** a sculptress whose figurative work combines African and European traditions. **Francoise Lacroix:** her photographs juxtapose human forms with the different environments they inhabit. ■

- *The Alternative Turner Prize was sponsored by Hackett, members club Quintessentially and hotel One Aldwych.*