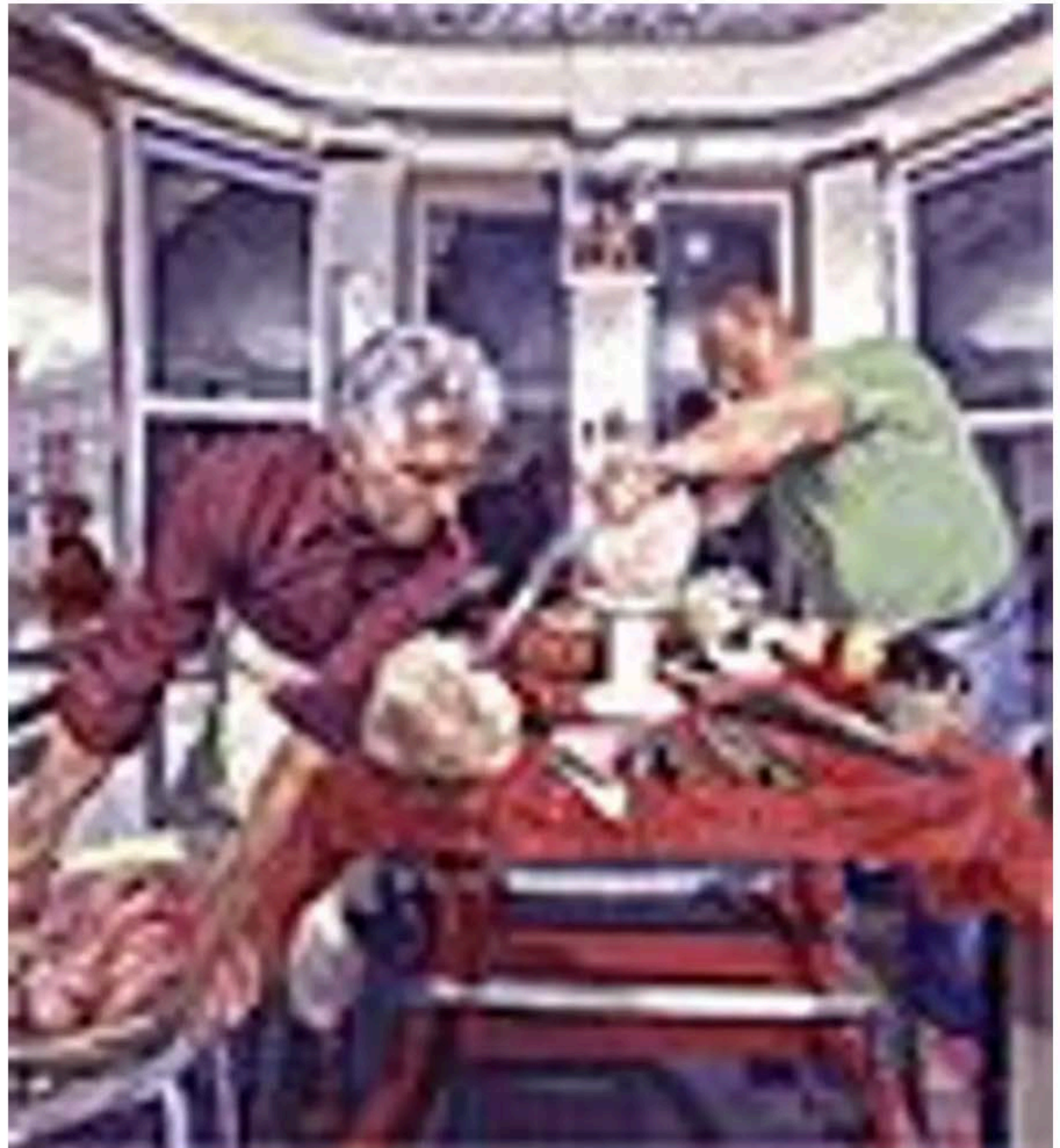


When age is a virtue

NICK HACKWORTH | EVENING STANDARD | Wednesday 7 May 2003 00:00 |



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Established in 1994 and worth £30,000, the Jerwood Painting Prize is annually awarded to an artist who "demonstrates excellence and originality in painting".

Displaying a flagrant disregard for this basic stipulation, this year's panel of judges have selected a shortlist of six artists whose work can lay few claims to being excellent and still fewer to originality.

Instead, their efforts, represented in this exhibition by two or three paintings from each artist, achieve but do not supersede that unremarkable level of competence that for decades has characterised British painting.

While the shortlist fails to excite, it does at least boast two virtues. Firstly, it takes advantage of the prize's laudable lack of age restriction, thus running counter to the art world's rampant neophilia and producing nominees with an average age of 54. Secondly, it is generously catholic, encompassing a wide range of types and styles of painting, honestly reflecting the diversity of contemporary painting practice.

Highlighting that diversity is the contrast between the work of the two prize favourites, which is announced on 20 May; John Hoyland, the abstract painter and Royal academician, aged 70, and John Wonnacott, the figurative artist who executed a portrait of the Royal Family to celebrate the Queen Mother's 100th birthday, who is 63. Being the best-known figures on the shortlist they were always likely to be the favourites, but from among this average field they are also the two most deserving candidates.

Hoyland, after four decades of abstract painting, is fluid in his handling of paint and effective in his orchestration of compositions. The two works here have a cosmic air with dark backgrounds, expanses of reflective metallic blues and nebulae of red and purple paint. Though pleasant they are mannered and lightweight like all post-war British abstract painting, which never matched the bombast of American abstract expressionism. Meanwhile, the best of Wonnacott's works is Red Table III: Carving the Ham (pictured) in which the dynamic composition is let down by inconsistent drawing quality, the lumpen man being rather ham-fistedly rendered compared with the stooping man who dominates the foreground.

Elsewhere, Suzanne Holtom's craftstyle canvases, Marc Vaux's minimalist 3-D wall reliefs and Alison Watt's paintings of suggestive folds in white bed linen all suffer from being too quiet and unassuming. Shani Rhys James's works, depicting household scenes, meanwhile, try too hard to be emotive, loaded with implied psychological meaning. Thus, despite their flaws, it is Hoyland and Wonnacott who best demonstrate skills particular to painting. But ultimately, one sincerely hopes they are not the best that British painting has to offer.

Until 18 June. Information: 01372 462 190. ■