

The Arts

Prize game

'None of us need be serious about the Turner. It makes not a jot of long-term difference to the winner or the rest of us'

have no status in the matter — Janet Street-Porter and her ilk certainly among them — working themselves into a froth or treating the prize as an event as theologically significant as the second coming of Christ. The sane, however, will see it as they see a pantomime: as a not-too-onerous obligation to adolescent children who will not be shocked by the obscenities. Let us rejoice in its clowning and leave support and indignation to poor souls without a sense of humour.

IT IS the custom of those who run the prize to invite foreign critics and curators to be among the judges — readers will readily recall the participation of Bernhard Bürgi, Milada Slizinska, Bice Curiger and Kasper Koenig. This year I thought I might follow suit and called on Waltraut von Clausthal-Zellerfeld to add a little continental zest to my report on the four finalists. She is the director of the Museum für Kunst und Gewerbe in Umpferstedt and, as an expert on contemporary pottery and porcelain, is particularly well qualified to be a judge, for London bookmakers are offering high odds on Grayson Perry, who is well known to the cognoscenti as Saatchi's favourite potter. "Und vot a potter!" said Miss Clausthal-Zellerfeld (CZ to her friends).

"Vot," indeed. Perry's pots at first glance are the sort of thing for which the unthinking rich, attracted by the gilt and glister, pay too much in Harrods and turn into table lamps without realising that their decorative embellishments are not descended from elegant Japonaiseries, but are images of sex, violence and the lavatory. "He is so subversive," said Waltraut, "Zese are powerful commentaries on ze cultural values of mittel England. Grayson is stifled by your consumerism and to ze only class zat buys works of art here, he sticks ze finger up. Zis is sexual socio-pathology; Grayson is a man dressed as a woman, but unter ze frilly skirt is an erect penis. He is just like his pots — you sink zey are vun sing, but zey are another, and zey both say f*** you."

Waltraut has a reputation for outspokenness, but I'd not expected vernacular English in a matter of such high seriousness. I drew her towards work less controversial, to the apple tree of Anya Gallaccio and the video of a running man by Willie Doherty. "Ach,

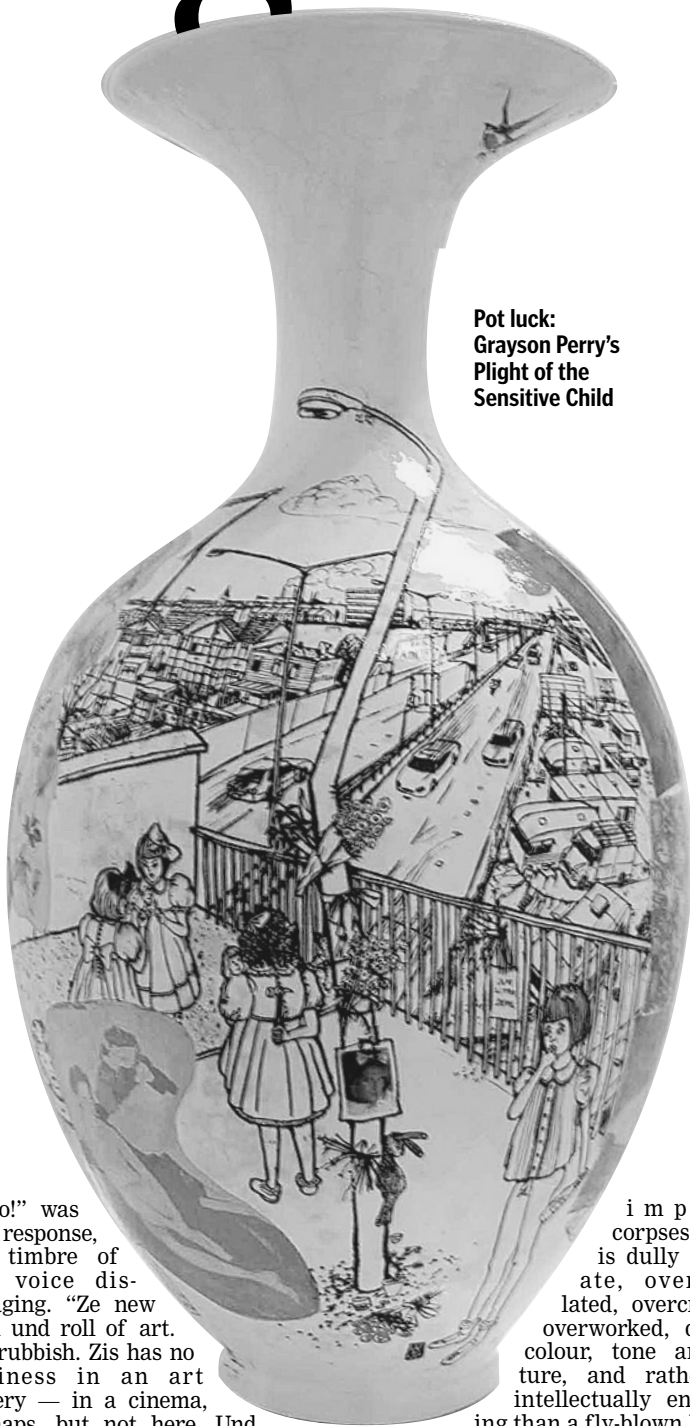
video!" was her response, the timbre of her voice disparaging. "Ze new rock und roll of art. Vot rubbish. Zis has no business in an art gallery — in a cinema, perhaps, but not here. Und who is he? Vot is he running to and from? Und vy should I care? Is zis a seminal event?" I ventured that it is an allegory of politics in Ulster, to which she almost spat: "Und so? Zat is a justification for calling it art?"

Gallaccio's apple tree did nothing to mollify her. "Vomanish," she hissed, "more feminine than Perry's pots. Und I have seen it all before, zis silly business of rotting fruit and flowers. Ze first time it vos rotting daffodils, 15 years ago, now it is rotting daisies and rotting apples. Now zey are pretty, aber soon zey von't be. Und again, so vot? Rotting apples, rotting cabbage, rotting orchids — und so weiter und so vot? Show me samsing new."

"Zen tell me vot you sink of zis," I heard myself reply as we turned to the work of the Chapman brothers, for Waltraut's Dennis-the-Dachshund accent is alarmingly infectious. "Ach! Ze famous naughty boys," she said with the anticipatory grin of Germaine Greer about to lick honey from the upturned gluteous maximus of a hairless youth.

"Zese are ze New Futurists. Ze Old Futurists said zat venerating art is as pointless as ejaculating semen into a funerary urn — ve must regenerate it, no matter vot ze risk. Zat is vot zese boys do for Goya." As it happens, I share her respect for the brothers' adjustments to Goya's etchings — sympathetic to the spirit of the original, politically pointed and technically delicate — but their sculpture of

Pot luck:
Grayson Perry's
Plight of the
Sensitive Child



impaled corpses rotting is dully deliberate, overcalculated, overcrowded, overworked, drab in colour, tone and texture, and rather less intellectually entertaining than a fly-blown Damien Hirst or the Elfin Oak in Kensington Gardens. It is certainly no match for the gravity of Goya's original idea.

MY REVERIE on maggots and bare bones was interrupted by a yelp from Waltraut. "Look, look," she said, "sex," pointing to what appeared to be a pair of inflatable sex dolls engaged in fellatio. "No, no," I said, "according to the labels that is Death and the skeletons are Sex." "Zey have muddled zem," she insisted, "I know sex ven I see it und zat is sex. Look vot she is doing mit her mouse; look at his erection. Sex is art und art is sex."

Hoping to restore order to her cerebral processes, I asked if that might be her manifesto for 2003. "Ja, ja — sex is art und art is sex," she began to murmur as a mantra. Seeing a glint in her eye that I would rather confront in the eyes of a great white shark, I slipped away from the gallery, its marble halls filled with the answering echoes, "Sex is art und art is sex," faintly dying, dying, dying.

In brief, this is as usual the worst Turner Prize show yet, and if the best that Serota can muster is the futile anger of the pimply adolescent and the taste of housewives in Hampstead Garden Suburb, then he should put an end to it.

● *The Turner Prize 2003 exhibition is at Tate Britain until 18 January 2004.*



In the race: Willie Doherty's Re-Run, the only video-based work in the show

Which way will the judges go?

by Nick Hackworth

THE Chapman brothers are favourites with William Hill at 6-4 and by rights they should win. They have engaged more effectively and intelligently with the culture of contemporary art than any other artist of their generation and they have done so with an appealing sense of humour that serves to undermine the pomposity and absurdity of the art world. If that is not enough, the brothers deserve to win the £20,000 prize for the fact, alone, that their work doesn't go down well in America.

But have the bookies got it right? Probably not. "Judge for yourself" is the strapline on the Tate's publicity material, but the decision, far from being in the hands of the public, falls to four invited judges, with Nicholas Serota, director of the Tate, as chairman.

This year's arbiters are: Richard Calvocoressi, director of the Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art; Frank Cohen, one of the most prominent collectors in Britain after Saatchi; Chrissie Iles, curator at the Whitney Museum, New York; and Andrew Wilson, deputy editor of Art Monthly magazine.

This distinguished list suggests that work deemed to be weighty and serious will carry the day at the expense of the Chapmans and Grayson Perry (currently second favourite at 2-1), who will be dismissed for being gauche and silly. Iles is a specialist in

video art and so likely to go for the only video artist included, Willie Doherty.

Calvocoressi is more into early 20th-century art than contemporary work and has a serious bent of mind that suggests he will plump either for Doherty or Anya Gallaccio.

Wilson's vote is harder to call since, as well as liking heavy conceptual and theoretical art, he has written on Perry and was an early supporter of the Chapmans. Cohen, too, may stick up either for Perry (some of whose work he owns) or the Chapmans.

But then there's Serota, who will have enormous influence despite his nominally neutral role. His favour is likely to fall upon either Doherty or Gallaccio. The piece that Doherty is showing in the exhibition, Re-Run, has been bought by the Tate for a rumoured £50,000; and Gallaccio exhibited some bare tree trunks in the hall of Tate Britain earlier this year. Neither would have happened without the approval of the Big Chief.

As Doherty has been nominated before and has more of a serious international standing than the others, he emerges as the insider tip for victory, at the respectable odds of 7-2. Risk a pony on Gallaccio, also at 7-2, and you may be set up to profit nicely. Betting may be fun, but this year's result will be a joke.

... and the contenders are:

Jake and Dinos Chapman

Jake, 37, and Dinos, 41, are notorious for mannequins with dildos for noses and sphincters for mouths. They are thinking of changing their names by deed poll to Goya.

Willie Doherty

Doherty born, 44-year-old photographer and video artist inspired by the politics of Ulster. Unfairly branded an "IRA artist" when first nominated for the Turner in 1994.

Anya Gallaccio

Glaswegian, 40, specialises in decay — melting ice, dissolving pillars of salt, chocolate-painted walls and rotting fruit.

Grayson Perry

A 43-year-old happily married transvestite with an 11-year-old daughter, Perry makes vases that satirise middle-class morality.