

The Arts

not as you know it

THE four short-listed artists are, in the order in which the visitor is most likely to encounter them, Keith Tyson, Liam Gillick, Catherine Yass and Fiona Banner.

Brian Sewell Lawks 'a Mercy! This is the stuff of infant schools.

Nick Hackworth No it's not. This is Keith Tyson's room. Can't you see that all the imagery is based on scientific theory, the pop science that was so fashionable in the 1980s — chaos theory, the butterfly effect, the interconnectedness of things, and so on?

BS No, I can't — but I've never had a taste for science fiction. To me this looks like kids' stuff — except for the looming form of the computer over there, as threatening as the conning tower of a Soviet submarine or those new-fangled pissoirs erected by the city fathers of Westminster. Those two huge pictures are the most sophisticated of the bunch: bright patches of colour mechanically applied, embellished with scraps or text that recall the one-line poems popular 40 years ago. But should one really have to read pictures rather than see them in the ancestral terms of brushwork, drawing, composition, light, shade and meaning?

NH Well, at least there is some meaning in them. The pattern of colours and shapes is strictly identical. Only the one-liners differ, and they are printed in identical typefaces and are of virtually identical length; they construct parallel worlds — Carthage and ancient China, for example — and you must read the narrative in one and then, immediately, walk to the other.

BS Oh, they are an exercise machine as well as art, are they? But it's a literary business, all words, not art.

NH That's a dead attitude. Words have been art for decades and you must learn to accept language as a current idiom. It is more important to assess whether the art is good or bad within the idiom, rather than whether or not it is art — that's now a corny old question. And can't you see the imagination in his using bits of old timber and their distress marks to generate physical sculptures? There is more than just words in those.

BS Bah! You'll be talking about metaphysical polarities next. It still looks like playschool stuff to me.

NH I admit there is a weakness in Tyson's work — the borrowed ideas that are his inspiration, naive though they are, are more interesting than the use he makes of them. I would rather read a book on chaos theory than look at his illustrations of it.

BS I know a dog called Chaos — a wonderfully mad spaniel.

NH My turn to say bah! Now let me show you the work of someone renowned in the international art world as highly intelligent and intellectual. Liam Gillick is famous for being clever. Curators love him because his theoretical statements are even more incomprehensible than theirs.

BS You mean he composes what David Lee calls Artbollocks — "the flux of being and non-being, appearance and disappearance ... the anticipation of the endpoint ... a visual language that transcends formalist ideas ..." — we can all concoct it if we try? (*Lapsed into silence for 10 seconds, then wails*) But there's nothing here!

NH Put your glasses on, Brian. Look



Brian Sewell has occasionally refused to review Tate Britain's annual Turner Prize exhibition on the grounds that in its blind pursuit of change and innovation, the award has driven itself into a corner so tight that nothing can save it from oblivion. This year **Nick Hackworth** steered him round the show and forced him to take another bite at the cherry

up. That's not your bog-standard Tate Gallery ceiling. Aren't you excited by all those rectangles of saturated colour, the tinted light flooding through the Plexiglas, the mysterious shadows ...

BS It's Gilbert and George without the turds and dirty words.

NH That's absurd. Gillick believes that we are all conditioned by our visual environment and this ceiling proves it in the simplest, clearest terms. He has created an atmosphere that is momentarily thrilling but which quickly becomes dull and boring. If we stay here for five minutes we shall be profoundly bored.

At this point the Tate's Curatrix of Interpretation beards the two critics, directing their attention to a display case designed by Gillick, full of neat, clever little computer-generated commissions; she then embarked on a spirited but wearily long defence of Gillick's work, conjuring the ghost of Mondrian as the inspiration of his neo-modernist design concepts for beach towels, Christmas cards and traffic islands. BS with mounting impatience snorts an F-word and cuts her short.

BS But it's only design, it's trivia, it has nothing to do with art — a beach towel, for God's sake! A beach towel for the Turner Prize! And none of it is cutting-edge in any conventional sense of that benighted idiom. Have you [addressing the curatrix] and Gillick never heard of Victor Pasmore, never heard of Peterlee? As for the architectural designs — give me an architect's drawings packed with information, not these slick hypotheses.

NH takes BS's elbow and hurries him into the Catherine Yass room to look at videos.

NH Yass is the bookies' favourite — God knows why.

BS (*hanging head and looking away from the screen*) Nor do I — and I want to be sick — this gives me nausea and vertigo.

NH But it's meant to make you queasy — the video camera is attached to a remote-control toy helicopter looping the loop over London.

BS walks off to contemplate three light-boxes illuminating what appear to be old-fashioned abstract paintings of the 1950s, but they are, in fact, blurred images of skyscrapers. NH joins him.

NH This, I agree, is pretty meagre stuff, banal too. But I dare say that will be your word for Fiona Banner.

BS Perhaps. The last thing I saw by her was a densely written and utterly tedious text about Lawrence of Arabia — not an educated hand, not a hand accustomed to a pen, not a hand capable of writing a decent letter, just graffiti, just the writing of a pre-pubescent child scribbling words on a wall — no image, no beauty, no taxing of the mind.

NH But that's not what she is interested in. Take this vast text piece occupying a whole wall, *Arsewoman in Wonderland*, in pinkish-red lettering on crumpled white plastic — it's a blow-by-blow description of what she sees in a pornographic video, no narrative, just the action noted in detail, each frame frozen so that she misses nothing, each

sexual happening or nuance trapped in the language of the barrack room. At the very least she succeeds in expressing the tedium and banality of pornography.

BS She is entitled to that tendentious and typically feminist view of a male pleasure, but as most men do not find pornography the least banal and boring, and *Arsewoman* in literary form is too tedious to contemplate, I doubt if it will have much success as a piece of social engineering. And it isn't art — it's nothing more than an old-fashioned attempt to outrage the sensibilities of Tunbridge Wells, to cock a snook at the yah-boo tabloid newspapers, and ensure notoriety. It is intended to provoke the angry baying of those whom the Tate can dismiss as Philistines and thus confirm its self-righteousness.

NH I agree that *Arsewoman* as Banner relates it is virtually unreadable — it is much less coherent than Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*, from which the plot is cribbed ...

BS You mean that the White Rabbit and Mad Hatter have a part in it?

NH I dare say, but I haven't seen it — and don't interrupt — and you're wrong in assuming that she's a feminist — she told me that she enjoyed the film.

BS I've had enough. This is the dullest Turner Prize show yet. No outrage unless you look really hard for it — just pretentious jabberwocky from both the artists and the Tate's interpreters. But I know who'll win.

NH Liam Gillick. Serota will give him the prize to prove that contemporary British art has grown up, no longer has to shock and can be severely intellectual. The flamboyant days of carcasses and rumpled beds are over. But, to be frank, I don't think any of them deserves to win.

BS You're right about Gillick and the betting man should back him. I can't see that he's severely intellectual — the stuff's too trivial for that accolade — but he's dry, like an insect on a pin in

a cork mat, and that's what will appeal to Serota. But if the other jurors are inclined to rebel, they might be inclined to back Tyson — at least there's a little rough-and-ready vigour in the smaller works.

NH Is this, as the bosses of Channel 4, the sponsors of the prize, opine, exciting work at the cutting edge, made by the brightest and best of their generation?

BS No.

NH Is it the most stimulating visual experience of the year?

BS No. No.

NH Does it nurture curiosity, excitement and intelligence?

BS No. No. No.

NH Is £3.50 well spent on seeing it?

BS No. No. No. No.

NH (*wearily, and he's only 24*) Eheu. Eheu. Verily these are the dying embers of a bankrupt civilisation.

● *Turner Prize exhibition is at Tate Britain, Millbank, SW1. Admission daily 10am-5pm. Tickets £3.50. Until 5 January. The winner will be announced on 8 December.*

'Arsewoman is an old-fashioned attempt to outrage the sensibilities of Tunbridge Wells, to cock a snook at the yah-boo tabloids, and ensure notoriety'