

Persuasive Essay

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The Turner Prize

Recently, considerable media attention has again been given to the critically acclaimed Turner Prize and its entries.

The Turner Prize is awarded to a British artist who is under 50 years old for an outstanding presentation or exhibition of their work in the twelve months preceding the judgement date (usually in May). The Prize was established by Tate's Patrons of New Art in 1984. The Turner Prize is widely recognised as one of the most important and prestigious awards for the visual arts in Europe.

There are no surprises that a work of classical media (i.e. paint) failed to clinch the elusive prize, but paintings are rarely seen, or even short-listed. A few years ago, however, Chris Ofili's unusual portrayal of the mother of Christ done in acrylic, oils, glitter and elephant dung took first place - the closest thing to a traditional painting for a long time. Chris Ofili is renowned for his alternative approach to art. He is acclaimed in the art world, even though he uses elephant dung in his work - a passing nod to his roots in Zimbabwe and British Colonialism - and the generally offensive nature of his work. In fact, the mayor of New York threatened to cut the grant for the Manhattan museum of modern art unless the show which contained Ofili's work was cancelled. He specifically singled out some work, Ofili's among it, as 'sick stuff.'

This year's winning entry "lights go on and off" (a room where the action of its only door switches on and off lighting) by Martin Creed caused a stir in the media and with the general public forcing the old question - is that art?

Many other works have had the same or similar effect on the media and general public, but perhaps the most universally known Turner prize entry of recent times was from Damien Hirst, his name was preserved and famed by his highly controversial series of mutilated and mummified livestock displayed in formaldehyde.

Some argue that this is not art, only “sensationalist collectables” designed for one sole purpose – to shock. What could be more shocking than two congruent tanks with a cow in each displayed in full *post mortem*?

When thinking about this competition the ‘Emperor’s clothes’ come to mind. It seems that gradually the competition has metamorphosed into something abstract and warped - all for the cause of ‘something new.’ Which like the Emperors clothes to most who are willing to admit, is invisible. An example of this may be taken as Steve McQueen’s 1999 winner. A video showing the artist re-enacting Buster Keaton’s slapstick performance from ‘Steamboat Bill Jnr.’ The artist filmed himself from various angles as the wall of a house falls on him. Miraculously, the artist, like Buster Keaton, is unscathed, escaping thanks to an open window in the gable end.

In an article from the Independent, the journalist Mark Chilvers, described McQueen’s appearance as follows: “With an expression that I think is meant to be impassive, but ends up more self-important.”

The artist J.M.W. Turner was a classical painter said to be the greatest British artist of all time. His approach was at the opposite end of the spectrum to the likes of Tracey Emin, who managed to make the shortlist with a photograph of their bed as part of their portfolio. Emin exposes her life to the

public through her art. Her “hopes, humiliations, failures and successes” are displayed through the media of drawings, film-making, neon, painting, photography, sculpture and appliquéd blankets. Unlike J.M.W. Turner, who translated his feelings by hand into the picture - a picture most importantly that everyone could identify with.

In conclusion, I feel the whole Turner Prize and Tate Gallery fraternity have been locking themselves away in their own self-importance since 1984. But there is public interest in the works - as has been shown through the appearance of many Tate Galleries throughout Britain and the extension of the original Tate Gallery, being renamed ‘Tate Britain.’ But are people genuinely interested in the art? Or is the pull of visiting a Tate Gallery just a chance to expose themselves to something weird or new?