

## THOMAS DANE GALLERY

**Jeffery Taylor, 'We spot the first art of summer at the Royal Academy', *Express*, June 10, 2014**

"It is all very orange," was my first impression as I stood in Gallery 3 of the Royal Academy of Arts, surrounded by piles of canvases, a scattering of architectural models and diverse (actually, weird) statuary; not to mention enough scaffolding to cover the Forth Bridge.

The Sunday Express was given an exclusive opportunity to nose around behind the scenes of the most famous annual art show in the world: The Royal Academy Summer Exhibition 2014, which opens its six-week run tomorrow at 10am.

At this time of the year we Brits show the world there is more to UK culture than warm beer and dodgy football.

The Royal Academy, founded in 1768 with Joshua Reynolds as its first president, welcomes the public to Burlington House, its rather grand early Georgian building on London's Piccadilly, by opening its doors wide and filling all 10 galleries with the stunning artwork of a nation.

This year the ratio is one third, or 400, professional Academicians on show to two thirds, or 800 works of art, from the public at large.

None of the "send-ins" entries from non-members is identified by the Selection Committee, the men and women who sift through more than 12,000 entries.

They have all, Academicians and public alike, been judged by the same yardstick: a gut reaction to what the committee sees, triggering a very human instinct: instant love or hate.

Everywhere I look, a strong orange is the dominant colour and none more disturbing than a huge blood-red explosion on a primroseyellow background, propped without frame or title against the wall. I later learned that this visceral visual attack with "young rebel" written all over it was the sole entry from the RA's president, Christopher Le Brun. Elected in 2011, the 60-year-old comes across as the antithesis of undergraduate subversion in his three-piece grey suit, collar and tie and his neatly trimmed naval beard.

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Christopher Le Brun

He wears his gold chain of office and large medallion, of which any lord mayor would be proud, with a nonchalant flair.

"This is a Golden Age for the Royal Academy," he says, "for a long time our voice was not heard but today in painting, architecture and sculpture we are at the heart of the arts in this country." The RA is a Royal Peculiar, financially a completely independent institution and answerable only to the monarch. "From Hockney to Foster," explains Le Brun, "Tracey Emin to Phillip King, and right across the generations, we all sit down and talk to one another and people listen."

The Summer Exhibition is specifically designed to attract first time gallery goers. "In a typical art gallery, the visitor is tightly controlled," says Le Brun, "but here you choose what you want to see, you tell us what you like.

"My only word of advice is to let the pictures speak to you, never mind the theories. It is your gut reaction that matters.

"Art has no secret code, its only real meaning is how you feel about it."

The scale of the whole enterprise was brought home to me as I strolled through the galleries with Hughie O'Donoghue RA, chief hanger of this year's exhibition, who has overall responsibility for the whole show. Each gallery is hung by a Royal Academician and when we reached Gallery VII, Gus Cummins RA was busy juggling.

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A trick of the trade is to plan a wall's layout by first designing it on the floor. We gingerly tiptoed round the colourful and precious carpet Cummins had created with a retail value of about £1million. And this is one of the smaller rooms! "I just tell them to get on with it, really," O'Donoghue says. He is a mild mannered personality, with a soft Mancunian accent, apparently immune to panic, an essential virtue for his task. "It's a guessing game, you never know what is coming in next. How can you possibly plan for something you have never seen?" Yet already Gallery III speaks his language. "I want to express the basic sensory experience of a picture," he explains, "form, colour and paint material."

There is an almost frivolous amount of space between the pictures. "I want to give each item the best possible show," he says.

Regardless of how hectic the job may appear, you quickly find yourself smiling at the relaxed atmosphere and bright light beaming in from the glass ceiling.

Something is missing, though. There is a striking absence of figurative work which usually characterises Gallery III. Where is the tradition of Constable, Turner, Reynolds and Hogarth? Are their magnificent pictorial masterpieces not an inextricably entwined part of our, and the RA's, history?

"Constable was seen as a radical and banned from the RA for a number of years," says O'Donoghue, "but every institution has to evolve or it soon becomes irrelevant."

President Le Brun has the last word: "We reflect the British sense of humour, of not taking ourselves too seriously. As we are artists we have laughed at ourselves for dealing with the unknown for 250 years and so has the public.

"We are still here. All I can say is: 'Give us a try'."

Personally I would love to know if, like me, you find it all a shade too orange...

*<http://www.express.co.uk/life-style/life/481266/Royal-Academy-summer-exhibition-2014>*