

# THE TIMES

**Turner prize works are baffling, that's the bottom line:  
Obscure nominees make for a confusing, messy, pick'n'mix art show**  
**Rachel Campbell Johnston, Chief Art Critic**  
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Anthea Hamilton's sculpture is sure to confirm prejudices of Turner sceptics. Photo: Kyle Knodell.

None of the nominees for this year's Turner prize are brand-new on the art scene. The youngest, Michael Dean, is now 30. Josephine Pryde narrowly squeezes under the prize's upper age limit of 50. And yet only the art anorak can really be expected to have heard of them.

This is a shortlist which, ironically, should reassure the sceptic. The salient image to emerge from the shows for which the nominees were picked, is one by Anthea Hamilton (37). Her 2015 New York exhibition *Lichen! Libido! Chastity!* was dominated by an 18ft sculpture of a brick doorway through which a massive bottom, its buttocks parted by splayed fingers, had been pushed. If you have long suspected the contemporary art scene to be little more than a huge flatulent puff in the face of high culture, then this is an offering to shore your opinion up.

Even the most enthusiastic fan is likely to feel pretty flummoxed. We live in a complicated world. And, if nothing else, these artists reflect that.

There is a strong sculptural element to their work: but it feels a long way from sculpture as the traditionalist might imagine it. Don't think lumps of cast bronze or pieces of carved wood. Think disparate clutters of fairly unidentifiable objects: heterogenous assemblages that make use of anything from rubber, silk, bread and cabbages (Hamilton) through to resin, fish skin, nails, black sand, taxidermied insects, felt and salt (Helen Martin).

The sculptural object meets the conceptual installation. Spectators are expected not to stand outside and look but to enter into and be surrounded by bittily shambolic stage sets.

What are we supposed to make of these worlds within a world? Dean is interested in finding a physical form for language, apparently, and so creates a realm of enigmatic “glyphs”. Pryde explores the commodification of sexuality with a series of photographs of exotically manicured female hands caressing their smart phones. Marten undermines our experience of the material world with her all but surreal installations. As for Hamilton, even the Tate curator when asked to explain it, seemed hard pressed. “She has a fascination with imagery essentially explored through materials”. Its a pretty good starting point, I suppose.

What does this prize tell us about British culture? Apart from the fact that it’s global (to have seen the shows for which two of the artists were nominated you would have had to go to America) perhaps the presiding message is that, in our modern world the virtual and the real have become so inextricably tangled that all we can do is scramble confusedly through its multi-layered, pick’n’mix postmodern mess. Solemn political messages have dissolved back into navel-gazing depths.

The best you hope for is to enjoy a shared spirit of Rabelaisian humour.

More probably you will suspect that contemporary culture has finally vanished up its own fundamental orifice.