



left:

*TSIATSIA, El Anatsui*, 2013, aluminium, (bottle-tops, printing plates, roofing sheets) and copper wire, 15 x 23 metres. All photographs © Benedict Johnson



Sharon Wheaton, hoping for a good Summer Exhibition

Now don't tell anyone – but I have been coming to this annual art survey for close to 30 years, with my mum for much of it and latterly as a gallery owner. Always on the lookout and in the hope of discovering a dazzling jewel to join the ranks of my gallery artists. However, last year constituted an *annus horribilis* as far as I was concerned. It took me a mere 40 minutes before wondering what time my next train home was. To have the temerity to herd all small works into a personal tsunami of experimentation co-ordinated by Tess Jaray was objectionable and dismissive to the integrity of the artists. Their work was sacrificed in order to make her own statement. And sculptures and walls dedicated to recently deceased RAs were thrown together like a bric-à-brac stall. As you will gather, I was in no mood for more of the same!

The 2013 co-ordinators Norman Ackroyd and Eva Jiricna are keen to stress the cutting edge of this year's show, and I like the eye-catching sequinned tapestry cleverly draped over Burlington House by Ghanaian artist El Anatsui that you see first on arrival. It is titled *Tsiatsia* and is actually made out of discarded bottle tops and other items collected from rubbish tips in his homeland. We then go into the show by the Octagon Central Hall where we are confronted by seven tonnes of rusty steel, a triptych by the eminent Sir Anthony Caro titled *Shadows*, and some immensely appealing municipal stone seating by John Maine.

Less impressive is Room III. It contains about 70 per cent of the paintings by members of the Academy and has a rather floaty feel as if nothing is pinned down. I wonder whether this is owing to the lack of

# Improvement at Royal Academy

Last year's Summer Exhibition infuriated Fosse Gallery owner **Sharon Wheaton**, but this year her faith is restored by corners of brilliance

There has been an annual Summer Exhibition at the Royal Academy of Arts since 1769, so this is its 245th year. Its main purpose then was to raise funds for the Academy Schools, and this it still purports to do. It is a showcase for the work of the Royal Academicians and is very much their gig; but selected outside artists are invited to exhibit, and so are you and I, in what is famously known

as the "send in". If selected we have the opportunity to be hung alongside the most distinguished practitioners of art, and the Academy boasts this is the largest annual open art show in the world today. It is worth pointing out that the RAs are chosen to constitute the hanging and selection committees on a bi-annual rotation system, so the feel and emphasis differs from year to year.

## EXHIBITIONS

right:  
Lecture Room, installation view

below:  
*The Adoration of the Cage Fighters*, 2012, Grayson Perry RA, wool, cotton, acrylic, polyester and silk tapestry © Grayson Perry, photo © Stephen White

frames, which make the larger works feel more like emblems than works of art. Some nice things here though: four paintings by Terry Setch and Anthony Eyton, who is having something of a renaissance. Enormously disappointing – and quite frankly the person responsible should be castigated – is the lack of care and respect shown to the late and much loved Mary Fedden. A “memorial wall”, I don’t think so. It consists of five examples that could have been better sourced and celebrated, on a third of one crummy end wall. Pass it and you will have missed it.

The two rooms of prints as ever provide us with a wonderful platform for the ascendancy of British print-making and an invitation to spend some pennies before, regrettably, we move on to the large and small Weston Rooms curated by Humphrey Ocean. If he is asking us to buy into his visual take of what is bad or good art then I’m just left with the suspicion that the majority of his artists are all on some powerful medication. You should grin and bear it though, because tucked away in



the bottom right hand corner of the Small Weston Room is the most beautiful charcoal by Donald Zec, *My Grandfather, the Pious Patriarch*. In his 90s, Zec only took up drawing recently, and this is the deserved winner of the Hugh Casson Drawing Prize.

John Wragg has succeeded in giving

sculpture back its dignity with his carefully considered Rooms V and VII, the highlight being the group of three foam and pin pots by David Mach: *Orange Surf, Los Dos Ombres* and *Ming*. Mach once again succeeds in redeploying semi-industrial materials to create unerring grace and wit.





*below:*  
**Shadows, Anthony Caro RA, 2013, Steel, © Barford Sculptures Ltd, photo, John Hammond**

*bottom:*  
**Peter Freeth RA, installing the Summer Exhibition**

He revealed to me that inevitably the pins – he claimed five million of them – came from China and says they “have been a revelation, like sweets – a cornucopia of colour and wonder – they have released me into this incredible decorative world.” And believe you me, five million pins can’t be wrong.

Nearing the end I can assure you that the majority of the visitors to this year’s Summer Exhibition will be drawn to the Lecture Room, or found studying the Hogarthian carpets of Grayson Perry. The Lecture Room is hung by Mick Rooney (I must declare an interest – he is a gallery artist of mine), who has triumphed in jig-sawing together 220 paintings and drawings, many by the likes of you and me. Prices ranging from £60-£200,000 and a breadth of imagery taking in so many aspects of the human condition, provide us with a treasure trove. This is somewhere to rest your eye and open up your wallet. “There should be good painting and diverse painting, and we should celebrate it, and that is what this room is about,” enthuses Rooney. I even feel confident for the first time since 2007 I may have found a jewel or two there – but enough of that!

And then finally, the last small gallery is dedicated to Grayson Perry’s six large and beautiful wall hangings entitled *The Vanity*

*of Small Differences*. Exploring Perry’s fascination with aesthetic taste and social mobility in today’s fractured society, this is a good way to end.

But with all this craft and decorative arts, has the Summer Exhibition turned into a very sophisticated craft fair organised by the WI? No

– but the old arts/crafts snobbishness has gone. Fear not, it is still vast, messy and infuriating, but you will be glad to know that this year I stayed for a proper hour and a half. ■

*Until 18 August, [www.royalacademy.org.uk](http://www.royalacademy.org.uk)*

*For further details about *The Fosse Gallery*, see [www.fossegallery.com](http://www.fossegallery.com)*

