

# Turner Prize award to Wolfgang Tillmans hailed as shift in focus

By Paul Mitchell  
28 December 2000

This year's £20,000 Turner Prize for Art was awarded for the first time to a photographer—the 34-year old, German-born artist Wolfgang Tillmans.

The Turner Prize was established in 1984, originally to reward British artists under 50 years of age. It has since become associated with the conceptual “Young British Artists” (YBAs) such as Damien Hirst and Rachel Whitbread. The selection of Tillmans and the three other shortlisted artists, only one of whom was born in Britain, marks a turn away from the YBAs. According to Nicholas Serota, chairman of the Turner Prize jury, “I think it's a question of recognising that the culture here is much richer than we could define by those who have simply been born in this country.” He added, “There is a great deal of public discussion about the contribution that economic and other migrants make to this country.”

Tillmans (born in 1966) tapes photos of everyday subjects in an apparently random way across gallery walls (see: <http://www.artincontext.org/LISTINGS/IMAGES/FULL/J/CPG8SK4J.htm>) He made his name as an “all-seeing Warholian recorder of his time”, publishing his photos in fashion and style magazines such as *iD*. In the last year his photos have been in at least four major exhibitions in Britain alone and a recent picture—*Metro Ticket*—sold for £12,000.

At the exhibition showing the Turner Prize nominees, Tillmans has taped 57 variously sized photographs around four walls of a room. On display in glass cabinets in the centre of the room are his books *Concorde* and *Soldiers*, and examples of his magazine work. The photos on the walls look as if they are from a year in the life of Wolfgang Tillmans. He records everyday events from an unusual or striking angle (see: <http://www.yvonneforceinc.com/yfinew/tillmans.htm>)—a series of footprints frozen in the ice; commuters squashed together on the London Underground; a night time view over a Japanese city; a trapeze artist balanced delicately on the high wire; clothes discarded haphazardly and suggestively down some stairs; a joyful naked man rolling about in sand dunes. This image and a shot of an unzipped pair of jeans just exposing a shaved male crotch are the only selection of openly erotic pictures for which Tillmans is known (see: <http://www.stern.de/nerve/tillmans/tillmans.html>). In one of the display cases there is a picture from his book *Do You Wanna Party in My Hole?* A man bending over exposing his anus has been discreetly covered by another picture. I am not sure whether Tillmans censored his own pictures or the exhibition organisers asked him to tone them down.

In his 1997 book *Concorde*, Tillmans sees the supersonic plane as the last symbol of the space age and the destruction of a hope once offered by technology. He concludes, “For me and my generation there is no super future”. This loss of confidence in the future must be one of the reasons Tillmans work is so introspective. It is as if he is hunting for an oasis of humanity amongst his own friends and day-to-day experiences. To give Tillmans credit, within this restricted world he seems to squeeze out an

unsettling sort of beauty in his pictures. His own particular favourite shows a deer and man looking at each other on a deserted beach. He thinks it evokes “a tender and bewildering encounter of man and nature”. I agree with him.

Tillmans is a political person with views that sit comfortably with Britain's New Labour elite. His homo-erotic photos became iconic for the gay rights movement and his 1998 *Soldiers* makes use of press cuttings that promote ideas of the less heroic, more humanitarian soldier. One picture is particularly memorable (see: <http://www.haywardeducation.org.uk/bas/works/tillmans.htm>).

Photographed from below, we see a soldier in his underclothes doing physical exercises. He seems to stare towards a bright blue sky—a symbol of escape for Tillmans. In an edition of the homeless magazine *The Big Issue*, he says he hopes his set of photos “can cross borders between communities and class”. He believes that the powerful are powerful because they control the surface of things. For the artist, who lives in the realm of images, the surface is important, but to understand the deeper underlying causes, is both more rewarding and the key to challenging the powerful.

I felt the same problem with Glenn Brown (born in 1966) who is showing nine paintings and three sculptures at the exhibition. Brown borrows images from unfashionable painters, but subtly changes their appearance. His borrowings have caused him several problems. A few days before the Turner Prize was announced, he was accused of copying Anthony Robert's illustration for the cover of Robert A Heinlein's 1974 sci-fi book *Double Star* for his picture *Love of Shepherds*, 2000 (see: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/graphics/00/11/29/nturn129.jpeg>)

*Love of Shepherds*, which sold recently for \$45,000, is one of four large-scale works on show measuring about 2 x 3 metres. It is a historical narrative painting set in the future and depicts a spaceship, which Brown says he tried to imbue with a “warm sexuality”. By placing a threatening icy-blue fiery planet behind it, the spaceship seems to offer a safe haven. The whole painting has a silk-like finish that has become Brown's hallmark. This contrasts with the lumpy sculpture *The Shepherdess* he has placed in front of it that is composed of hundreds of tubes of paint stuck together.

The gallery also displays several of Brown's small oil-on-panel portraits such as *The Marquess of Breadalbane* (<http://www.tate.org.uk/britain/images/glenn3.gif>) based on Frank Auerbach's thickly painted *Head of JYM*. He chooses Auerbach because his portraits show “isolated, existential angst”. At first you notice thick brush strokes making up the face as it twists in contortions upwards, but on closer inspection the surface is actually exceptionally glossy, just like the *Love of Shepherds*. Brown achieves a 3D effect for the rest of the head and shoulders as they melt into a sky blue background.

Of a similar size to the *Love of Shepherds* is *Oscillate Wildly*, (<http://www.tate.org.uk/britain/images/glenn2.jpg>) named after the song by *The Smiths*. In this painting, Brown says he is challenging the accepted

interpretations of paintings of the Spanish Civil War by Picasso and Dali. Based on Dali's ridiculed *Autumn Cannibalism*, it shows two embracing figures that seem to melt into each other and the surrounding landscapes and objects. However, Brown has painted it in the greys of Picasso's anti-fascist work, *Guernica*, pointing out that "poverty, the grey and the mundane" has become a cliché for seriousness. To what end he is attempting to visually reconcile two great Spanish artists with fundamentally opposed political views, other than purely aesthetic, one can only speculate.

Brown believes Dali's conversion to Catholicism marked the end of his great works. In *The Tragic Conversion of Salvador Dali (after John Martin)*, Brown paints an end-of-the-world scene of raging seas, blood red stormy skies and enormous cliffs crashing down on to a futuristic city. It is based on *The Great Day of His Wrath* by Victorian visionary painter John Martin, once the highest paid artist of his time, but whose works are only worth a few hundred pounds today. Brown has produced a number of other paintings with religious titles or themes, pointing to the irony that, although an atheist, he uses the medium of painting largely developed by Catholicism. In *Jesus: The Living Dead*, Brown says he is dealing with the point at which God—leaving him not knowing if his situation was reality or a fiction, forsook Jesus. He says there are similarities between his paintings about religion and disco dancing—another favourite theme. "Both are fake, but they get you by", he concludes.

Could this phrase sum up Brown's own attitudes? He thinks reality is so obscured beneath images that first-hand experience is no longer possible. He sees his role to "decorate" a world that has lost its faith in religion and ideologies. In *Towards An International Socialism (After Chris Foss) 1997*, a pure white icebound island bathed in an eerie blue-white light floats like an iceberg high above the earth. Whilst Tillmans seeks solace in the personal, Brown imparts a "feeling of putrefaction" to his work. "Mine is a vampiric world," he says. "Images are a language, it's impossible to make a painting that's not borrowed. I'm not doing anything to challenge the status quo of painting that's different from anyone else."

Although Brown recognises that for many, "to get through the 'modern age', you have to anaesthetise yourself to a certain extent", he says that is not his answer. "I want to describe the underlying structures without falling for the cliché developed by bourgeois modernism—avoiding anything that was beautiful, natural and escapist which are things the masses adore and the elite despise even though the elite have beauty and the poor are perceived as ugly."

Tomoko Takahashi (born in Japan, 1966) uses "painstaking selection and arrangement" of rubbish for her huge installations. She studied at Goldsmiths College, but gave up painting for installations, the first of which *Company Deal 1997* used office equipment in a London advertising agency. Takahashi's *My Garden Shed* sculpture recently sold for £15,500. For *Tennis Court Piece* (<http://www.n16.clara.net/festival/parklight3.htm>) and (<http://www.n16.clara.net/festival/parklight4.htm>) at London's Stoke Newington Festival, Takahashi asked local people to donate unused sports equipment. The local paper reported, "as Tomoko is in the running for the Turner Prize, her work has become collectible and therefore it has been deemed unwise to give it [back]." Last year, Takahashi was the star of the advertising magnate Charles Saatchi's *New Neurotic Realism* exhibition, with her work *Line Out*, a mass of rubbish that glittered and shone when the electric cables joining them were switched on (<http://www.btinternet.com/~dafyddk/rubbish.htm>)

This might seem a bad introduction to Takahashi, but she is tackling serious issues. "Everything has its own life and I want to make things more themselves, to liberate them from imposed rules. Teetering on the edge between order and chaos, that's the exciting point—living is like that."

She has lived through the economic rise and stagnation of Japan and the

development of its obsessive consumerism and human alienation. She explores how consumer objects that are replaced as soon as new models are marketed can live again and how individualism relies on social activity.

Her work at the Turner Prize Exhibition is called *Learning How to Drive*. Instructions for her assistants on how to construct the installation are written on the floor and walls. Discarded maps, signs, lights and maintenance tools are piled high. Here and there you spot a police driver's manual or a heap of children's model car racing track. You gradually begin to realise how an apparently simple activity is a really quite a complex social one. (Unfortunately all this effort did not help her pass her driving test!)

In her Internet-based work *Word Perfect*, Takahashi comments on the impact of globalisation—how worldwide word processing packages seem to produce conformity of language and grammar. Instead, she turns impersonal emails into handwritten ones. Try it for yourself on [http://www.e-2.org/word\\_perfect.html](http://www.e-2.org/word_perfect.html)

Elsewhere Takahashi has held a day event, turning the solo card game *Patience* into a social activity and organised a *Ticker Tape Parade without Parade* at Brixton Fire Station, in which she laments there are "no heroes for the people".

The fourth contender for the Turner Prize was Michael Raedecker (born in Amsterdam, 1963). He paints landscapes that look as if the life was sucked out of them (see: <http://www.vanabbemuseum.nl/archief/r/>). Raedecker says, "I hope that with the 'landscapes' I do there is this sense of timelessness. The great outdoors has always been there, long before us, and nothing has changed ever since. And we have always been puzzled how to relate towards this 'thing' that's as mysterious as life". He wants the viewer "to drift through space and time" as they look at his work.

Characteristically he uses thick layers of paint over wide areas of the canvas, decorated with threads of material dipped in paint, sequins and embroidery. Entering his section of the Turner Prize exhibition I could see a bright white luminescent box at the other end of the gallery. It turned out to be part of his painting *Ins and Outs 1999* (<http://www.vanabbemuseum.nl/archief/r/raedecker10.html>)—the box being a window in the outline of a wooden house and composed of white horizontal cotton threads; a row of trees made up of tufts of wool disappear towards a non-existent horizon. Apparently, the house was one of those escapist backwoods cabins popular in 1950s and 60s American home magazines. Raedecker later saw on TV that it was the scene of the murder of a whole family. In the painting he explains how he tried to capture a feeling of opposing values being present within the same object.

Like Glenn Brown's paintings, Raedecker's have a putrefying feel to them—perhaps more accurately, that spooky or disturbing quality that reminds me of the TV series the *X Files* or the film *Blue Velvet*. Raedecker justifies this by saying, "I am dealing with popular collective images and people have stories of their own to fill in the painting. In a film you need a music score to orchestrate a dangerous or mysterious scene, to make it more horrifying, I set my paintings up similar to a music score. I've given one frame, one scene and I've asked the viewer to fill it in."

Raedecker's paintings sell for £10-20,000 and he is one of the few painters to be represented in the Saatchi collection.

Charles Saatchi, as a member of the Patrons of New Art, was a founder of the Turner Prize in 1984. The Prize was a response by the Tate Gallery to the election of Margaret Thatcher in 1979 and her government's cuts in museum funding. Galleries and museums had to look increasingly to private money and relied on publicity to raise it. As the art critic Richard Cork explains, there was also the feeling that "convinced that no good would come of ruminating on Britain's past glories ... we must rid ourselves of this disabling tendency to shy away from the present." Hence the phenomenon of the Young British Artist as commodity and the

controversy on which this has thrived. Now it seems the YBAs are being dropped in favour of a new commodity. As Glenn Brown's agent says, "You've got great painters in Britain. The buyers are going mad for them in Los Angeles. It's old school painting, baby, hell yes". Serota has also offered up a new group of artists to help the ruling elite attempt to develop a new British identity.

When asked recently how he could stop his work being manipulated, Wolfgang Tillmans answered that he put so much thought and effort into his art that he hoped it would continue to "shine through". I am not so sure. All four artists seem serious and thoughtful—I enjoyed all of them—but what shone through for me was how a lack of confidence in the future affects the visual arts today.

Examples of the artists' works can be viewed until January 14, 2001, during the exhibition at London's Tate Britain gallery (<http://www.tate.org.uk/britain/exhibitions/turnerprize.htm>).

To contact the WSWs and the  
Socialist Equality Party visit:

**<http://www.wsws.org>**