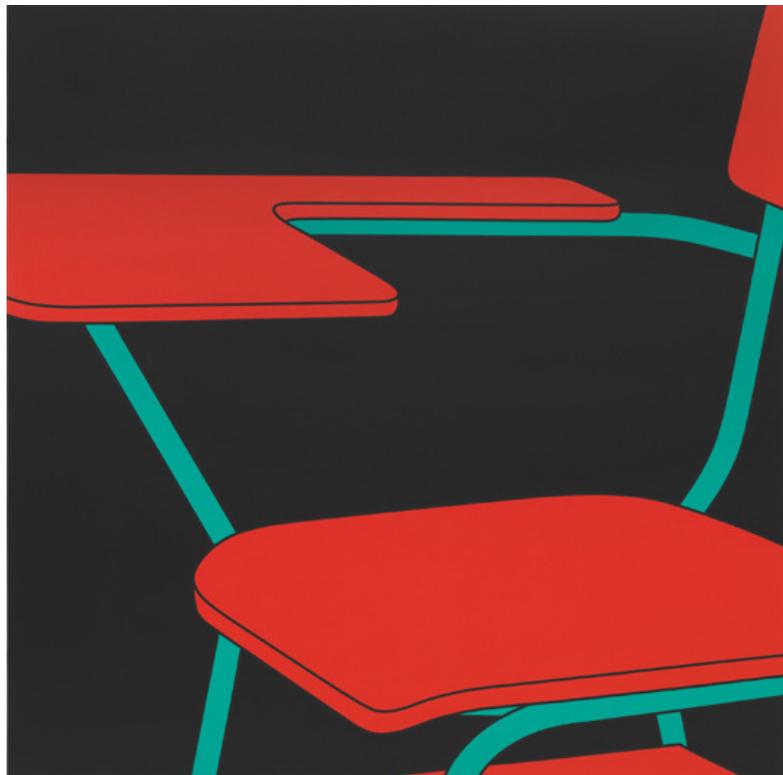


Royal Academy Summer Exhibition: Middle class? Stuffy? Not us

Mark Hudson is invited to the Summer Exhibition to find out how the Royal Academy is flinging open its doors to a young bohemian generation.



Old and new: from left, 'Desk Chair' by Michael Craig-Martin Photo: Royal Academy

By [Mark Hudson](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/journalists/mark-hudson/)

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The room, tucked away in a corner of the Royal Academy little seen by the public, is extremely grand: the ceiling a frescoed tumble of cherubs, the blinds lowered to protect the valuable paintings. But what really catches my eye are the large neo-gothic salt cellars on the immaculately laid table. They are, Academician Barbara Rae tells me, part of a large silverware collection added to over the centuries by eminent artists and architects, a tradition that is being revived as this venerable institution's fortunes continue to rise.

We're joined by more of its members: twinkly-eyed portrait painter Humphrey Ocean; Christopher le Brun, its suavely bearded president; and Tess Jaray, co-ordinator of the Summer Exhibition.

When I was told that I was to be one of the first outsiders ever permitted to attend one of the "hanging lunches" of the Academy's Summer Exhibition Committee, I naturally assumed I'd be sitting quietly in a corner taking notes. Instead, as more eminent artists arrive, I'm shown to a position of honour at the centre of the table, and all eyes are upon me.

To be sitting among this elite group of artists, in whom the survival of the 244-year-old Academy and its palatial premises in Piccadilly are invested, feels a great privilege. To be the centre of attention is more than a little unnerving. As their eyes bore into me, I feel as though I'm about to be entrusted with some task. And that task, it transpires, is to tell the world that for the first time in nearly two centuries, the avant garde is banging on the doors of this great bastion of academic tradition.

"We've got very young artists who normally only show at little galleries in the East End very keen to be seen here," says painter Mali Morris.

[Summer Exhibition: the RA sharpens its act](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/art/art-reviews/9297937/Summer-Exhibition-2012-Royal-Academy-of-Arts-review.html)

[Summer Exhibition 2012 \(http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/culturepicturegalleries/9297047/Summer-Exhibition-2012-at-the-Royal-Academy.html\)](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/culturepicturegalleries/9297047/Summer-Exhibition-2012-at-the-Royal-Academy.html)

"It's something we haven't seen since Turner's day," adds le Brun. "In the 19th century there was a rupture between the Salon and the Anti-Salon, the conservative and the progressive wings of art. But now the tribes are coming together again."

And this momentous occurrence has arrived through the most unlikely of agencies: the Summer Exhibition.

The largest open-submission exhibition in the world, where professionals and amateurs can compete on equal terms, the Summer Exhibition was reviled by critics for much of the 20th century as an anachronistic embarrassment. I can still remember my first visit in the Seventies. On the one hand there were the Academicians, those artistic dinosaurs, with their endless, meticulously rendered views of suburban gardens and cluttered studios. And on the other, the borderline-certifiable hobbyist fringe – an image of Arthur and Guinevere in multicoloured biro lingers scarily in the mind. And the whole lot was crammed haphazardly onto the walls with barely an inch of plaster left empty.

Anyone visiting the Summer Exhibition over the past 10 years would hardly recognise it as the same event. The hanging has become more spacious and contemporary, with international modern masters such as Robert Rauschenberg and Anselm Kiefer – the kind of artists who were anathema to the old Academy – hanging beside those younger figures who have dramatically increased Britain's profile on the international art scene, such as Tracey Emin, Marc Quinn and Sam Taylor-Wood.

"By the late Nineties, attendance figures had fallen to an alarming extent," says le Brun. "And it was clear something had to be done."

Yet it still felt very much the establishment's show. The fact that YBAs such as Emin and Michael Landy were now RAs seemed indicative of how quickly yesterday's Young Turks can become today's comfy mainstream. Walking through the RA's gilded halls you'd hardly have been aware that London, by then probably the most dynamic art city on earth, supported whole underground art scenes, fostered by networks of tiny galleries in south and, particularly, east London.

Now, however, it is the denizens of this new bohemia – the sort of young artists you would assume would laugh at the idea of the Summer Exhibition – who are most keen to be involved in it, or so the Academicians would have us believe.

William Stein, who graduated from the Slade School three years ago, whose work investigates the boundaries between narrative and abstraction, is exactly the kind of articulate, ambitious young artist the Academy is delighted to see in the Summer Exhibition. "The world of contemporary art galleries in east and south London doesn't relate much to other parts of society, it's visited by like-minded people who are used to seeing a certain kind of art," he says. "So to see how my work stands up in the Academy alongside landscapes and paintings of dogs is potentially very interesting."

"The Academy is always changing with the people that join it," says Alice Browne, another young up-and-coming artist whose work will feature this year, "so in that sense it is contemporary."

As I talk to the Academicians it's clear that this happy rapprochement between generations has been not quite engineered, but certainly encouraged by the Academy. A number of more established artists have been invited to show in the Summer Exhibition – such as the American abstractionist Thomas Nozkowski and the 45-year-old British painter Phil Allen – precisely because they have strong followings among young artists.

"I thought carefully before agreeing to take part," says Allen. "The Academy has always been seen as an establishment gallery. But the boundary between what's establishment and non-establishment is much more flexible than it was. If you look at the crowds going into Tate Modern on a Sunday afternoon, you'll see that looking at difficult art is just what people do now. So to show in an underground gallery one week and the Royal Academy the next doesn't feel that odd."

If the strong showing of painting among the contributions of the younger artists this year suggests something of a resurgence in this rather neglected area, what this renaissance of the Summer Exhibition really demonstrates is the fact there is no longer any clearly defined avant garde. There is instead, as Academician Tess Jaray puts it, "a great sense of stylistic openness. There is no dominant figure or idea, no line to toe. Young artists are just getting on with what they want to do."

Yet as many of the more traditionally orientated RAs gradually die off, you can almost find yourself regretting the passing of a certain quirkily British, if rather stolid spirit. If the Summer Exhibition becomes dominated by young artists it could end up being barely distinguishable from the many other showcases for contemporary art, such as the British Art Show and the Liverpool Biennial.

"The Summer Exhibition cuts across tendencies," says Morris. "There's nowhere else you get such variousness under one roof. And it's run by artists, not by businessmen or dealers, critics or curators. That's what makes it unique."

The Summer Exhibition is at the Royal Academy, London W1 (0844 209 0051) from June 4–August 12