

# Nushin Elahi's LONDON LETTER

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**The Royal Academy's Summer Exhibition** (until 18 August) is always greeted with delight by the public, perhaps because it is a jumbled mix of the highbrow and the unknown, placed side by side, leaving the art to make an impact. This year clever hanging has changed the often rather claustrophobic feel of the crammed galleries to a light and airy spaciousness. There are long vistas across the beautiful rooms, to allow large-scale works to connect with each other. It comes as something of a surprise to learn that the numbers have remained constant.

As ever, there are works that appeal, and others that make you wonder how they reached the ten percent of submissions that get past the panel. A group of artists over 80 years of age offers a bright and joyous take on life, but there is a general sense of optimism that permeates the show, despite all the economic gloom. Sculpture and architecture are skilfully interwoven throughout, from the African drapery outside the building to Zaha Hadid's elegant chrome seating in the shape of a flower.

The show ends on a shocking note with Grayson Perry's room of tapestries *The Vanity of Small Differences*. Forming a grim modern take on Hogarth's *Rake's Progress*, another edition of these will be touring the north of England, where they are set.

**The BP Portrait Award at the National Portrait Gallery** (until 15 Sept) is another popular open submission show. It is an international affair, with nearly 2000 entries from 77 countries and this year South Africa features prominently. The winning piece is a simple but powerful portrait of her son by artist Suzanne du Toit, and hanging nearby is a huge canvas by Pretoria-trained artist Lionel Smit of a waitress in a township café, entitled *Kholiswa*. It is a close-up of her face, using bold colour to make an impact.

There is nothing shocking or cutting edge about the paintings on this show. They are all fairly, almost boringly, traditional portraits of loved ones, family and friends roped into sitting for their picture. Many are head and shoulder portraits, probing what the face reveals. They are quite simply ordinary people caught in their daily lives. There is some photo-realism, and the occasional celebrity, but it is largely a snapshot of European faces of today. Many artists use their children, and even more do self-portraits. One of the few African faces

there made his picture a homage to Frieda Khalo, but there is little symbolism in most works. A gang of bikers hangs next to a musician doing tricks, a trio of office workers discusses a project, and a group of schoolgirls does their baking, but it's mostly individual faces that stare back at you in this refreshingly unshowy presentation.

The travel award is one exception to the rule. Last year's winner Carl Randall has brought back from Japan a fascinating array of Oriental faces, crushed on the railway at rush hour, in paddy fields, in Tokyo's cafes and walking in the Zen calm of a Japanese garden.

Outsider art, it seems, has come inside. Not only is it a main theme of the Venice Biennale this year, or the subject of a show at the quirky Wellcome Collection, but now mainstream gallery space in the heart of London is being dedicated to numerologists, occultists and fetishists. **The Alternative Guide to the Universe at the Hayward Gallery** (until 26 Aug) seeks to "expand the spaces of our own imaginative thinking" and initially there is much to admire. Detailed drawings and whacky models of imaginary buildings, colourful number charts, delicate sculptures made with found objects and a fleet of decorated skateboards certainly take the mind into new realms. One can see how some of these strands could, and perhaps have, given rise to our understanding of art, and a lack of training is no barrier to great art. Taken as a whole, though, there is an eerie element of obsession that makes one wonder just where art is heading.

**David Bowie** is someone who has entertained aliens on earth in his time. He has always defied conventional boundaries in pursuit of his artistic vision. The wildly popular exhibition at the **Victoria and Albert Museum** (until 11 Aug) explores his impact on design in general and fashion in particular, his showmanship and ability to set trends. With a fully integrated soundscape, which has the audience gyrating in front of displays, it forms a blueprint for future exhibitions. **Tate Britain** teams two generations of artists: **Patrick Caulfield** (until 1 Sept) and **Gary Hume**. Both work in bright, flat planes of gloss colour on large canvases, so it would appear that their paintings would enhance one another, but nothing could be further from the truth. A contemporary of David Hockney, Caulfield, who died in 2005, developed a trademark black outline to the objects on his canvas. He reduced spaces to their linear basics, and except for a very early homage to Cubist Juan Gris, he captures urban interiors as objects without revealing a human presence. His work is instantly recognisable and highly decorative. He often plays between the different textures, so he may keep everything in a single basic colour, and then explore the patterning on a curtain, a carpet, or detail the door handles.

Hume is a YBA who studied at Goldsmiths, exhibited with Damien Hirst, was collected by Saatchi and was nominated for the Turner Prize in 1996. A more sterling beginning one couldn't hope for and looking at the slick sheen of his red barn door, which was his calling card until he got bored with churning them out, one can understand that collectors went wild. Despite being called "one of the greatest artists of his generation" by the Tate, his solo show reveals a banality that no amount of gloss paint can disguise. There are weirdly shaped faces, a snowman 'sculpture', a rather beautiful blackbird and a few swirls to imply a flower, but the work shows no progression and even less contemplation. It simply shows up the stature of the older artist.

## Images:

- (Top Left) Album cover shoot for Aladdin Sane, 1973 Photograph by Brian Duffy
- (Top Right) RA Summer show Zaha Hadid's seat in foreground
- (Below) BP Portrait Award installation shot . Lionel Smit's Kholiswa on left
- (Below) RA Summer show Grayson Perry - Vanities 2
- (Below) Rammellzee:Letter Racer Set and White Letter Racer Set
- (Bottom) Alfred Jensen: Twelve Events in a Dual Universe

