

BP Portrait Award

National Portrait Gallery Museums

Since the BP Portrait Award is in its twenty-second year yet the standard of entries remains abysmal, it must be time to admit that the competition has failed in its bid to encourage good painting and to call it a day. This year, several entries test the limits of portraiture to a degree that makes the category meaningless. David Diprè gives 'AD' a triangle in place of a head, and Gideon Rubin's 'Royal Guard' is a featureless marionette, more like a skittle than a person. In 'Windows of the Soul', Brian Love mocks the concept of the title by attaching glass eyes to a blank face.

Catherine Goodman's portrait of Antony may be dull, but at least it confers dignity and presence on the sitter – qualities so rare in this paltry gathering that they won her first prize. I'd have given the prize to Jackie Anderson (her monochrome portrait of 'Andy' has enormous tenderness) and second prize to Jennifer Anderson for 'Reflection', an oval face isolated in a sea of darkness that is as impressive for its design as its subtle powers of observation. Matthew Batt's 'The Birdkeeper's Daughter' is a disarmingly odd little daub; more a mask of colour than a likeness, it has a

'The Birdkeeper's Daughter' by Matthew Batt



haunting charm that may even be recognisable. For 'Life Is a Bitch', Vasiliki Gkotsi has squared up a photograph of a face covered with wounds. The model could be one of the homeless photographed by Boris Mikhailov and, although the painting is powerful, the original photograph is probably more so. Which raises the question of what painting can do that photography can't. By way of an answer we are offered hyper-realism, surrealism, various attempts at quirkiness and downright silliness. I'd heap most of them in a pile, set light to it and call the purge 'Bonfire of the Vanities'. *Sarah Kent*