

Triptych of Portraits wins The John Byrne Award



This has been a busy week for Edinburgh based artist, John Byrne. On Tuesday he was a nominee at the Glenfiddich Spirit of Scotland Awards, this morning he officiated at the opening of The Scottish National Portrait Gallery, and last night he was handing out the prizes at the Ingleby Gallery in the competition bearing his name. We imagine he may be off for a wee sleep now!


Last night a team of sixth year pupils from St. Thomas of Aquin's High School won the John Byrne Award 2011 for their triptych of portraits inspired by triptychs from early Renaissance painters. The artist, playwright and writer, John Byrne, presented the winning team with a £7,000 cheque, £5,000 of which will be donated to one or more social projects chosen by the winners. The remaining £2,000 will be spent on personal development for the team.

✘ Alex Wallace, former head teacher at James Gillespie's High School and chair of the John Byrne Award judging panel, said:- "The overriding theme of The John Byrne Award is 'Inspiring Values for Today'. It was set up to encourage sixth year [17/18] students attending school in Edinburgh, to consider values in the context of the world that they know and live in and to examine and challenge them using any media of their choosing.

‘The nature of this challenge is tremendously important at this time, particularly to these young people, and there was a phenomenal depth and breadth of skill demonstrated in all of the presentations we saw. There was also a diverse array of media used, from art work to original music and film, moving away from the over dominance in writing in schools today.’

Eleven teams, including two solo entrants, from eight schools from across Edinburgh took part. They were asked to respond to a piece of text related to the values theme, ‘The Stimulus’. This year, in celebration of the 400th anniversary of The King James Bible, the stimulus was an extract from the King James version – The Sermon on the Plain, from The Gospel According to Luke, Chapter 6, vs 17-49.

Alex Wallace added:- “It was not an easy job picking the winner, and it wasn’t a unanimous decision because of the high level of excellent entries. However, overall, we felt that the triptych from St. Thomas of Aquin’s High School was remarkable in terms of its collaborative output. The team understood the brief, fulfilled the criteria and gave a remarkably polished presentation to back up their work.”

The paintings from St. Thomas of Aquin’s were a  collaborative effort with four team members involved in painting each portrait. The first is of an old man representing the failure of society towards old people. The second is a young person wearing expensive headphones representing materialism, and the third portrait is of flowers in the hair of a young girl, representing naturalism and the way forward for communities.

Three teams were Highly Commended for their presentations and won runners-up awards:

- Boroughmuir High School, for their collage of painting and mixed media inspired by issues of corruption and greed, together with a film charting the creation of the artwork
- Currie High School, who composed a song, using text from the bible, and produced a music video looking at God's creation of nature and the need to look at oneself to make a difference
- James Gillespie's High School, for their 15 minute musical composition and supporting artwork with a team of Christians and atheists stimulating debate on the passage from The Sermon on the Plain.

Each team received prizes of £1,000. A brief synopsis of all eleven entries can be seen in the Notes to Editors below.

John Byrne was joined on this year's judging panel by writer and broadcaster, Richard Holloway, political journalist and theatre critic Joyce McMillan, former head teacher at James Gillespie's High School, Alex Wallace, Scotland international rugby player Ruaridh Jackson and snowsports instructor Neil Paterson.

Through discussion and consensus they were looking for an independent response to 'The Stimulus' that reflected competitors' thoughts, their study and the conclusions they have drawn, with reason, clarity and imagination. The judges also wanted to be clear about the values that teams and individuals had chosen, and to be persuaded that they would stand up to the choices that they had made. However students were not judged on the values that they had chosen.

The John Byrne Award is privately funded. The sponsor wishes to acknowledge the support and advice provided by the Children

and Families Department of the City of Edinburgh Council and, in particular, Councillor Marilynne MacLaren.

City Education Leader, Councillor Marilynne MacLaren, said:-
'The John Byrne Award is going from strength to strength, and I was delighted to see so many fantastic entries from our pupils. There's a huge pool of talent out there, and I know the judges had a tough time picking a winner, but the St Thomas of Aquin's project was stunning. It explored the subject exceptionally well and the team are deserving winners.'

For further information on the 2011 John Byrne Award and to find out how last year's winners used their prize money, you can [have a look at the website.](#)

Photos Rob McDougall