



Face of things to come

Nick Miller was a predictable winner of the Hennessy Portrait Prize, but the future belongs to one of the runners-up, says **Cristin Leach Hughes**

Everything is a contest nowadays, even better if it's a public one: audition before a buying crowd, bake a cake under studio lights, paint a portrait live in four hours on TV. Modern audiences like their competition cruel and statistic. If at all possible, it should involve open spectacle and expose failure alongside success, each rejection a form of entertainment. In light of all this, there is something delightfully civilized about the National Gallery of Ireland's inaugural Hennessy Portrait Prize, for which I was a judge.

There was nothing of the Roman coliseum about the behind-the-scenes deliberations

that resulted in the selection of 12 finalists, whose work is now on show at the NGI. The winner was chosen in private, too. It's painter Nick Miller, for his intimate portrait of the late Irish artist Barrie Cooke.

A press release has described the judging as an "arduous elimination process". The first round, at least, was not. Of the 47 submissions, considered anonymously and in digital form, about 350 were easily dismissed. The judges — painter Donald Teskey, National College of Art and Design (NCAD) lecturer Declan Long, NGI curator Janet McLean, and I — shortlisted 10 works independently and met with our first surprise when the amalgamated longlist contained 31 images. No one entry had been selected by all four judges, just one had been picked by three of us — it did not win. At

this early stage, there was no frontrunner and no consensus.

From the 31, we chose our 12, and this was a more difficult task. There are portraits in the final show that were not on my original shortlist, and the same is true for the other judges. The exhibition — of two videos, three photographs and seven paintings — is not a show any one of us would have put together alone, but this is the joy and the value of group selection. It's an oddly democratic, enlightening and worthwhile process, particularly when it forces reconsideration of works previously rejected.

A surprising number of entrants ignored the rules. There was depiction in icing of the late poet Seamus Heaney — not a sin in itself as all mediums were permitted, but possibly in violation of the requirement that

entrants secure the permission of their sifter. George Clooney, Nelson Mandela and Martin Scorsese (nose in fondant form) may not have been complex in their portrayals either. There was no worthwhile sculpture.

Each piece was selected on its own merit, without considering how it might fit with the others. Thus the shortlist offers a range of styles, mediums and techniques. Several unforeseen themes emerged, including two works featuring baths at a time when anti-water-charge protests are a hot topic, and three female painters submitting portraits of their children.

Video does not have a habitual home at the NGI. Yet John Beattie's ponderous, technically outstanding video portrait of the artist Thomas Ryan and Saoirse Wall's unforgettable self-portrait, *Gesture 2*, succinctly bookend

the selection. The provocative, confident stare of Wall's bathbub girl issues an intense challenge to the weighty, filmic posturing of Beattie's portrayal of a senior, academic, traditional painter.

The show includes self-taught artist Gavan McCullough's blocky head, Una Sealy's endearingly gangly portrait of her son, Helen O'Sullivan-Tyrell's fear-laden portrait of her sick child and Cian McLoughlin's experimental yellow *Donk*.

The most abstract work on the shortlist, Tronie hangs next to realist painter Conaghall Casey's slightly recent-looking self portrait, epitomising the range of styles a competition like this should embrace. Tronie is not typical of McLoughlin's usual style, but his attempt at trying something new plays well against Casey's safe skill.

The photographs are unadorned



Comings and goings Nick Miller's *Last Sitting: Portrait of Barrie Cooke*, far left, *Gesture 2* by Saoirse Wall

only by medium. Erin Quinn's slick Adam is from a series in which subjects were photographed at the moment when they surfaced from under water to take a breath. Mandy O'Neill's red-haired Cait shares something of Wall's arresting stare. Hugh O'Connor's photograph of Beckah at Dublin Airport is one of the most strikingly beautiful images in the exhibition.

The choice of winner was a close call, but the decision was ultimately unanimous. Miller's portraits tend to be hit and miss, and he is a more consistently successful landscape painter, but his entry represents a particularly well-played card. Miller has painted Cooke before. This is a final image, the artist's "last sitting" before his death in March 2014. Even without this knowledge, the portrait carries a weight of pathos. It's a portrait of

an old man, wrapped in a blanket-like coat.

Miller is a messy painter. The painting's dark colours and small scale (61cm x 56cm) do not demand viewer attention, but it is a passionate portrait that keeps giving the longer you look.

There's a story told in art circles about Cooke's funeral that his eco-friendly, cardboard coffin was painted by friends at the wake. Miller renders his subject as a man with a face literally made out of paint. There's no attempt at smooth realism. Cooke's spikish features emerge from the scumble of yellow, white and black that form his beard and moustache. His hand is a flash of paint, a messy splodge, and there is a vulnerability to it all as he sits, his eyes like piercing holes behind big, round lenses.

Apparently, Cooke made a

small charge to the background of the painting before he departed — one final gesture. *Last Sitting: Portrait of Barrie Cooke* is a worthy, and some may argue predictable, winner, but this is a contest and Miller chose well when he decided to submit this particular work.

The winner receives a €25,000 prize and a commission of €5,000 to produce a portrait for the NGI collection. Miller's portraits are wilfully awkward, driven by a risky spontaneity that does not always produce a pleasing result. Commissions are unpredictable at the best of times, as evidenced by Louis le Brocquy's overweight 2003 portrait of Bono, already in the national portrait collection. The subject of Miller's Portrait Prize commission is to be agreed between artist and gallery.

Another strong contender for

the prize was Gemkine O'Neill's multilayered, art-historical portrait of her daughter. At two metres tall, it's the largest work in the show and best viewed from afar. Up close it starts to come undone. If Miller's portrait gives more the closer you get to the paint, O'Neill's jumble of images threatens to unravel as you approach. However, comparing the two is a thankless task: O'Neill's composition is a striking achievement in an entirely different vein.

The youngest artist to make it to the final is Wall, born in 1992 and a graduate from NCAD this year. *Gesture 2* was part of her degree show. Contenders and favourites aside, it's likely that Wall's accusatory stare is the image that will remain in your head.

Her self portrait-cum-sustained filmed performance is a product of the same forces that brought us Lena Dunham's TV show *Girls*. It sits in the context of the unending avalanche of young female selfies (produced by and predominantly for women), and is feminism 3.0's answer to the male gaze. This is an artwork of the moment; it belongs in the here and now, bears repeat viewing and is full of integrity, technical skill and brazen confidence. It's the most exciting piece in the show.

And if reality TV has taught us anything, it's that sometimes the runners-up do better than the winner. Being shortlisted is a serious endorsement. You don't always have to win the competition to ultimately win the competition. **E**

The Hennessy Portrait Prize 2014 is at the National Gallery of Ireland, Dublin, until February 8



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