

WHY ART PRIZES ARE SO IMPORTANT

Nina Murdoch, 2008 Threadneedle Prize winner and 2009 selector, talks about winning and selecting... and why she didn't sleep for four nights afterwards.

Getting your work out there Winning the Threadneedle Prize last year was amazing. It felt like I'd been picked up in a whirlwind and dumped in a parallel life. I'm naturally very shy and I've never been so much in the limelight, so even though it was good for me, I also found it terrifying and quite traumatic. As an artist, you don't often get that much feedback, working away in your studio, putting on a show once every two years or so. So to hear people debating your work is extraordinary. It didn't feel like me at all and a year later I'm still digesting it.

Last year I was really trying to push what I was doing. And for me, I took quite a big risk painting something which was so paired down. Just to take a bit of wall and paving... I'd never done that before. But to get such a response to it – both positive and negative – was amazing. It made me think, 'Hang on. I can do this'. On the other hand, I did feel suddenly I had to be a good painter, so I got painter's block for a while. Stage fright! But I think that's natural.

Now people are far more interested in my work because I've won the Prize. I've had some really good reviews in art magazines - things that just wouldn't have happened if I hadn't won. So that's fantastic. It puts you on the map and everyone starts to know you. I think one of the key things for a lot of artists, and I know for me, is to get your work seen... to get it out there. It helps your career enormously.

Selecting on merit Selecting was much harder than I expected. Like other artists, I just had no idea what goes into the selection process or how much work is involved. I went there thinking I want to look chiefly for someone who painted incredibly well, someone really pushing things or doing something slightly different. But I found that you couldn't necessarily pick the things you liked: it came down to individual works and their merit. Two days is such a limited time to see each piece and there were so many pieces of work to see. It was such a responsibility to make sure everyone had a look in, especially as all the artists had gone to so much trouble. But I was really pleased how everyone took it terribly seriously. Even though the judges all had very strong opinions and different ideas about what they wanted, there was no arguing. Everyone got on and managed to come to some sort of agreement. I was quite surprised at the number of works that the judges did agree on.

Making hard decisions I didn't want the first day to end. I was really enjoying it because you could see instantly what was good and what was bad. It was fun getting your eye in. I didn't sleep at all that first night, or the four nights afterwards. I just kept seeing pictures pass in front of me... I think I was selecting all night. But the second day was much, much harder. I didn't enjoy it much because trying to get it down to the final 80 from 140 was really tough. There was a lot of good work in that last bit. By the end of the second day my brain had just gone totally into

overload. I ended up with complete art pollution. I wish I'd had more time to make the final decisions. I'm used to working quite slowly, so I found having to give every work a lot of attention in such a short space of time incredibly hard. It kind of traumatised me a bit, but I'm sure if I did it again I'd be more prepared.

I also learnt a lot just through working with other people with different ideas. I think it's a really brave show because the selectors were looking out for interesting work and were prepared to go out on a limb on stuff. Even though we didn't have a chance to think of it as a whole show, we've ended up with a real consistency, and I think some really interesting work. If I'd picked the show myself it would look very different to this show. But it's got a bit of everyone in it, which makes it interesting.

Having to make decisions so quickly about what works and what's interesting in a painting has definitely had an impact on me. It makes you look at your own work very differently and I think I may now be a lot more critical of my own work. After a while, I went back into the studio to look at my own work. I felt quite positive about it and quite excited about what I'm going to do next, just by seeing so much other stuff. Seeing that what I do is so different from other people's work gave me a bit of a boost. There's very little in the show that I'd say was similar to my work, except perhaps Melanie Miller's *Green hydrangea*. It's very subtle.

Personal opinions I think it was a good idea to have more artists on this year's panel, because artists have got a good eye. They do it all the time. They can spot the rubbish and can see good work instantly. But in the end it's still down to personal opinion. There isn't such a thing as an artist – we're the most disparate bunch and we all like terribly different things, which all tend to relate to our practice. Whether your work is selected or not depends on which artist is on the panel, how knowledgeable they are or what they're like as people. You needed four out of six votes to be selected, so a lot of good work didn't get in which may have got in with just one different selector. It's the combination of people liking your work that matters. I don't think I'd have got through this year, but I did last year. It was just luck because that particular group of people got me through.

Try every year So I think it's really important that artists keep entering their work to these prizes. I was rejected from an awful lot of shows. I never seemed to get through selection and arrived at a point where I almost gave up entering - because there seemed no point. But having done this judging I think, more than ever, I'll be entering more exhibitions again, exhibitions I'd given up on. If you don't get in one year, try the next year. It's not personal; it's just down to the selectors' point of view and what those particular people like. It doesn't mean your work's bad. There were a lot of really good artists who didn't get in. It's down to the right combination of four judges that like your piece. Whoever got in did really, really well.