

# This annual embarrassment should be put out of its misery

## Exhibition

### Royal Academy Summer Exhibition 2020

London W1



By Cal Revely-Calder

This has to stop. The Royal Academy has held 251 Summer Exhibitions, every year since 1769. I had high hopes for Covid-19, which threatened to do what Napoleon and Hitler could not, but no – here we are with the 252nd edition, opening four months late. Dependably, it is nonsense: absurdly disorganised, and full of art that shouldn't be on display.

This year, the “coordinators” are Jane and Louise Wilson, the only Academicians who come as a pair. (There was also Gilbert & George, but they resigned from the Academy earlier this year, which spares us their presence here.) The Wilsons' task: to oversee the winnowing of 18,000 submissions down to “around 1,000”. In the event, there are 1,172 works on show, because the duo have been generous, especially to themselves: six of their pieces are featured, and no artist has more than that.

You go looking for the big names, and you find them on tepid form. In the Central Hall, the Wilsons have installed their LED net, *I'd Walk With You But Not With Her*; it's colourful, but inert. Tracey Emin has a painting, *The Ship*, and a bronze, *Take Me Home*, but none of her glorious neon works, and there are four vases by Ai Weiwei, addressing war and refugees with porcelain politesse. Elsewhere, matters are grim. Bob and Roberta Smith keeps sloganeering – “There is



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Potpourri: Grayson Perry's *The American Dream* and some of the other 1,172 works on show

still art/ There is still hope” – and the appalling Michael Craig-Martin keeps painting bits and bobs.

Frustratingly, the hot young non-Academicians are also out of sorts. Take Lawrence Lek: his video pieces, drifting through fantasy worlds, can be enthralling, but this one – *Unreal Estate (The Royal Academy is Yours)* – is dull. It's a mock-prospectus for a Chinese billionaire who has bought the Academy; during the languid tour, a voice-over offers tips on firing the staff. A dreamy soundtrack, paired with cold-hearted words: gosh, it's irony!

Not all is lost. *Manifestation*, by Oscar Murillo, reminds you that paint can live, as sensuous oil-stick marks expand across the frame. Rebecca Horn's *Oracle* is wonderful, too: her acrylic spatters are smart. And the first two rooms are dominated by the work of black artists, in tribute to the late curator Okwui Enwezor; they form an initial flurry of resilience and energy.

But the majority of works are, as usual, by the public, which demonstrates, as usual, why the Summer Exhibition is a hopeless case.

The open-submission policy is “inclusive and democratic”, a terrible idea. It would be unfair to single out names, because many aren't professionals with institutional support, but that fact also explains the quality. I lost hope when I reached a painting of the Prime Minister with his head in an EU-made washing machine. It's one of dozens of works that are unacceptably bad – works that should not be shown.

Such embarrassments are now a tradition. So are the format and scale, which make the hang a catastrophe. (People mock the “white cubes” of contemporary galleries, but they clear space around each work, and that is a form of respect.) Worse, there's usually a decent sculpture in the Annenberg Courtyard, and in the Covid Year, there's none. Regardless, age does not confer immunity; it's time to face facts. The exhibition is not a serious show. Sooner rather than later, it should end.

From October 6 to January 3 2021.  
Details: [royalacademy.org.uk](http://royalacademy.org.uk)