

Exhibition of the week **Royal Academy Summer Exhibition 2023**

Royal Academy, London W1 (020-7300 8090, royalacademy.org.uk). Until 20 August

Every year since 1769, the Royal Academy has hosted a Summer Exhibition, a “cave-of-wonders-cum-candy-shop-cum-car-boot-sale of works by known academicians and keen members of the public”, said Laura Freeman in *The Times*. And, as the saying goes, “it is what it is”. This latest iteration, stewarded by watercolourist David Remfry, features some 1,600 works spread over 13 rooms under the “happily vague” theme “Only Connect”. As ever, submissions are open to anyone, everything is for sale, and its scope takes in almost every conceivable artistic medium. While it doesn’t represent much of a departure from the standard format, it is markedly “less manic than usual”, and aside from “the odd nod to climate change or BLM”, it is significantly lighter on politics than recent outings. There is so much to see here: one moment you’re looking at an “inflated sculptural beetle”, the next, a piece juxtaposing floor plans for Notre-Dame cathedral and a Second World War German battleship – laid flat, they “look much the same”. Or you can admire a “balloon dog” wrapped in Tunnock’s Teacake foil. The tone is largely upbeat: this is a show with “all the fun of the fair”.

“In a show of 1,613 works, there’s always going to be plenty to admire,” said En Liang Khong in *The Daily Telegraph*. A case in point is a painting by Frank Bowling, a veteran Royal Academician: up close, it is “a cauldron of gluey detritus and



A “random jumble sale”, with moments of genius

anyone telling you why it’s Both Important And Urgent”. Even the silly works are often fun and, every so often, “something grabs you”. Comedian Joe Lycett’s Hockney-ish painting *I Drink a Crisp, Cold Beer in a Pool in Los Angeles While Gary Lineker Looks on in Disgust*, for instance, is both amusing and “accomplished”. Better still is *Oratorio*, an extraordinary work by Paula Rego: “a heavy old wooden cabinet opened up to reveal violent, sexually charged, unresolved scenes painted on its interior and doors, while a gang of grotesque dolls within stare you down”. It is that rarest of things: a genuine “modern masterpiece”. “Mediocre” as most of this exhibition is, there is more than enough to celebrate here.

bubbling Day-Glo pigments”; from a distance, however, it becomes a “sublime” vision of sunshine in a woodland glade. Elsewhere, there’s Kara Walker’s “satisfyingly spooky” ink drawing *The Omicron Variation*, in which a moonlit figure in a ruff “raises her hands over the still outlines of a kneeling child”. For the most part, however, the content here is either trite – witness a “huge fibreglass model of Donald Trump’s flattened head” – or simply “bloodless”. Much of it, I’m sorry to say, is “art on autopilot”.

True, it’s “a random jumble sale of mostly anodyne art”, said Jonathan Jones in *The Guardian*. To its credit, however, it isn’t pretending to be anything else: “you can look at a work, for once, without

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A Celebration of Portraiture

at Piano Nobile

In recent years, the Piano Nobile gallery in Notting Hill has mounted a number of museum-standard shows devoted to the likes of Leon Kossoff, Walter Sickert and Frank Auerbach. This exhibition continues the trend, focusing on British portraiture in the 20th century, featuring works by all three of the aforementioned artists plus a host of others, represented in many cases by first-rate pieces: R.B. Kitaj, Euan Uglow, Celia Paul, David Bomberg and Lucian Freud are all present and correct, as are a number of comparatively obscure figures, such as the excellent surrealist Ithell Colquhoun and the marvellously self-effacing Jean Cooke.

The last artist’s contribution, entitled *The Sun Hat* (c.1960), is a particular



The Sun Hat (c.1960), 121.9cm x 91.4cm

highlight, as is *Portrait of Anthony* (1991), a rare-as-hens’-teeth work by the superlative Michael Andrews, a stalwart of the Colony Room. The latter is a masterclass of economy – indeed, most of the canvas is left entirely blank. It’s one highlight among many in this show. Prices start at £12,000.

96 & 129 Portland Road, London W11 (020-7229 1099). Until 31 July

A giant woodland gateau

“Kitsch and beautiful, absurd and captivating”, Joana Vasconcelos’s giant wedding cake “may be the first wholeheartedly joyful artistic masterpiece of the 21st century”, says *The Guardian*.



The installation, which opened to the public at Waddesdon Manor, the Rothschild family’s stately home in Buckinghamshire, last week, is a garden folly in the British tradition of random “pleasure-buildings”, set in landscaped gardens. The Portuguese sculptor has commissioned thousands of gleaming, icing-like ceramic tiles to decorate it. “You can go inside, passing between the electric candles and ceramic mermaids”, into a domed circular wedding chapel. You can climb the stairs to the higher tiers of the cake, which rises up 12 metres, “and find yourself suddenly above the trees in an impossibly light and heady place”. Tours run from 18 June – 26 October.