

RA

Summer Exhibition 2024

Varnishing Day at the RA

Here are some numbers:-

16,500, 4,000, 1,710

I recently had an artwork accepted for the Royal Academy of Arts Summer Exhibition in London. It was the first time I'd entered. There were 16,500 entries by photograph, from which 4,000 were shortlisted and then 1,710 works were selected for the show. When you're selected, you're invited to Varnishing Day, a venerable tradition consisting of a Reception and Preview solely arranged for the chosen ones.

Sitting in the window of Pret on Piccadilly, opposite St. James's church, artist-



spotting. With a broad grin I'm sipping my coffee and watching people cross the road towards me and the Royal Academy. She's an artist, he's an artist, *he's definitely one*. It's easy to spot them because they're all *dressed up* in their gaudiest finery, or alternatively not caring at all, they're *dressed down* in their scruffiest trampery. Somewhere in-between in a smart casual ('*smasual*') kind of way, I'm wearing a big hat. (*Have you heard the phrase:- "If you can't fight, wear a big hat." My Mum used to say that. No idea where it came from, but it floated back in memory the other day!*)



Anyway, you'll be glad to know I'm not just wearing a hat, I also have on an arty t-shirt, smart jacket, jeans and a cross-over bag. So possibly, I do look the prat ~ err, *the part* of an artist of some sort.



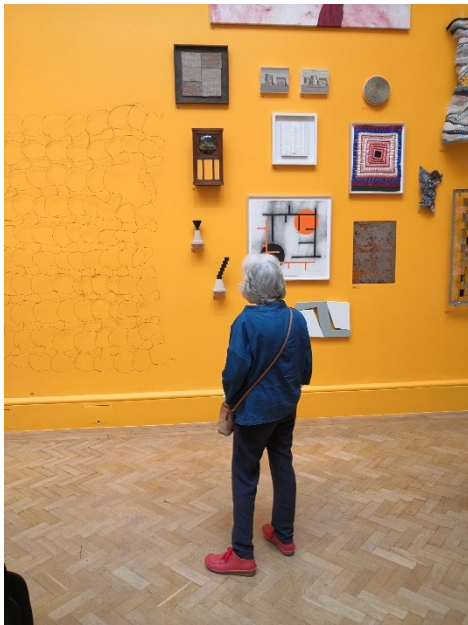
Making my way into the echoing Courtyard of Burlington House with the towering edifice of the RA looming over us, nothing could prepare me for the next steps....What do you call a bunch of creatives? A *collection maybe*? Well, this is the biggest collection of creatives I've ever seen ~ there are masses of them here.

We're falling over each other and jostling for position, as the expectant hubub swells to a shout and we crane to recognise anyone we might know, or someone who could *possibly* be famous. *Anyone? Anyone?* Oh, look! There's Jim Moir aka Vic Reeves of Vic and Bob off the Telly. Not exactly Tracy, Grayson or Damien but anyway, does he count? I suppose so. *We all count. Oops! Scuse me.* Pretty sure I'm crashing into a famous artist right now ~ *how would I know?* Maybe they think *I'm* famous too! Here's my friend ~ *well met* ~ we hang exhibitions together every so often and her work was chosen too ~ *good to see a friendly face I know.* Apart from the selfies, no doubt we'll take pictures of each other pointing artfully at our own entries.

Then a steel band strikes up ~ *did I mention the steel band?* And now ~ *Wow!* hundreds of us are piling into the street, stopping all traffic and processing back to the church for a Service of Thanksgiving for Artists. Rowdy but respectful, we're swept along with the excitement ~ it's quite an out-of-body experience. Inside the church, packed to the gods, I've no idea what the vicar is saying except that when she asks, "Anyone here accepted by the RA for the first time?" A deafening cheer goes up and it feels like we're at a football match! Eventually, after hymns and prayers, it's a slightly subdued soft-shoe-shuffle back to the galleries where we queue with our special red cards to get in ~ every one of us wondering inwardly, exactly where and how our work will be shown.



Catalogue clasped in hand ~ *checking, checking* ~ yes there it is, number 1461, located in the eye-popping turmeric coloured Lecture Room ~ *somewhere*. Shouldn't be hard to see, it's 3D, looks like a wall-clock and it's called 'Cutting Room'.



Seen through an archway from another room, my eyes zoom. *Blimey, there it is!* High up there on the wall, it seems so small, but still, there are works above and below me. Curators can never get it right. Everyone wants their work to be shown in the best possible light and there are always complaints.... *oh no, not there!* Listen, your piece is next to several incredibly prestigious, super-famous RA's whose work is going for tons. *An absolute privilege.* I know! But what if my work doesn't sell and I don't get red-dotted? Had you thought about that? It doesn't help that I can see already, a flurry of red dots cropping up all over the place, as artists buy each other's work ~ *crazy* ~ and why wouldn't they? *Heck!* What if mine is the only piece in the whole exhibition that doesn't sell? *Hell!*

Anyway, 8 weeks is a very long time to be on show and the fact is, Cutting Room will be seen (*or overlooked*) by hundreds and thousands of people from all over the world. *Amazing!*



And now, surrounded by one thousand seven hundred and ten dizzying artworks on display, together with all these happy, insouciant, delighted, very proud or spaced-out artists, for me ~ *momentarily* ~ the brightly coloured walls recede to a hazy infinity, the drowning noise drops away to nothing and I begin to feel myself falling, falling ~ *vanishing almost ~ varnishing,*

vanishing....

Hey ho, wake up, grab another prosecco and *here we go!* Phone camera cocked and ready.... steady.... with a snap-snap here, snap-snap there, here a snap, there a snap, everywhere a.....

So, Cutting Room is perched high on a wall quietly overseeing it all, with a mobius loop of 16mm film, (*kindly donated to me by the British Film Institute ~ because I asked them*), plus an editing device and mirrors. Yes, I think it's good there, because it can **Notice, Observe and Witness** every single frame of what happens in the event ~ *I'm sure it will.* And also, because I write ~



I have to write ~ there's a hidden verse. I typed it on a small piece of brown paper, signed, rolled and inserted it in a metal tube attached to the back. No one knows it's there.... except you and me.

The words say:-

Cutting Room

Fleeting tangled time is caught here
Edited and changed
Pieces fragments frames
Exposed viewed and thrown away

Seeing each moment as it is
Perfect even when un-retouched
Each film remains intact

So, there it is, Cutting Room ~ *the director's cut*.

I could tell you much more about how it came into being, but for the moment, shall we let it be? *In London at the Royal Academy!*



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