

William Wilkins

The man behind Britain's largest international art prize makes no bones about it. Artes Mundi is not a clone of the Turner. Paid to artists who are setting out on their careers, the biennial award 'focusses on issues not reputations', says William Wilkins. His committee launched Artes Mundi in Cardiff earlier this year, and out of ten finalists chosen by an Irish and a Japanese curator, Xu Bing from China pocketed the winning £40,000. This is twice the annual Turner bag. It all started when the Chairman of the Welsh Tourist Board asked Wilkins to help raise the country's cultural profile. With an enviably mystical Anglo-Welsh family background (his mother is descended from Wales's ancient doctors), forebears who were writers and architects and ten years' experience in the Architectural Department of London's City Council, Wilkins had connections. He knocked on doors, raised money and made Artes Mundi work. He is now Chairman of the prize committee. Given the envy that someone in his position could rouse, it would be easy to think that he had access to unfair political clout. Face to face, it doesn't seem likely. Wilkins is approachable, unassuming, unpretentious, even disarming: 'I care about the welfare and merriment of everyone around me.'

The list of his achievements is impressive, with or without privileges. It includes creating a trust to restore the medieval hall and gardens at Aberglasney with traditional materials and establishing a fund to save a beautiful 17th century Llanelli town house designed by Thomas Stepney. He has also fired up Ceramica Cymru, the annual pottery fair in Llandeilo which takes place this month.

In 1979 the information officer left his desk job to become a painter of spacious pointillist pictures. He does landscapes, interiors, and the human figure, finding a way through this apparently tedious, rigorous and meticulous dot process to create a sense of light, airiness and easy well-being. For fourteen years his paintings made him a living. He had exhibitions in New York when realism had passed its sell-by date. His role model is the gloriously unfashionable Rubens, who was painter and high-flying diplomat. He is undogmatic about the nature of cultural identity: 'It comes from examining what's near to you as well as what's far off.' William Wilkins may not be cool, but he simmers.

(383 words)

Caroline Juler

Droifa, Brynberian, Crymych SA41 3TG