

Royal Academy summer exhibition rolls into town

2012 show includes wave of tiny works from Turner prize winners and amateurs – including some young Afghan artists

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The Royal Academy's summer exhibition is the world's oldest and largest open arts show, and this year there are only a couple of nods to the jubilee and the Olympics. Photograph: Rex Features

The views of a charming Venetian piazza, of the artist's garden, or of boats rocking in a harbour, the nude models, faithful hounds and snoozing cats are all back in the Royal Academy for the 244th year of the world's oldest and largest open art exhibition – it's just that this time they're very, very small.

The artist Tess Jaray, one of its co-ordinators, has transformed the largest of the Burlington House galleries in London, a palatial space which in the past has usually been reserved for a handful of gigantic works strictly by royal academicians.

This year she appealed to the RAs to send small works – they took it in good spirit, she says – and mixed them up with hundreds more chosen from the 12,000 sent in by outsiders.

She then sank "the line", the cherished privilege of hanging paintings just at the viewer's eyeline on the wall, which in centuries past has caused artists to trade insults or even punches, or withdraw their work entirely in a huff.

Instead Jaray has hung all the paintings in a wave-like curl, so a painting of two nice lamb chops hangs beside portraits of two nice dogs, mixing Turner prize winners such as Martin Creed with the work of amateurs like (declaration of interest) a tiny portrait of my son's best friend as a baby by his father Marcus Austin.

She also managed to procure five works by young Afghan artists, including Aman Mojadidi's near lifesize photograph of a bearded man with a gilded pistol hanging from a heavy gold chain around his neck. Titled Dressing For Work, the image is from Mojadidi's series A Day In the Life of A Jihadi Gangster.

"If the artists there are managing to continue to make art in the midst of that war-torn country, we should at least be saying, 'We know you're there, we know you're working,'" she said.

"The logistics were extremely difficult. There would have been more if we could have got them, and it would have been lovely to have had the artists here, but it just wasn't possible."

The traditional trap for unfortunate cleaners or members of the public has been contributed this year by the artist Michael Landy, whose Self portrait as Rubbish Bin appears to be just that, a rubbish bin cast in bronze and painted bright yellow and black.

There are surprisingly few nods to either the jubilee or the Olympics, although Vida Bewley has contributed a manic little ceramic sculpture of the Queen, draped in a tartan sash and sidesaddled on a piebald mule, with a plaintive corgi pleading to join in the fun.

In the architecture gallery, curated by Christopher Wilkinson, whose own huge sculpture fills the front courtyard, a large relief model shows the Olympics site at Stratford in east London in the years 2000, 2012 and 2020 – when Anish Kapoor, the artist who created the Orbit tower, will be relieved to hear his twisting red colossus still dominates the site. It's too small to see whether people are still queueing for tickets at £15 a head, though.

- *The Royal Academy summer exhibition runs from 4 June to 12 August*

- This article was corrected on 31 May 2012. It originally said the summer exhibition was in its 254th year. In fact it is in its 244th year. This has now been corrected.

