

A helping hand

Sotheby's launches a new prize for cutting-edge curators

It is hoped that the annual award of \$250,000 will “encourage museums to break new ground”



Prospero

Sep 28th 2017 | by F.R.

SMALL museums that struggle to find the funding their curators need to research and develop innovative, ideas-based exhibitions are to get a boost from Sotheby's, a commercial auction house, which on September 28th announced the inaugural winners of its \$250,000 annual Sotheby's Prize.

The 2018 Sotheby's Prize will be shared by the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago (MCA) and the Nasher Museum of Art at Duke University, two American institutions that are planning shows of under-represented areas of art history. "Many Tongues: Art, Language and Revolution in the Middle East and South Asia" curated by Omer Kholeif, a Cairo-born scholar who is now at the MCA, will open in October 2019. "Pop América: 1965-1975" will open in October 2018 at the McNay Art Museum in San Antonio, Texas, before moving to the Nasher Museum and then on

to the Block Museum at Northwestern University in Evanston, Illinois almost a year later. Curated by Esther Gabara of the Nasher Museum, who has written extensively about modernist photography in Mexico and Brazil, the show will bring together nearly 100 objects by Latin American Pop artists from Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Cuba, Mexico, Peru, Puerto Rico and the United States, placing particular emphasis on how these artists dealt with the political and social turmoil of the period (see Elena Serrano's "Dia del guerrillero heroico, 8 de octubre" (1968), below).

ADVERTISING



inRead invented by Teads

Latest updates

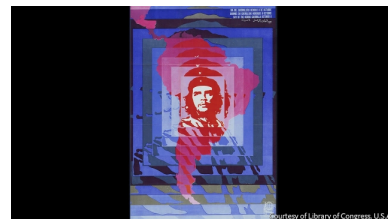
Arte Povera's radical simplicity
PROSPERO

Job listing: Foreign correspondent
CHINA

A strange disease has taken hold of British politics
BAGEHOT'S NOTEBOOK

[See all updates](#)

The winners were chosen from 92



applications submitted by institutions in 15 countries across North and South America,

Europe, Russia, the Middle East, Asia and Africa. The five-person jury was made up of Sir Nicholas Serota, former director of Tate and now chair of Arts Council England; Connie Butler, chief curator at the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles; Okwui Enwezor, director of the Haus der Kunst Museum in Munich and most recently the curator of "PostWar", a ground-breaking show about global modernism; Donna de Salvo, senior curator at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York; and Allan Schwartzman of Sotheby's, a noted expert on Latin America and one of the forces behind the Inhotim sculpture park in southern Brazil.

"This prize comes at a critical moment," says Sir Nicholas. Under mounting pressure to increase visitor numbers, museums are opting more and more for the

popular blockbuster or single-artist monograph show over more complex thematic exhibitions that need extensive new research and development. The most popular exhibition at Tate Britain this year was the David Hockney retrospective, which is now at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA). In 2018 the biggest show at Tate Modern is likely to be about the work that Picasso made in 1932, when in thrall to a new lover, Marie-Thérèse Walter. He painted three of his most famous pictures in the course of just five days.

“We were looking for innovative, experimental, forward-looking curating,” Mr Schwartzman says. “These kinds of exhibitions are more difficult to fund and they are being done less and less.” The judges intentionally left the criteria for applications rather broad, but found themselves particularly drawn to shows that had a political angle and that were trying to offer fresh insights on stories or histories that were already familiar. Thus, the Chicago show about modernism in the Middle East and South Asia will go a long way to countering the long-held notion that modernist art was made only in Paris, London and New York (“Exit” (1970), by Huguette Caland, a Lebanese artist, is pictured below). “Pop América” will do much the same thing, showing how Latin American artists embedded into their artworks political statements that they could not possibly have made in other ways in those countries at that time.

Sotheby’s has come under severe financial pressure in recent years, with activist shareholders insisting on job cuts and managerial changes. Now it is keen to be seen as a cultural innovator as well as a commercial business. “The commercial world, the museum world and the collector world are increasingly integrated,” says Robin Woodhead, chair of Sotheby’s International. “Museums grow their collections, collectors become patrons, so we are looking to the future.” Sotheby’s is keen to see the prize develop globally. It is conscious that, at just two months, the application period was probably too tight for most curators. Almost 45% of the applications this year came from institutions beyond America. Yet both the winning exhibitions (and three others that were highly commended and each awarded \$10,000) were all from American institutions, a sure sign that non-American curators need to improve the quality of their applications. The Sotheby’s Prize has made a good start, but much work remains to be done on all sides.



[Previous](#)

The Killers, after five albums, are more mournful than lethal

[Next](#)

The Salzburg Festival is a boon to the local economy

You've seen the news, now discover the story

Get incisive analysis on the issues that matter. Whether you read each issue cover to cover, listen to the audio edition, or scan the headlines on your phone, time with *The Economist* is always well spent.

Enjoy 12 weeks' access for \$12

