

**Brush To Judgment; The unifying trend among the finalists in this year's RBC Canadian Painting Competition was their trendlessness**

*Leah Sandals*. **National Post**. Don Mills, Ont.: [Oct 28, 2009](#). pg. AL.6

Copyright CanWest Digital Media Oct 28, 2009

Note: Interview with John Kissick.

What do football fans, teacher's pets and art lovers have in common? Fall is their busiest, most competitive -- and often, favourite -- season. So just like midterm exams or CFL playoffs, the \$25,000 RBC Canadian Painting Competition, awarded this month, is an anticipated autumnal rite. Here, artist and award juror John Kissick tells Leah Sandals what made this year's competition great -- as well as a grind.

Q None of the finalists in this year's competition resemble what most people might think of as "a good painting," like a realistically rendered scene. What makes a painting good today?

A Well, we had a jury of nine people, all from different parts of the art world--curators, dealers and artists. And that itself created very eclectic expectations of what a painting is. Still, I would argue that there was a lot of very well-crafted or virtuosic painting on display. In honesty, though, we didn't see that much of what we might call "straight-ahead representational painting" submitted.

Q What made Brenda Draney the winner, then?

A Brenda's work struck everyone as odd in a really wonderful way. In many cases, painters have a sense of opulence, but with her it was all about an economy of means. It's one of those resonating images that tended to grow on people. Of course, there's always the worry with this kind of painting that the person might not be able to paint at all, and just happened to nail one image. But even the title, *Aim is Important*, showed the artist recognized what she was doing. It's not just about a dart player throwing a dart but the placement of paint on canvas.

Q What trends did you see emerging among other finalists?

A In Ontario, we saw a lot of what might be called exploding interiors or imploding exteriors. A relationship to architecture seemed to be quite hot. But really, the overarching trend, as far as I could figure it out, was the trendlessness of it all, which is itself indicative of contemporary art-making today. We had process-driven work, we had very traditional abstraction, we had hybrids between naturalism and surrealism, we had cartoon-like forms. I think 10 years ago you would have been able to track people more; now it appears that anything and everything is fair game.

Q What question were you hoping I wouldn't ask?

A "How a difficult a jury was it?" I've never been in a more difficult group dynamic. Everyone wanted to see certain people win, and on top

of that, this is a huge career launcher for people. Also, when you get nine art people in a room, getting them to agree about anything is pretty difficult!

Q Do you think there could be any downside to awards like this?

A No. What could be the downside of giving a young artist \$25,000? I guess some people might say that the process is so subjective, why not split the pot and give every finalist \$5,000. But \$25,000 gives allows a young artist to travel, have a studio for a year, make a new body of work. Many of the finalists get picked up by significant galleries anyway, and a lot of them can still turn around and apply next year. This is a great competition.

Q Though all the artists in this competition are Canadian, there's little of what we might call "identifiable Canadian content." Why?

A One thing that is pretty clear right now, with technology and art magazines being what they are, is that anything new and interesting in New York City on a Tuesday can be all over Toronto by Wednesday. The older notion of a regional group of painters all doing the same thing doesn't happen significantly anymore. Unless a painter is quoting from a national art history, the arena of discourse is big--it's global now.

Having said that, there are several artists who deal with issues of landscape, a form that is pretty entrenched in the Canadian psyche. Another thing that identifies Canadian artists is a tendency to articulate their practice in a way that doesn't happen as much in other countries. Because the art market is not great in Canada, artists are tied to granting organizations. The need to make an effective artist statement to justify one's practice is a huge issue. It's pretty hard to survive without being able to do that.

Overall, I think our nationality is now reflected in acceptance of a plurality of styles --and I think that is a very Canadian attitude. - To find out more about the competition and its upcoming exhibition in Toronto, visit [rbc.com/paintingcompetition](http://rbc.com/paintingcompetition).

Credit: Leah Sandals; National Post