

# Salon des Refusés

**James O Jenkins** explains why he and **Carole Evans** set up **Portrait Salon**, a necessary alternative to the behemoth of the **Taylor Wessing Photographic Portrait Prize**. He talks to **Oliver Atwell**

For many years during the 18th and 19th centuries, the Paris Salon at the Academy of Fine Arts was a hotbed of emerging talent within the world of academic art. A medal from the Salon carried the power of the Midas touch, and guaranteed a lifetime of success for the lucky artist. But perhaps the most interesting story around this event occurred in 1863, when the Salon refused around two-thirds of the paintings submitted. Upon hearing of the uproar among the artistic community, Emperor Napoleon III declared that the rejected works should be displayed in a separate exhibition. With that, the Salon des Refusés was born.

Today, the photography world has its own versions of the Paris Salon. Check the photographic calendar and you can see a number of high-profile competitions: World Press Photo, the Sony World Photography Awards, Wildlife Photographer of the Year, and so on. Perhaps one of the most contentious of these competitions is the National Portrait Gallery's (NPG) Taylor Wessing Photographic Portrait Prize, a collection of portraits that never fails to raise the heckles of the photographic community and inspire debate about the nature of photographic portraiture. Out of more than 4,000 entries, only 60 are exhibited. It was with that in mind, back in 2011, that a new Salon des Refusés was born, launched by portrait photographers (and Taylor Wessing rejects) James O Jenkins and Carole Evans.

'Portrait Salon started when Carole Evans and I connected on

Twitter after we both received our rejection letters from the Taylor Wessing Prize,' says James. 'We talked about a Salon des Refusés because we thought it would be interesting to see who else was rejected. The National Portrait Gallery only includes around 1% of the images it receives. Carole and I met in person and decided to put a call out for people to send us the digital files of their rejected images.'

That first call out received an overwhelming response, perhaps due largely to the fact that James and Carole printed fliers to hand out to photographers as they picked up their rejected work from the competition. As James points out, Portrait Salon offers photographers a second chance to show their work.

'Carole and I were interested to see the quality of work rejected by the NPG,' says James. 'We believed that with so many images, there must be scope to put on another show and give those rejections a good home. I guess a lot of the time these images just go on a website,

Below:  
Image by  
Sam Wright



collect dust in a cupboard, or just get destroyed when no one picks them up. In the end, we found that the rejected work was of a very high quality.'

### The edge

The submissions to Portrait Salon are indeed of a high quality, with many photographers adopting an experimental edge, such as in Jonathan Knowles' image (top right) or in the moody intimacy of Marcin Józefiak (above). One criticism levelled against previous Taylor Wessing competitions concerns

its selection of images that seem almost too repetitive and conservative (for a deeper analysis of this, read Gemma Padley's article in AP 24 January). However, this year saw the competition take on a more exploratory flair by awarding David Titlow's oddly dreamlike image of a group of adults gathered around a baby. 'There's been a lot of talk about how photographs take on board classical paintings,' says James. 'Titlow's image feels almost like a Caravaggio painting.'

Perhaps one virtue, whether it's intentional or not, that results from

exhibitions like Taylor Wessing and Portrait Salon, is that it forces us to confront just what we mean by the word 'portrait'. What should a good portrait aim to do?

'It's a tricky question to answer,' says James. 'I kind of like the way the NPG have worded it in their rules: "Portrait may be interpreted in its widest sense, of photography concerned with portraying people with an emphasis on their identity as individuals." That to me is fine. Pictures of people are open to lots of interpretations, but I think for me, one of the main rules is that there's

Image by  
Marcin T. Jozefiak  
(James Blite)



Image by Jonathan Knowles

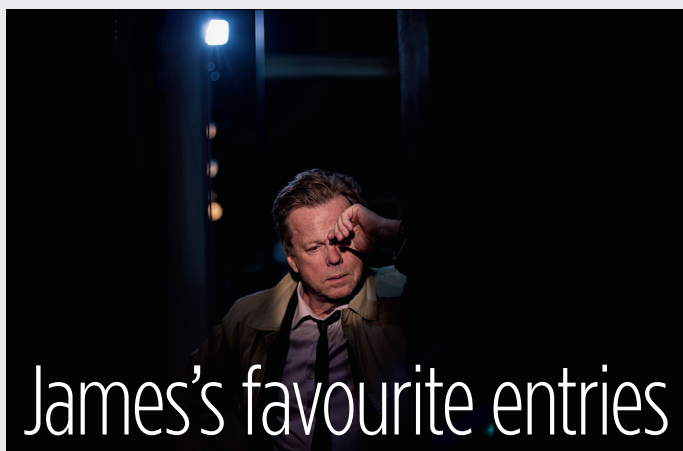
### 'What they want are striking, standout and standalone portraits'

an engagement between the photographer and sitter. It's a two-way process. It's when someone knows they're having their portrait taken. I dislike non-engagement in portraits. But then you could argue that's debatable as well.'

James and Carole are not part of the process that goes into the final selection of the Portrait Salon competition. That task goes to three judges (this year including *Photomonitor's* Christiane Monarchi). 'Everyone submits their images digitally to the website,' says James. 'They go through them and cast their yes votes. That's all collated and printed out, and one evening the judges sit down together and sift through the final selection. I'm not sure if there are any particular elements they're looking for. I think what they want are just striking, standout and standalone portraits.'

### Saturation point

Each year, Portrait Salon releases a beautiful newspaper-printed portfolio to accompany their exhibition. There's something appealing about thumbing your way through the coarsely textured, ink-printed photographs. In this year's edition, the portfolio opens with a well-argued essay concerning the current state of photography competitions. Specifically, the copy addresses the fact that the photographic calendar is at near-saturation point. Photographic competitions seem to be going the way of music festivals. Every month, a new one appears, which in some cases means another two



'FROM this year's selection, I'm particularly keen on Tom Keen's image,' says James. 'I also like the image by Sarah Lee (above), who works for *The Guardian*. Carlotta Cardana entered a picture from her series about young Native Americans. That was great. I really like Phil Le Gal's image

from his series on traditional Breton dress and life. I like Dougie Wallace's work because he clearly puts a lot of legwork into it his images. He must spend a lot of time in the middle of roads with his camera. The images are arresting. They create a reaction in viewers.'

## 'We can only guess at Taylor Wessing's motives for collaborating with the NPG on a photography competition'

or three must close due to our attention being diverted to newer and fresher festivals and competitions.

'Perhaps the most worrying aspect with photography competitions is that people are either realising they can make money out of them, or you have PR companies make a name for themselves by setting one up,' says James. 'It's a way for them to get their name out there. If you Google "photography competition", you find that pretty much every company has launched a competition as part of a marketing initiative. In one sense that's a good thing because it demonstrates just how popular photography is. At the same time, it shows a blatant misuse of the medium.'

We can only guess at Taylor Wessing's motives for collaborating with the NPG on a photography competition. Chances are it sits somewhere in the middle of a genuine passion to expose the public to new and exciting photography – and a blatant PR grab. 'I think competitions are great and I really like the Taylor Wessing Photographic Portrait Prize,' says James. 'It's a very important event.



Left: The annual Portrait Salon newspaper portfolio. To purchase a copy, visit [portraitsalon.co.uk/about](http://portraitsalon.co.uk/about)

As I've stated before, we'd just like to see more images in their selection. It also seems to me to be a bit of a cash cow for the NPG. Photographers have to pay for the printing, the acetate sleeves, the delivery of those prints and then pay £26 per picture to enter the competition. Once you add all that up, the photographer has had to spend hundreds of pounds. If you're a new photographer or a student, that's a lot of money.'

That's not to mention the fact the NPG receives a hefty sum of sponsorship money from one of the biggest law firms in the world, Taylor Wessing, plus ticket and book sales. You could almost argue that the £12,000 prize money for the winner is a minimal dent in the overall income. Regardless, the competition is a wonderful host to an array of talent and, better yet, gave birth to Portrait Salon, one of the most interesting, competitions around today.



Below: Image by David Vintiner

You can submit your images to Carolee and James at Portrait Salon once you've received a rejection email from the NPG Taylor Wessing Photographic Portrait Prize in August. Visit [www.portraitsalon.co.uk](http://www.portraitsalon.co.uk) for details. You can also follow them on Twitter on [@Portrait\\_Salon](https://twitter.com/Portrait_Salon)