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John Gibbons: one public benefactor was so moved by his sculpture that he offered to buy a piece to give to the Tate Gallery. The Tate wouldn't have it, not even for free

ARTIST OF THE YEAR

BY TIM HILTON

Winner of the turned down prize

EXHIBITIONS in 1994 followed the pattern familiar from the past few years: blockbuster surveys and retrospectives designed to attract crowds to the Hayward, the Royal Academy and the Tate; a strong showing from photography; valiant but inconclusive efforts in provincial galleries – and, alas, too little exposure for artists still in the first decade of their careers.

Not that middle-generation artists fared better. The most popular show among the art community was the survey of current abstract painting at Flowers East. Here were 50 artists, many at the height of their powers, yet half of them are without a regular gallery. Two other surveys revealed talents that deserve much fuller display.

The Whitechapel Open was bigger than ever and the new Gallery at John Jones Open was remarkably fresh. All well and good, but such send-in exhibitions give only a glimpse of their artists.

Best photography shows were Bruce Bernard's survey of little-known photojournalism, "All Human Life", and Val Williams' disturbing "Who's Looking at the Family?" both at the Barbican. The Tate's retrospective of Picasso's sculpture dominated the modern-art scene. The Courtauld Institute repackaged its Impressionists with much style. Public gallery of the year was the Royal Academy. There we saw Goya's small paintings, then a revealing account of the Belgian symbolist avant-garde and finally "The

Glory of Venice", with its lovely homage to Tiepolo and the revelation of the previously obscure Giovanni Battista Piazzetta.

Artist of the year? Well, a number of shows celebrated Anthony Caro's 70th birthday. Clyde Hopkins' paintings at Francis Graham-Dixon were both mature and ebullient. The Edinburgh Festival was lightened by a set of perfect canvases by John McLean. Kevin O'Brien, at the Art Space Gallery, appeared reborn as an abstract painter. None the less my prize goes to John Gibbons, for his sculpture at Flowers East in February.

Gibbons is not well-known, except among fellow sculptors and some connoisseurs. Nor is he at all successful. But one public benefactor was

so moved by his sculpture *The Prophet* that he offered to buy it to give to the Tate Gallery. They wouldn't have it, not even for free. But Gibbons' art is immensely richer than, for instance, the work that wins the Turner Prize. It's abstract, made from old industrial materials, resolute, gritty and single-minded. Not totally concerned with itself, however. The more one considers these superficially rough pieces the more it's apparent that they're the work not of a labourer but of a grave metaphysician.

Previous winners: 1991 Ana Maria Pacheco, sculptor; 1992 Bridget Riley, painter; 1993 Prunella Clough, painter.

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