

Different Strokes

In mainstream circles, the name **Artes Mundi** might not elicit quite the same reaction as, say, the Turner Prize. But, says Karen MacKinnon, there's a lot to love about the UK's 'other' art award

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Ask even the most informed art lover to name the UK's biggest art prize and they'll likely proffer the Turner, such is its (oft-debated) public profile. But they'd be wrong – established in 2002 by Welsh artist William Wilkins, the biennial Artes Mundi International Visual Arts Exhibition & Prize trumps Turner's top-prize pot by a cool USD20k. Perhaps such collective oversight is down to the fact that the former's home is in Cardiff, not London, or perhaps it's because Artes Mundi, which literally means 'arts of the world', has more to do with said art than with courting the media spotlight.

Now entering its seventh cycle, Artes Mundi is slowly but surely bolstering

its position on the international arts circuit with its expertly curated mix of the contemporary and conceptual, all anchored by a singular, universal concern: what it means to be human in today's world. Says director Karen MacKinnon, "Of course it's wonderful to be compared to the Turner Prize. It's the most widely known art prize in the UK and draws huge audiences. However, Artes Mundi is a very different exhibition, prize and organisation – we're passionate about art and social change and our core aim is to create an ecosystem that connects individuals and communities through contemporary art."

This year's shortlist is testament to that aim. Whittled down from over

700 nominations, Artes Mundi 7 brings together six artists hailing from Europe, Africa and the Middle East, whose body of work, says MacKinnon, "explores the social realities lived by people across the globe. There are themes around the city and migration, and there is humour and surrealism, too". Previous exhibitions have featured everything from canaries to chocolate sculptures, and this one is set to be just as diverse.

Seminal black British filmmaker John Akomfrah's award-winning work will play out alongside the quirky installations of Neil Beloufa and the powerful war stories of Lamia Joreige, while Amy Franceschini brings environmental art into the

frame through her socially minded Futurefarmers collective. Then there's the Angolan performance artist Nástio Mosquito, who's been dubbed 'the coolest man in art' thanks to his original blend of anthropological commentary and political incorrectness. Wales' own Bedwyr Williams, known as much for his stand-up comedy as his satirical showpieces, completes the impressive creative lineup.

Over the next four months, their work will inhabit two of Cardiff's premier cultural spaces, Chapter Arts Centre and the National Museum, before a winner is chosen in early 2017. "I love them all," enthuses MacKinnon, who (quite rightly) refuses to pick a favourite. "What excites me is the clarity they have about their ideas. These are artists who are considered to be the best in the world today, whether they are from Wales like Bedwyr or Algeria like Neïl or Beirut like Lamia. Artes Mundi revolves around the theme of the human condition and the artists interpret this in many ways, from the poetic and beautiful to work that's critical, provocative and political. All of their work is connected to the here and now and how we live our lives in a global society. It's powerful in its connectedness to society, community and everyday life."

What most excites MacKinnon, though, is "the ability for art to bring about social change", and it's this concept that is at the very heart of Artes Mundi. On a local scale, the Cardiff-based arts charity of the same name is responsible for a public education programme that extends beyond the duration of the exhibition, as well as staging concurrent debate and networking events for artists and critics alike. But on a global scale, too, Artes Mundi has consistently made waves on the modern-art scene, raising both awareness and understanding of contemporary visual art around the world in its 12-year history, and, says MacKinnon, "building cultural bridges and conversations between Wales and the wider world".

Since the inaugural prize, which highlighted the lingering post-9/11 questions of the world, articulated in dust by Chinese artist Xu Bing, Artes

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Mundi has kept its finger firmly on our shared cultural pulse. The most recent winner, American artist and professor Theaster Gates, challenged Western notions of religion with his timely and thought-provoking installation *A Complicated Relationship Between Heaven And Earth, Or When We Believe*, to great critical acclaim – and not just because he declared, on accepting the prize, that he'd be sharing the cash with his fellow exhibitors.

As the BBC's art editor, Will Gompertz, put it, "The critical reaction to the open and innovative nature of Artes Mundi 6 has been as positive as the response to this year's Turner Prize was negative, suggesting that the one-time bad boy of contemporary art prizes is being shown a thing or two by this less staid young pretender."

And MacKinnon is confident that Artes Mundi 7 will only build on this success: "Each exhibition reinterprets the human condition, exploring issues that have both local and global topicality – issues such as poverty, globalisation, migration and conflict, which are relevant to Wales but seen through an international prism. I hope that the work in the exhibition speaks directly to the people who visit on a deeply personal level about their lives. I hope it engages, challenges and makes people think about things differently."

Previous pages: Nástio Mosquito performing at the 2014 Festival Belluard Bollwerk International. **Opposite:** *Bard Attitude* (2005) by Bedwyr Williams

