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Daniel Barrow. Eye Drops and Computer 1, 2008

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Sobey Art Award done good

Real money for young artists is just what Canada's scene needs

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BY DAVID BALZER November 24, 2010 12:11

Our country's biggest prize for visual art – the Sobey Art Award, created by grocery magnate Donald Sobey and his titular Art Foundation to honour significant achievements by Canadian artists under 40 – is only eight years old, and pales in spectacle and prestige next to the Turner Prize. That is an unfair comparison, however (indeed, one which is typically, self-negatingly Canadian). For as much as it gets wrong (and the Turner is no stranger to that, either), the Sobey has, much like the Griffin has done for poetry, allowed for a rethinking of how we make art and support artists in this country. With \$70,000 of private money at stake – \$50,000 for the winner, \$5,000 each for the other finalists – it out-sugars the Governor General's Awards as a single prize, and might be more important. Rather than marking the near-end of a senior artist's career, it puts wind in the sails of a younger one's, practically ensuring she or he will show more internationally and, thus, become an ambassador for Canadian creativity.

On that note, this year's win is a coup. Daniel Barrow – who has, serendipitously, just opened a show at Toronto's Jessica Bradley Art + Projects, and whose work I have trumpeted in this space for a while now – seemed like a long shot. He had already been nominated, in 2008; he is quiet and introspective, so unlike the glib, enterprising figures one is used to encountering in the contemporary art world; and he makes illustrations and projections that are delicate, complex, unabashedly archaic and aching, uncomfortably personal. He is also just beginning to show outside Canada, unlike last year's nominee Marcel Dzama and winner David Altmejd, in whose prestigious footsteps he is now primed to follow. It is just this kind of Canadian artist, hardworking and outside the usual-suspect list of dour Ontario and BC conceptualists, who needs the Sobey.

And the Sobey exhibition, which took place this year at Montreal's Musée d'art contemporain, proved this exceedingly. Curators from across the country select the Sobey nominees; the inevitable result is degrees of agenda-foisting, exacerbated by the very Canadian regionalism of the nomination process, which splits up selections according to five geographical areas. (Barrow, who just recently moved to Montreal from Winnipeg, represents "Prairies and the North.") Amusingly, this year's exhibition, curated by Lesley Johnstone and Sarah Fillmore, brashly showed work from all the Quebec semifinalists alongside the five finalists. Imagine such a thing happening in Ontario, and you get a sense of just how tetchy and complex our national cultural etiquette remains.

Still, agendas seemed to crumble next to Barrow's talent. Semifinalist Karen Tam joined finalists Brendan Fernandes (who represented "Ontario") and Brendan Lee Satish Tang (who represented the "West Coast") in proving just how tediously browbeating identity-politics art can be, despite having embraced more pop-cultural approaches over the past decade. Notable indeed was how Barrow's work, lacked proselytizing – even compared to worthy competitors Emily Vey Duke and Cooper Battersby, who showed their pro-perversity Lesser Apes video and represented the "Atlantic." Yet to observe viewers engaging with Barrow's pieces – moving figures and switching transparencies – was to see, very poignantly, contemporary art at work. Miraculously, it seems, Barrow's win was free of politics. It didn't happen because the judges felt obliged, either because of the kind of artist or practice or audience he represented. He won because of his skill and intellect. He won, to be blunt, because he was the best.

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