

The Art of Democracy

The toughest competition of 2008 wasn't in the world of politics.

Months before the mania of election season reached its fever pitch, thousands of candidates fought in a competition even more furious.

I'm referring to our Annual Art Competition, of course. The 25th contest was our most harrowing race yet, though, thankfully, we were spared the ad battles and smear tactics customary in presidential campaigns.

Our selection process is steeped in democracy, with multiple layers of judges to check and balance each other (notably lacking Department of Justice hiring policies¹). We consider each painting at least once—and often three or four times—before a decision comes down.

A screening judge did the first pass through the 11,000-plus candidates. Then five of us from *The Artist's Magazine* reviewed the

thousands of entries remaining. Two “yes” votes were enough to keep a piece in the running at first, but the next time through, a work needed a majority of votes to move along. Comparing our judging process to the electoral college might be apropos here, but, to be honest with you, I still don't quite understand how it works. The electoral college is one of those great American mysteries, like the content of hot dogs.

Just like the U.S. citizens voting this November, the judges of this contest have very high standards. It's difficult not to, when you're looking at hundreds of images a day, having to whittle down thousands

of entries to fewer than 400. My standards became so high, in fact, that when I visited the Smithsonian's National Portrait Gallery in the middle of competition season, I left unimpressed.²

Although our process was democratic, the editor in chief could exercise executive privilege to save works of art she really loved, something akin to a presidential pardon.³ In the eleventh hour, overwhelmed with guilt for letting the rest of us cut a painting she really adored, she'd halt judging to go back and save it.

But when it comes down to it, there's only one winner. Well, in our case there are five. But rather than being also-rans doomed to the footnotes of history⁴, the runners-up in our competition get their props⁵. We honor all the wonderful artists who make it through our gauntlet by sharing their work with their creative compatriots, to inspire and activate them. An artistic call to arms, if you will. Our founding fathers would be proud⁶. ☪

1. Zing!

2. John Singer Sargent is such a hack.

3. Note: *The Artist's Magazine* editor Maureen Bloomfield was not responsible for the exonerations of Jimmy Hoffa, George Steinbrenner or Richard Nixon.

4. Michael Dukakis, anyone?

5. Slang used by young people meaning due respect, for example, “Mad props if you remember the name of Michael Dukakis's running-mate.”

6. Except Charles Cotesworth Pinckney. He had no taste in art.

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