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Deutsche Börse Photography Foundation Prize 2024: Never mind the curatorial neuroses – this is a shortlist to cherish

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Mohlokamedi wa Tora, 2018, Scene 1 - Lebohang Kganye

If you were walking around Vienna in 1968, you might have run into a young woman wearing a Styrofoam box strapped to her chest. The box was fitted with curtains. She would have invited you to part them, and reach inside – to find yourself fondling her breasts.

Born Waltraud Lehner, this former convent girl had reinvented herself as an outrageous performance artist (styling herself [Valie Export](#), after a



brand of cigarettes). Visitors to the Deutsche Börse Photography Prize, at London’s Photographers’ Gallery, can’t escape Export’s peek-a-boo antics – further proof for those who like to pillory the award for its cerebral nominees, that the prize has dug its own grave. (In what sense is Export a [photographer](#) anyway, if she’s not even the one picking up the camera?)

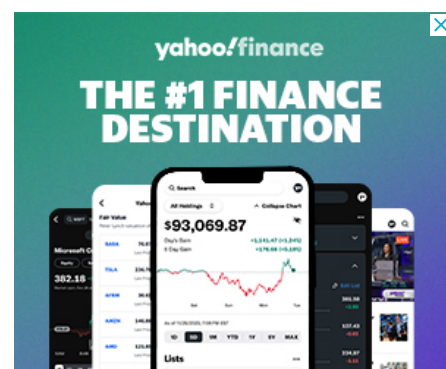
Nor will the haters be persuaded by the herd of cows that invade the gallery in Lebohang Kganye’s enigmatic installation. The South African artist cuts out figures from photo albums, arranging them in life-size dioramas that seek to tell the story of her family’s loss of farmland under apartheid.

Another work, by Syria’s Hrair Sarkissian, abandons photography altogether. His “immersive soundscape” records the digging and scraping of archaeologists, excavating mass graves from the Spanish Civil War.

But despite the familiar curatorial neuroses (chiefly, the obsession with art that “bears witness”), don’t dismiss this year’s shortlist. Bursting as it is with conceptual art, it’s among the most imaginative of the prize’s editions I can recall.



Self-Portrait, 1970 by Valie Export - Valie Export



There are Gauri Gill and Rajesh Vangad's portraits of a village in India's coastal state of Maharashtra. Over Gill's black-and-white photographic prints of quiet countryside, tribal artist Vangad has daubed a layer of intricate glyphs.

In one scene, a river's fish are poisoned by the leakage of toxic waste – invisible to Gill's camera, but pictured dripping into the water by Vangad. In another, a man walks through a forest glade, gathering herbs for medicine, and is enveloped by the painter in a cosmic web of stars and birds. It suggests an immense world, resonating beyond the confines of rural life.

And it's Sarkissian who reminds you how fickle a photograph really is. His portraits of emptied rooms, from Lebanon to Brazil, look banal, hardly worth a second look, until you learn their sad secret. These living rooms and hallways, a Hello Kitty blanket and even a messy upright piano, are the places in which a missing person – disappeared in war or because of political dissent – was last seen.

Many people are troubled by how easily images of suffering are reproduced. Whether in a charity advert, or a newspaper, are we not in danger of reducing human pain to undignified spectacle?

Sarkissian's pictures achieve something remarkable. You cannot gawp at them, or ignore them. He has spoken of using silence "as a tool to bring the viewer closer to the image". They are haunted, and they still haunt me.

Art is not a competition. But if I had to throw my lot in with any of these, it would be the Austrian provocateur: her barbed assaults on voyeuristic men are spiked with wit.

One time, Export reportedly paraded through a pornographic cinema in crotchless trousers: a proud two fingers up at the male gaze, she thought. Later, she struck a macho pose, spreading her legs insouciantly, while clutching a rifle: in the gallery, she's glowering for the camera, her hair a mad mess. It's defiant, and rather crass – and that's why I love it.

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