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Pictures Worth a Thousand Words: The Winning Portrait Photography at the National Gallery

The exhibition of winners of the Taylor Wessing Portrait Photography Prize presents an impressive display of its craft and the human relationships that make it possible. Each portrait allows the viewer an intense connection with the subject, an experience that is repeated over and over as the visitor strolls through the show currently on display at the National Portrait Gallery. The overall effect makes the universal personal, and one is left feeling optimistic despite the often difficult subject matter.

Since its inception 27 years ago, the Taylor Wessing Prize has become one of the most prestigious awards in photography. Held in partnership with the National Portrait Gallery and sponsored by the law firm Taylor Wessing, the prize is notable for its open entry rules: amateurs and professionals are displayed side by side, and subjects can be the artist's mother or a member of One Direction (both winners last year). Fifty-seven photographs were chosen from this year's 3,700 entries, picked blindly by a committee of curators from within and outside of the National Gallery.

Though the photographers range significantly in experience, the winners all have a visceral humanity in common. The first portrait as you enter the exhibition is the second-prize winner: a close-up of a boy in his late teens, pimples and a single chin hair thrown into contrast in the

backlit twilight, eyes filled with tears of unknown origin. With his close-cropped hair, naked torso, and chiselled jaw, he appears tough and tender at once.

The duality is a common theme for the portraits: a healthy-looking new mother who actually has terminal cancer, tiny boys dressed as rough cowboys, a young sumo wrestler suspended in a move as delicate as a ballerina's. These contradictions are quietly affecting and instruct the viewer to look twice – things are not always as they seem.

The exhibition's first place prize is an encapsulation of these contrasts. It was awarded to photojournalist Pat Martin for his portraits of his dying mother. She is clearly in poor health and yet too young to be dying; with her yellow pallor she sits defiantly, almost regally for her portrait, holding her pet chihuahua and wearing a t-shirt sardonically emblazoned with the very same chihuahua's face.

The dichotomy renders the viewer both distant and close to her; it is not a surprise upon reading the museum label to learn that Martin has had a complex relationship with his mother.

The curators of the exhibit seem acutely aware of the diversity of the portraits they have chosen. While representation is paramount in the arts, the museum labels that accompany each photo veer towards the tokenistic. Every transgender subject is pointed out, every person's nationality mentioned. It is in danger of dehumanizing an art form whose very purpose is to humanize.

Despite this single flaw, the exhibition is a profound experience, both carefully curated and voyeuristically satisfying. It is little wonder that it is often hard to get a good look at the photographs for the crowds, all eager to consume the show meant to be a feast for the eyes but that ultimately satisfies the heart.