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Two Northumbria students among winners of prestigious £40,000 art prize

Becca Halliwell-Sutton has been announced as the winner of this year's Woon Foundation Art and Sculpture Prize following a record number of submissions.

The Manchester student artist was awarded the £20,000 first prize last night at an award ceremony hosted by Northumbria University and held at BALTIC 39, a contemporary art hub on High Bridge in Newcastle city centre. Two Northumbria University Fine Art students, Sheyda Porter and Hannah Barker, were also among the prize winners on the night.

Becca was named as the overall winner and new Woon Fellow from 10 finalists, representing some of the UK's most prestigious arts institutions. An additional prize of £9,000 was awarded to Sheyda Porter, from Northumbria University, with £6,000 going to Bex Ilsley, a digital and photographic artist who has sold work internationally, most notably to Miley Cyrus. Two judges' discretionary prizes worth £2,500 went to Hannah Barker, also from Northumbria University, and Brighton's Jake Grewal.

The combined £40,000 competition prize, supported by the Woon Foundation is equal in value to Britain's biggest art award, the Turner Prize. The Woon Prize was created by Northumbria University law graduate and philanthropist Mr Wee Teng Woon along with his three brothers who together make up The Woon Foundation. Mr Woon's wife Christine and son Jeremy were guests of honour at the award ceremony and presented the first prize to the winner.

This year's finalists were selected by Christine Borland, who is a Turner Prize-nominated artist; Karen MacKinnon, Curator and Director, Artes Mundi; Laurence Sillars, BALTIC Chief Curator. Almost 300 artists submitted artwork for this year's prize – the highest number since its launch in 2012 – with two Northumbria Fine Art students making the final shortlist for the first time.

Woon 2016 winner Becca, whose work was inspired by Julia Kristeva's theoretical text *Women's Time*, said: "I am so completely shocked to win the Woon Prize! I've absolutely loved my final year at university making work and I feel like I've gathered momentum throughout the year. I have desperately wanted to keep that momentum going, but I was really worried about how I was going to afford to continue making work now the course had ended. This prize has now given me so much freedom to fully pursue a creative path and become immersed in my art practice. The enormity of the prize is only just starting to sink in. Thank you so much for everyone involved in giving me this opportunity."

Becca added: "The work in the show stems from personal narratives and feminist theory that I've been influenced by. My starting point was the idea of the matriarch as a symbol of strength and power, but I was interested in the tensions within that, with opposing elements that coexist together, such as strength and vulnerability, sensuality and the abject."

Professor Keith McIntyre, Head of the Arts department at Northumbria, said: "It is a great honour for Northumbria University to work with the Woon

Foundation and BALTIC 39 to host this prestigious national art competition for emerging contemporary artists. It is especially exciting this year given that two of our own graduates were among the winners in what was a highly competitive submission.”

Sarah Munro, BALTIC Director said: “I am delighted to congratulate and welcome the new Woon Fellow Rebecca Halliwell-Sutton into both BALTIC 39 and the arts community of the North East of England. I want to congratulate not only the overall winner, but all five prize winners and all 10 shortlisted artists for their contribution to this process.”

She continued: “The Woon Prize is fast gaining a reputation as one the most important awards for graduates in the UK and this shortlist exhibition in BALTIC’s project space, until 31 July, is testament to that and a fascinating spotlight on a new generation of emerging artists.”

Turner Prize-nominated artist, Professor Christine Borland, who was on this year’s judging panel, said: “Looking through the record number of applications for the 2016 Woon, it has been a real pleasure to see such clear evidence of the strength of young artists coming out of art departments all over the country - though the great diversity and quality of work has made the judge’s job of shortlisting, extremely difficult. We had a very strong exhibition from which to select the prize-winners. Hopefully, seeing their work so beautifully installed will make all the artists feel rightfully proud of this achievement, which will be an important stepping stone in their future career.”

The Woon Foundation Painting and Sculpture Prize offers an exceptional opportunity for students currently in their final year of undergraduate study in the United Kingdom. The Woon Foundation kindly funds three major prizes and discretionary commendation prizes each year to the value of £40,000. The BxNU (BALTIC and Northumbria University) Institute for Contemporary Art at BALTIC 39 is the result of a collaborative partnership between BALTIC Centre for Contemporary Art and Northumbria University.

The Woon Prize was launched in 2012 and the inaugural winner was artist Holly Hendry who completed her Fellowship in September 2014. The next Fellow was Ramona Zoladek who held the Fellowship until September 2015. The current Fellow is Kayt Hughes, who recently met Mr Woon when he visited the UK this year. To find out more go to:

www.baltic39.com/woonprize or www.northumbria.ac.uk/woonprize

Northumbria offers a range of courses in the arts and was recently rated Top 10 in the UK for Arts and Design research power following the Research Excellence Framework 2014. To find out more about studying at Northumbria go to: www.northumbria.ac.uk/arts

Northumbria is a research-rich, business-focused, professional university with a global reputation for academic excellence. To find out more about our courses go to www.northumbria.ac.uk

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