

Restaurants: Joseph Connolly visits The Rex Whistler, Tate Britain

Modern artists? What a bunch of prize idiots

Service is the only letdown for Joseph as he gives the Tate another go. Lucky that his head's stuck in Turner's turbulent clouds...

Art – I'm going to talk about art. I'm also going to talk about food and drink – review the restaurant, usual thing, you know how it goes ... but first I'm going to talk about art. Because we went to the Tate, you see, my wife and I – Tate Britain, the proper one. You may recall my scathing review not too long ago of Tate Modern where we ate, but not very much because it was dreadful and took a fortnight to arrive. Ah yes but the restaurant in Tate Britain is famous, you see: the Rex Whistler Restaurant, it's called – due to that artist's absolutely glorious and romantic full-wrap mural. So I'm going to tell you about the food there, and also their legendary wine list ... yes but first, I'm going to talk about art. And also: non-art. Late Turner is the exhibition we actually went to see: it is subtitled 'Painting Set Free' – whereupon my wife wanted to know when we would get our free painting set. I've always loved this artist, and what he had in common with his great contemporary – our

local lad, John Constable – was his obsession with turbulence, weather and (crucially) light. The later works best exemplify this, those practically abstract

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watercolours being among the purest and most uplifting ever created. Now here's the thing: we paid our entrance fees (£30! And you don't even get a late Turner to take home with you!) whereupon I was asked whether or not I wanted joint and more expensive tickets, these to include the Turner Prize exhibition. Well in answer to that, may I say as emphatically as I am able: A Whole World of NO.

The Turner prize: oh God, oh God – the bloody Turner Prize ...! If the great man could only come back from the grave and glimpse for just an instant the insulting and puerile dross, the sins that for thirty years have been committed in his name, he would surely suffer an immediate coronary and be back in that grave in no time at all. This year, even those critics who may generally be depended upon to laboriously make some sort of an effort to justify or even see virtue in the yawn-making heaps of debris, wonky photos, flickering films and tacky installations ... this year, they simply threw in the towel: enough is enough, right?

Okay: grub, now. The Rex Whistler Restaurant is a longish and quite low-ceilinged room, that ceiling rather dispiritingly bright white and studded with recessed downlights in the manner of a 1990s hotel bathroom. The mural, by contrast, is warm and ochre, and there is a large curved and glossy black bar, rather like a giant's grand piano. A musical giant. There are equally black buttoned leather banquettes which actually make history: they are higher than the chairs opposite, in a world where the opposite is always, but always the case. Two courses at £24.95, a fiver more for pudding – the same as at Tate Modern, the difference being that that was dire. So, for my wife: crispy duck egg, ham hock and green beans with a shallot dressing, and I was going for Dorset crab in a brioche crumb with tarragon mayonnaise. Took a while to come ... and nor did we yet have the succour of drink. The list here is a legend: I remember twenty-five years ago

when you could still order first and second growth clarets for less than you would be charged by a merchant. Yeh well: them days is gawn, matey – but still, a Caronne St.Gemme 2000 at £36 seemed a deal, so I collared it. It was presented, and I was asked if I would like it decanted: I said yes. Time passed. Then the same (unopened) bottle was presented again to me, a different waiter wanting to know if I would like it poured. Eventually the wine made it into a rather beastly squat sort of a thing – a bit like a ship's decanter, upon which someone had dropped a giant's grand piano. A musical giant. It was very awkward to handle and pour from – and I know, because no one, not once, attempted to do it for me. Nor was it properly decanted: lees still hovering at the base. For all that, it was a damned good wine.

As was the food: the crisply breadcrumb duck egg oozed its gold, though my wife rather wished that the good ham hock had been similarly warm, and not fridge-cold. My three little crab cakes were just about perfect, as was the tarragon mayonnaise. There were six mains, three of them fish – from which my wife chose roast monkfish tail with shrimp fritter and celeriac puree with fennel. I had venison sausages with buttered mash and red onion marmalade. Yes ... but before we received it, there was one hell of a wait. This, clearly, is the Tate disease: they are very evidently understaffed. A waiter apologised for the delay, and I received the impression that he did this frequently, day in day out, as a matter of course. My wife thought there might have

FACTFILE

- The Rex Whistler Restaurant, Tate Modern, Millbank SW1. Tel 020 7887 8825
- Open daily 11.30am – 3.15pm
- Food: ★★★★★☆☆☆
- Service: ★★★★★☆☆☆
- The Feeling: ★★★★★☆☆☆
- Cost: Two courses £24.95, three £29.95. So about £100 for two, with decent wine. With spectacular wine ... £250.

been more monkfish and less bone, but she enjoyed it all immensely. My sausages were of pink coarsely milled venison, extremely good and meaty flavour and texture, the marmalade a fine and glossy jus – with buttered mash exactly what you want it to be. We shared unadvertised and welcome al dente broccoli. As my wife awaited her pear and apple strudel with ginger cream – which she was to pronounce one of the nicest puddings she had had in a very long time (the ginger gentle, and then rather less so) – I observed that there were quite a few French people in the restaurant and at the exhibition, all enthusing about the artist 'Tour-Nair' – so they can't really moan when the Yanks say Van Go. And talking of Tour-Nair (Turner, to you): do you know his Christian name? You know Da Vinci's Christian name. And that of Monet, Picasso, Gainsborough, Dali ... you even know that Reynolds' is Joshua. But Turner ...? Well it's Joseph, actually. So there.

