

# Studio Election Artists



**THERE IS A LOGIC TO THE IDEA** of an official election artist. The War Artists Scheme, which took in everyone from Paul Nash and Stanley Spencer in the First World War to Henry Moore and Eric Ravilious in the Second, has been running for a century. And what is an election but a form of war by other means? It may often be the phoney type, but there are live rounds, or at least barbs and the occasional egg, being loosed off too. Like a military campaign, the party machines also have a hierarchy, with their own officers, foot soldiers, headquarters and materiel. The campaign aim, as in war, is to advance to the point of total victory.

The War Artists Scheme was initially a propaganda initiative but quickly became a means to document a nation in extremis in its many and varied forms. The Election Artist scheme also sets out to capture, for perpetuity, history in the making. The idea was first suggested in 2001 by Tony Banks, the then chairman of the Parliamentary Arts Advisory Committee, and has been a little-known feature of every election since.

**BRITAIN IS IN FACT WELL SERVED** with official art. As well as the Government Art Collection, which supplies British art to embassies around the world and ministers' offices in Whitehall, there is the British Council collection and the Arts Council England collection. Between them, they have responsibility for tens of thousands of publicly-owned works of art. The least known of the major collections is the Parliamentary Art Collection, which oversees the art belonging to both the Commons and the Lords, some 8,500 works. The collection, which illustrates the history of parliament and British politics over the centuries, is displayed throughout the buildings of the Parliamentary Estate.

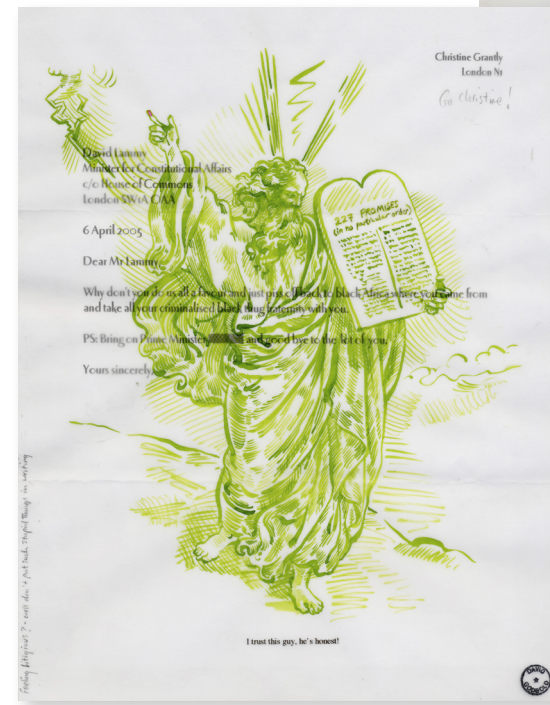
The bulk of the collection is pretty much what one would expect: portraits of monarchs and leading parliamentarians, images of the buildings themselves — including during the great fire of 1834 — scenes of some of the most historic debates, and statuary that goes back to the fourteenth century. The Election Artist scheme was devised as a way of introducing greater modernity into an historic collection.

**THERE HAVE TO DATE BEEN FIVE** election artists: the portraitist Jonathan Yeo — son of the former Tory minister Tim Yeo — was the first in 2001, followed by David Godbold in 2005, the photographer Simon Roberts in 2010, Adam Dant in 2015 and the sculptor-installation artist Cornelia Parker in 2017. The brief they were given was straightforward: the artist must be politically impartial and follow the election campaign in order to produce a final work that somehow represents the British public's engagement with the democratic process. For their pains, the artist is paid £17,000 plus expenses.

This election's artist is Nicky Hirst, someone who works across disciplines — from printmaking and creating sculptural installations using abstract shapes of wood, metal and found objects. She is a bold choice: her work is rarely figurative but relies on subtle affinities of shape and form, which makes her response to the very human drama of electioneering particularly difficult to envisage. Can the antics of Boris Johnson and Jeremy Corbyn be reduced to circles of plywood or leaves in a dried-up puddle? Perhaps they can.

**HOW EACH ARTIST WAS SELECTED** is slightly more nebulous. Dant suggests that in 2015 an external art consultant drew up a list of more than 100 potential artists to put before

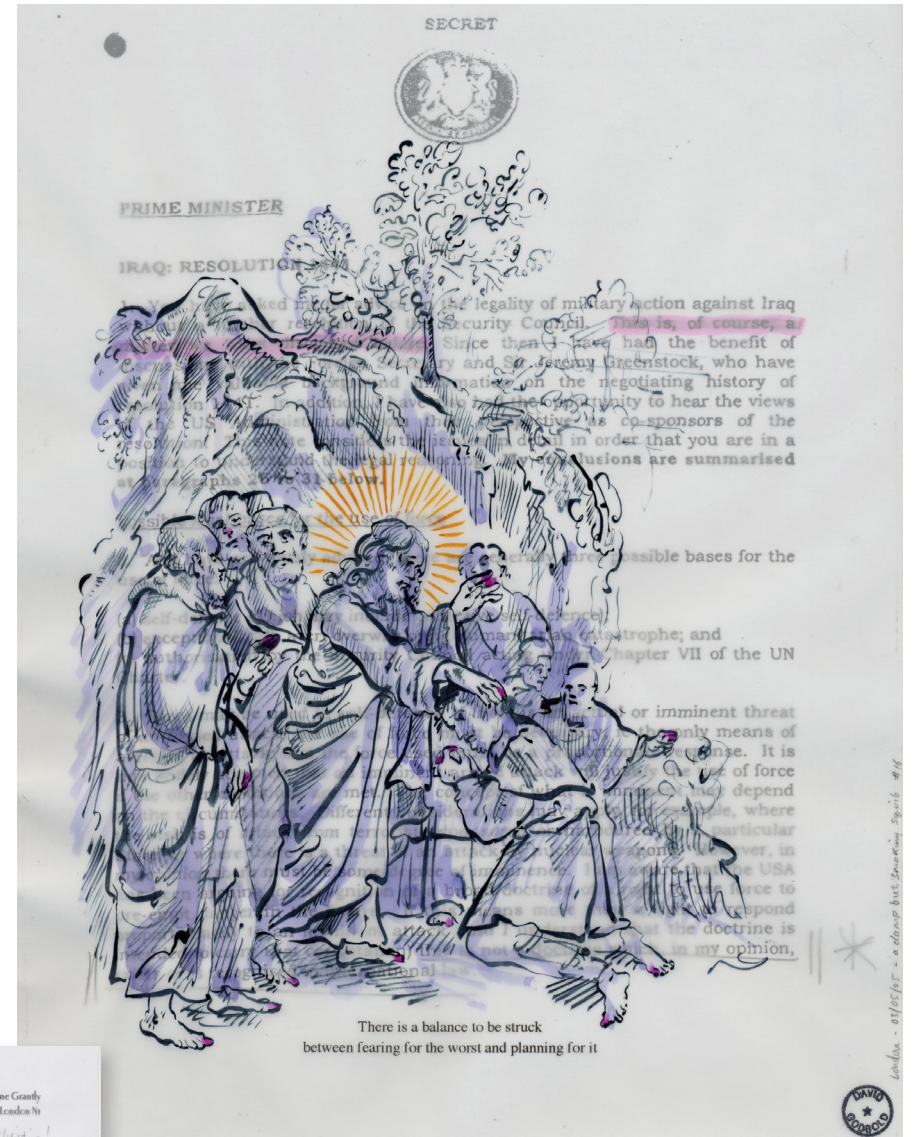
**2001 JONATHAN YEO**  
*Proportional Representation, a triptych of portraits, oil on canvas.*  
From left, Charles Kennedy, Tony Blair and William Hague. The width of each party leader's portait reflects their share of the popular vote.



**2005 DAVID GODBOLD**

**Above: *Striking a balance.*** Ink and pencil on tracing paper, overlaid onto a copy of the legal advice from Lord Goldsmith to Tony Blair about the legality of regime change in Iraq.

**Left: *Feeling Litigious?*** Ink and pencil on tracing paper, overlaid onto a letter addressed to the parliamentary office of Labour MP David Lammy. The drawing of Moses with the tablet alludes to the 227 promises of the 2005 Labour election manifesto. Godbold says: "The contents of the letter are difficult, but used at Lammy's request to highlight issues of racism. The publication of this drawing was initially resisted by the House of Commons, due to the potential infringement of the letter writer's rights." The objection was dismissed because the letter was not signed.







the cross-party Speaker's Advisory Committee and parliament's curatorial team, who then whittled that down before selecting their preferred artist.

Roberts, on the other hand, was one of 10 photographers who had to prepare a proposal to put before the committee. The 12 committee MPs in place before the calling of the 2019 general election included the likes of Chris Bryant and David Lammy from Labour, Ed Vaizey and Tom Tugendhat from the Conservatives, Antoinette Sandbach from the Liberal Democrats, Hywel Williams from Plaid Cymru and Hannah Bardell from the SNP.

What is in it for the artists, a breed that does not always want to find itself at the very heart of the establishment? For Roberts the attraction was the scheme's uniqueness: "I can't think of another country that puts its political process under artistic scrutiny." It also offered him the chance to see politics up close. A point is echoed by Dant who saw the invitation as an opportunity to "leave the fringes and be plonked at the heart of things — in the middle of something important".

### 2010 SIMON ROBERTS

**Gordon Brown, Labour, Rochdale, 28 April 2010. Roberts traversed the country for 24 days. His photographs "focused on the relationship between the canvassing politicians and the voting public". Here he captures the prime minister about to meet a disgruntled Labour voter.**

**HOW THE ARTISTS GO ABOUT THIS** is up to them. Dant, sketchbook in hand, headed to marginal seats around the country because "that's where the party leaders go". He attended manifesto launches, party rallies and doorstep campaigning. He found himself looking for a hedgehog sanctuary with Nick Clegg, whose assistants "got the directions wrong; we ended up in a pub car park in the Lake District. The pub wasn't even open."

He trailed the then Plaid Cymru leader Leanne Wood, who, courtesy of some remarks about fox hunting, was being chased by protesters dressed as badgers and foxes as she went around the valleys in her battle bus. He witnessed the effects of the first

© SIMON ROBERTS, COURTESY THE SPEAKER'S ADVISORY COMMITTEE ON WORKS OF ART



© PARLIAMENTARY ART COLLECTION

### 2015 ADAM DANT

**The Government Stable (detail), Sepia ink drawing, 230 x 170 cm. Dant represented the election with a single monumental sepia ink drawing — according to the artist, "a fictitious space which serves as a notional General**

**Election Campaign Archive". Everything Dant drew was inspired by events from the campaign: "It would be possible, had one been paying very close attention ... to identify and recount the stories of every detail depicted in the finished drawing."**





## 2017 CORNELIA PARKER

**Cornelia Parker, *Left Right & Centre*, film still. The film features newspapers collected during the 2017 general election campaign and the eventful months that followed. The newspapers and their headlines chart the polarised opinions of the left, right (and centre).**

“selfie election” in Scotland while tracking Nicola Sturgeon and the public’s repeated calls for “just a wee selfie with Nicola”, and was in Thanet on St George’s Day for Nigel Farage’s rally in a working mens’ club. Along the way, he filled 12 sketchbooks.

Roberts, too, was keen to show all aspects of campaigning in the election following the parliamentary expenses scandal. He was on hand in Rochdale to photograph Gordon Brown seconds before a meet-the-public walkabout went off the rails when the PM was berated by Gillian Duffy over Labour’s stance on immigration. Famously, Brown was caught on microphone referring to Duffy as a “bigoted woman”.

Roberts was standing with his camera on a motorhome roof at the time and his photograph captures the micro-drama with his signature deadpan, slightly detached point of view. Indeed, Roberts says his biggest problem during his project was negotiating with Brown and David Cameron’s nervous and protective press officers so as to get behind the stage-managed set-pieces. Politics, he says, usually “looks ordinary in many places — someone on a rainy day sticking leaflets through letterboxes”, and he photographed that too, so Brown’s Duffy confrontation was refreshingly untypical.

If Dant and Roberts bought into the whole idea of the Election Artist, the Irish painter David Godbold was more in

tune with the words of another Advisory Committee member, Hugo Swire, who noted that elections have provided scabrous artists with fodder “since the days of Hogarth.”

In 2005 Godbold had various proposed works rejected, including one of a naked generic politician (reflecting, he said, the idea of politics stripped bare), and another that included the word “bastard”. After the whole process was over, he said he would never work with parliament again. Cornelia Parker, meanwhile, saw her role in 2017 as neither satirist nor documenter but akin to “the court fool in Shakespearean times” who could “say all kinds of stuff that the other people can’t”.

**THE FINAL ARTWORKS HAVE PROVED** just as varied.

Yeo produced *Proportional Representation*, a portrait triptych of the party leaders Tony Blair, William Hague and Charles Kennedy with the size of their individual portraits correlating to their proportion of the vote. Godbold made 18 works using images on leaflets and other election detritus.

Roberts chose 24 disparate photographs, one for each day of the campaign. Dant’s *The Government Stable* is a large and detailed drawing of a huge architectural space full of election motifs, including Liam Byrne’s infamous “I’m afraid there is no money” note and David Cameron’s lectern. Parker produced two films, one of which shows newspapers with shouty headlines blowing round an empty Commons chamber, and 14 photographic prints.

Given that a Banksy picture of the Commons chamber peopled by chimpanzee MPs has just sold for a little under £10 million (surely one of the most expensive gags of all time), whatever Nicky Hirst comes up with this time round, she will at least know that interest in the parliamentary process as theatre — or farce — is high. **Michael Prodger** ©