

Meet the Turner prize shortlist, from the musician to the mind-reader

Architecture, opera, fashion, parapsychology ... this year's contenders are taking contemporary art into exciting new territory. We sent our experts to meet the artists on the shortlist



The 2015 Turner prize shortlisted artists: (clockwise from right) Bonnie Camplin, Nicole Wermers, Assemble and Janice Kerbel. Photograph: Tate

Janice Kerbel

Doug is a 25-minute, nine-movement work for six singers that has been performed in its complete form precisely once, at Glasgow's Mitchell Library. There was no public recording, nor does Janice Kerbel intend one. When I meet the Canadian-born artist, she's not yet sure how to present the piece for the Turner prize exhibition: what will the visual representation of Doug become in the Tate's galleries, apart from a handful of performances from the same team who gave its premiere?

In contrast to the classical music world's obsession with trying to find visual expression, Doug is stark in its simplicity. The six singers wear the austere black mufti of the contemporary music ensemble, they stand behind their music stands, the conductor raises his hands, and they sing the notes printed on the scores in front of them. Kerbel, it seems, is consciously making a musical composition in Doug, not trying to make a hybrid of sound-art experimentalism, nor to splice new music and new visuals in some hipsterish fusion.

“The work is entirely about how it sounds,” she says. That rigour is precisely the point. “Music was a completely unfamiliar language to me when I started work on Doug. And it’s important for me to be obedient to an existing language, to inhabit the form very strictly and very rigorously.” So much so that she tells me she’s the proud conqueror of the Associated Board of the Royal Schools of Music’s grade 3 theory exam. “I was the only person older than about 14 sitting in my row in some huge hall near Westminster.”

She’s delighted with the “distinction” she was awarded, but says a little knowledge is a dangerous thing: “When you start out knowing nothing at all, you’re not limited by not knowing what you don’t know. Now I know a little more, I probably couldn’t write another piece of music.”

In composing Doug, Kerbel was approaching the arcane languages of music, its notation, its performance culture and its rituals, with the perspective and insight of the outsider. That’s an approach she’s used before: writing the commentary for a fictional baseball game in Ballgame (Innings 1-3), creating a new language solely through lighting effects in Kill the Workers, and inventing a holiday resort, real in every palm tree and coral reef in its online representation and its offers to prospective honeymooners and luxury travellers – apart from the tiny detail that the island doesn’t actually exist.

Which all poses the question: why did Doug have to be a piece of music at all? “I knew I wanted to write a work for voice,” says Kerbel. “There are these nine accidents that happen to Doug, and I needed an ensemble of voices to embody them, because no single human voice could encompass the range.”

Ah yes, the accidents. Kerbel’s text in Doug tells of a series of remarkably unfortunate events to which the protagonist falls victim (an early version of the Doug project summed him up: “I knew this guy once named Doug. Man, did he have some luck”). These include a bear attack, a massive object falling out of the sky on to his head, a lightning strike, a long drawn-out asphyxiation, a slip, a drowning; all written in poems of wildly differing size, shape, tone and verse. Why is it called Doug? Because of that joke, she says. “What do you call a man with a spade on his head? Doug.”

The idea of the accident runs through her work. “For Doug, I looked at physical comedy, cartoons. I have a kid and I’m always trying to stop him from having an accident. So the idea was on my mind.”

Kerbel was assisted by composers Philip Venables and Laurie Bamon, and the conductor George Chambers, who taught her to use the Sibelius music-sequencing program, and suggested how best to realise her ideas about the shapes, sounds, and dramas of her accident-prone antihero. She shows me the stages of her composition: graphs of note names and vocal register, scrolls of

paper that mark her multidimensional attempts to fix and choreograph Doug's accidents through the languages and mechanics of musical time from boxes of her own musical handwriting notation, too big for conventional music paper, to the finished score, as polished and finessed-looking as any product of contemporary notated music.

The resulting work was hailed by the few who heard it as a piece that could stand alongside other new vocal compositions, but Kerbel is less sure of Doug's next stage of life. "Doug was clearly produced for a specific context, and it is in this context that I can best try to understand it."

I'm one of the lucky ones who has been granted access to a private recording of Doug. What it reveals to me is that Kerbel's work creates an imaginative space that does something more than simply depict the accidents that befall the hapless Doug. Instead each piece (even the climatic Slip, which sets the haiku-like "Heel on peel / To seal the deal. Feet to sky / Life slips by" in a single moment of vocal slippage) dramatises its accident and turns it into a musical object. In other words, Kerbel is doing what any real composer does, manipulating the stuff of musical time through her handling of the space of musical notation. In that sense, composers have always been artists. Perhaps the Turner should be open to all of them next year?

Tom Service, classical music writer