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Artist Richard Wright strikes gold as winner of this year's Turner prize

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Site-specific painter whose understated yet radical works are rooted in fine-art tradition wins judges' vote

The creator of a subtle and unashamedly beautiful fresco in gold leaf was the "shocked, surprised and stunned" winner of Britain's most prestigious UK art prize last night.

Glasgow-based Richard Wright, 49, was awarded the £25,000 Turner prize during a ceremony at Tate Britain by the poet laureate, Carol Ann Duffy, who praised a "wonderful" Turner prize exhibition created by "four fantastic artists".

Clad in tartan trews, Wright said he was surprised and touched by the reaction of those who came to see his work at the Turner prize exhibition "perhaps expecting art to be awful". He said: "That [positive reaction is] what I wanted to happen. It's not about winning the prize." As for what he had planned for the cheque, he said: "Like anyone else, I've got bills."

To make his untitled wall painting for the Turner prize exhibition, Wright employed the painstaking techniques of Renaissance fresco-makers – drawing a cartoon on paper and then transferring it to the wall in what he called "an incredibly medieval way" by pouncing – piercing the cartoon with holes and rubbing chalk through it to create "the ghost of a work" on the wall. The image was then painted with size (adhesive) and covered with gold leaf.

Despite the toil involved, when the show closes at Tate Britain on 3 January, the work will be painted over in white emulsion and lost for ever.

The temporary nature of the piece is deliberate: none of Wright's wall paintings is intended to survive the immediate circumstances of its commission. "I am interested in the fragility of the moment of engagement – in heightening that moment," he said. To see a work knowing that it will not last, he said, "emphasises that moment of its existence".

Asked how he felt to experience the destruction of his work, he said: "Sometimes I feel a sense of loss; sometimes of relief."

At the beginning of his career, Wright made figurative paintings on canvas, but then transformed his practice to create abstract images on walls. At that point, he destroyed all his works on canvas. "My paintings were rubbish," he said. "I felt the things that were influencing my work were ideas connected with another time. I wanted to make work that was part of the world." Giving up making paintings, he said, was "liberating. You're not carrying these things around with you."

Wright could be seen as the opposite to the kind of Turner prize contenders who captured headlines and provoked controversies at the peak of the YBA boom. By their nature, his works, which cannot be transported, bought or sold, exist outside the art market. Each is created for a particular environment. For the Turner piece he was inspired by memories of travelling from Scotland to London to visit the then Tate Gallery on the overnight bus – one night to get to London, a day in the gallery looking at a single work, and a night back.

So, though the golden fresco, seen from a distance, is an abstract shape, close up you can make out shapes that suggests sunbursts or clouds that recall the landscapes by Turner, or Blake watercolours that can be seen elsewhere in the gallery.

At 49, this was Wright's last chance to win the Turner prize, for which artists only under 50 are eligible. Born in London in 1960, he moved to Scotland as a child, and studied at the Edinburgh College of Art and, in the 1990s, at Glasgow School of Art.

He was nominated for the award for an exhibition at the 55th Carnegie International in Pittsburgh, and for a show at the Ingleby gallery in Edinburgh. Wright won the prize against competition from three other shortlisted artists: Enrico David, fellow Glaswegian Lucy Skaer, and Roger Hiorns. Each of the runners-up receives £5,000. The judges for this year's prize were Charles Esche, director of the Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven; broadcaster Mariella Frostrup; Andrea Schlieker, the director of the Folkestone Triennial; and Jonathan Jones, a Guardian art critic. The chair of the judges was Stephen Deuchar, who steps down as director of Tate Britain later this month.

Introducing the prize at the ceremony last night, Tate director Nicholas Serota said in the current economic climate "museum visitor numbers are up and the theatres are full ... in this climate the work of artists is more important than ever."