

Andrew Crane

Interviews Robert Priseman

AC: Was there a time when you thought “I’m really an artist now...this is all kind of working...people I don’t know are responding to what I do”?

RP: Mmm, that’s an interesting question Andrew. I think yes, but it kind of crept up on me. For many years I felt like I was trying to be a ‘good’ artist and failing. Then I realised that I was holding myself back from doing what I really wanted to do because I was worried about what my parents might think. Eventually I thought “sod it” and just went for it, and started on the *No Human Way to Kill* and *Francis Bacon’s Interiors* series of paintings. And they started to get noticed. Then one day my mum walked into my studio and saw the big painting I’d done on the death of George Dyer. It’s a painting of the toilet his body was found slumped on – and my Mum just looked at me all kind of disappointed and said “Oh Robert, you’re not painting toilets now are you?” Well it was hilarious, because I’d just completed and sold it – and I never really worried after that. And my folks were cool because they realised that even if they didn’t appreciate or fully understand what it was all for, others did and that was ok.

AC: Is there an attribute of your painting that makes it undeniably yours? Do you know where that attribute came from....and is it changing?

RP: There is something about the ‘feeling’ of the image. It comes about in the last 5% of the time I labour on a work. It’s just something about the image coming alive and gaining a presence of its own. It begins to exist outside of yourself. When I make a painting I work it up into a full image then virtually destroy it. I scour paint all over the surface before working it back up again. There is something in resurrecting an image that makes it somehow magical. I can’t really describe it any better than that really.

AC: Are you a ‘sketchbook person’?

RP: No, I’ve never really understood the need for them. I see lots of pictures in my head, then try to recreate a version of them via taking photographs, finding photographs and adapting other material. The images are more linked to feelings, and it’s the feeling I’m trying to recreate. Not so much the image itself.

AC: Do you ever get the urge to do non-figurative painting?

RP: Once I tried to do some abstract work, but it was impossible. Since then I've gained a deep respect for the best of our abstract painters, like yourself. Because they can do something with material that is beyond my own comprehension.

AC: Would you like to 'bug' one of your paintings to find out what people really think about it?

RP: NO! It would terrify me. Mostly I guess because I think people would not respect or like it that much. Which in reality is probably pretty much the case, but at least you don't have to confront it in person.

AC: Have you ever had a studio space, that on the face of it seemed perfect, but you just couldn't paint there?

RP: Again no. I've never had a dedicated studio space. But then I've always preferred to work from home out of a spare bedroom. It feels safer, is away from other people and doesn't cost anything. So it feels comfortable. The space I work in now still has old wall paper from the 1970's hanging off the walls in patches and lots of loose plasterwork. If you have something to say, you just tend to ignore the details around you and focus on what needs to be done. So, perhaps there is something in it being quiet, not perfect and away from others.

AC: As a founding member of Contemporary British Painting and custodian of the Priseman Seabrook Collection, you have helped, and continue to help, many painters achieve success. Would you say that networking has always been an important part of your painting career?

RP: It's very kind of you to say Andrew, thank you. I was reasonably successful before I set up CBP. I had received a number of solo museum exhibitions and was exhibiting in New York, Boston, London, New Zealand and other places. But I found there was not much support for painters in the UK. And it puzzled me. Because I've always thought of the UK as a brilliant place for painting. So I set out to see if painting as an art form had died here, like many were saying at the time. What shocked me was that as I dug deeper I could see that there was more painting going on across the UK than had been in the 20th Century. It's just that it wasn't being programmed. So I felt a kind of responsibility to do something about it and used my contacts and connections to begin making shows for artists who initially I liked the look of. People who seemed to be advancing the conversation of painting in some way or other.

That meant I had to take a back seat myself, which harmed my own practice in many ways, as people stopped seeing me as an artist. But that was necessary, as the project was really about creating a space for all painters to have a voice, not just a select few.

AC: What do you miss most about painting when you stop?

RP: It's fundamentally soothing. Creating anything is an act of catharsis, just as Aristotle wrote in his *Poetics*. I firmly feel and believe that. When I'm painting I feel happy and at peace.

AC: Do you see a bright future for painting in general, or do you see pitfalls?

RP: A bright future, absolutely. In the age of social media and fibre optic broadband, I think the need for slowing things down is becoming more and more important. The digital is with us now and has to be navigated. Naturally it has brought massive advantages, but there are problems too, as we all know. Such as the way it seems to be dividing people a lot. To engage with things handmade and outside of the realm of the digital world, it connects us to our common humanity. As a kind of balancing out I suppose.

AC: Great painting is unmistakable. Why is that? It is obviously a collection of things, but is there one quality in particular, that sets it apart from the rest?

RP: I think it transmits love.

Interview completed on 21 June 2023