

# Robert Priseman

## Interviews Fionn Wilson

RP: I love your paintings Fionn, they seem to value beauty and sensitivity. Do you think this puts you at odds with a 21st century art aesthetic, or in harmony with it?

FW: Thanks Robert, that means a lot to me. I think we're in an era where beauty is looked upon as somehow superficial or uninteresting or old fashioned. Maybe there's nothing much to say about it. There's no worthy 'issue' to pontificate upon with beauty. And it seems with art these days people want to talk more and more about issues.

I like what the artist and poet Etel Adnan said, "I am very sensitive to beauty. We don't speak of beauty anymore in art criticism, we don't mention beauty. It's *démodé* – out of fashion. But it isn't really. Beauty is an inner sense and it makes us happy. It's not complicated. We need it."

We also seem to have more of an interest in something resembling horror. I've noticed a kind of fetish with the disfiguration of the face, a kind of 'cult of cruelty'. I don't understand how anyone could find this interesting. I've seen paintings of 'dead' women in plastic bags heartily approved of online and I find it really bizarre. These paintings often seem to involve women's faces and bodies – women being cut up or disfigured or with pained expressions on their faces. People seem to love it.

The philosopher Theodor Adorno said that horror is beyond the reach of psychology and that perhaps this is one reason why people are so fascinated by it – there is a transcendental aspect to it. I think this also applies when it comes to beauty and that, particularly in the face of horror, fighting for beauty is important.

RP: Oliver Cromwell famously said of having his portrait painted "paint me warts and all". I've noticed that men tend to paint portraits in an idealised way whereas it is women who tend to paint "warts and all". What are your observations on this?

FW: I think it's particularly true when it comes to women painting themselves or other women. I think it has something to do with a concern that if, for example, a woman paints a woman as beautiful it will overshadow other qualities in her that may be of interest and that you may in some way objectify her (as men have been accused of doing to women through the 'male gaze'). Maybe it's a reaction to a cultural obsession with physical perfection and the pressures women feel about this, especially with social media and filtered and airbrushed

images, and a way of rebelling against that. Painting a woman as a woman means you almost have to turn away from any physical beauty and not be 'blinded' by it or you let her down, maybe even betray her. To some extent I can understand this, but it's not something that concerns me, and I'm also looking beyond the surface. I enjoy painting women and I enjoy painting women sensitively in order to celebrate their beauty – the equation of physical presence along with the qualities they possess that makes them a unique human being. Painting others has become political and issue driven and I think these days we're focussed on this when it comes to painting other human beings, rather than trying to explore their essence, their beauty.

RP: Is painting something that comes easy to you, or would you describe it as more of a struggle?

FW: It's definitely more of a struggle and to me painting is like having one long argument with yourself. I'm never happy with what I paint and if I finally decide a painting is finished, it's more because I can live with it rather than I'm pleased with it. I think this is probably a good thing, though, as the struggle is all part of the process. I like this from Agnes Martin, "An artist is a person who can recognise failure". The minute you become too comfortable is the minute you become complacent and I don't think complacency is good for painting. To me, it's a lifetime's work and is constantly evolving. You have to keep moving, a bit like Bob Dylan on the road with his Never Ending Tour.

RP: If there were any painting in the world you could take home and hang on your wall, which would it be and why?

FW: It would be Rembrandt's 'Self portrait with two circles' (1665) which hangs at Kenwood House. Rembrandt's self portraits are exquisite. They are alive and they breathe and radiate light. They're like a series of miracles. The 'Rembrandt: The Late Works' exhibition at the National Gallery in 2014 had a huge effect on me. Although Rembrandt's self portraits look like a real, living presence hanging on the wall, the painting is not hyper real. He uses impasto frequently on faces, and hands, particularly, fade into abstraction. In his self portraits, the palette tends to be limited and predominately yellow, black, brown and grey. I really like limited palettes.

What fascinates me about 'Self portrait with two circles' is that this is a self portrait of Rembrandt as a painter, one of his final self portraits, but there are actually no hands in the painting. A painter with no hands! I think this is significant. There is an artists' palette and it appears it is being held but there is no hand. It's one of those paintings where your brain sketches in the details which aren't actually there.

In Buddhism, the circle symbolises perfection, complete unity and fundamental truths. Maybe the two circles in the painting are basically Rembrandt showing off the perfection of his artistic skills, that he's reached his zenith. It's difficult for me not to read into the absence of hands as 'look, no hands!' It could also be Rembrandt acknowledging the presence of the divine or mystery in his painting. Pythagoras, the Greek mathematician, maintained that the circle is the most creative form and almost all cultures revere the circle as a sacred symbol of eternity, unity, infinity and wholeness.

Rembrandt looks triumphant in this self portrait, as well he should be. The self portrait was painted four years before he died. I find it one of the most moving self portraits I've ever seen.

RP: Have you always wanted to be an artist or was it something which came later?

FW: I'd never even thought about painting until a friend of mine, an artist and writer, suggested I should. When I finally got over how ridiculous the idea was, I sat down and painted and couldn't stop. I was painting around three or four paintings each night, sometimes more. It was like all these paintings had been stored up and were waiting to be realised. I think that's how people who are sensitive to visual information work – they are constantly taking in cues, composition, angles, the way light falls, how someone smiles, even when they're not painting they are gathering information visually and rearranging it into an equation to develop later during painting. I'd obviously been doing this without realising it. I had to paint at night as my daughter Edie was still very young, so my days were spent wrapped up in her. I started painting at the age of 40 and I think the start of painting was also the return to myself after the shock of motherhood. I see becoming a mother as an existential crisis (in a good way). I refound myself through painting.

RP: What's the first painting you remember making?

FW: I think that'd be 'Portrait for my own private revolution' painted in 2012. I painted a lot of self portraits when I started painting and it's probably the area of painting that interests me the most. I love looking at other artists' self portraits, especially artists who usually paint abstract work. For obvious reasons, when you're starting out painting, painting your own portrait affords you great freedom, logistically, and also from the chains of other people's opinions on how you've painted them! I remember someone accusing me of vanity for painting self portraits, which shows a real misunderstanding of what is involved with turning an eye on yourself. I often like to reevaluate where I am with my painting by painting a self portrait. 'Portrait for my own private revolution' was painted in a kind of Russian Futurist style. I've always loved the Russian painters of the 1910s and early 1920s, Malevich being a favourite. It's a big (much bigger than I usually paint) and bold painting in red, black and

grey and when I look at it I become aware of the sense of freedom I had when I started painting.

RP: Who would you say is the biggest influence on your work?

FW: It'd be really difficult for me to narrow that down to one artist. I love Manet. I love Lowry. I love Beckmann and I love El Greco and Warhol. I love all the German Expressionists and Constructivism and Abstract Expressionism. I think a simple answer to this is that, at this stage in my painting, I'm influenced by things I find beautiful. What beauty actually is, is difficult to talk about or to pinpoint. There's a mystery to this and that's what I'm exploring and trying to hold in paint. I look for the poetry in everyday life and the mundane. I'm not trying to be clever about it and there's no manifesto. It could be something as simple as the moon shining down over the McDonalds on the high street where I live. The local Charles Holden tube stations (Southgate station looks like a UFO). The poetry written across Steve Smith's face. The way Dennis Skinner holds himself with poise and grace which matches his refusal to compromise his political ideals. The sensitivity of Christine Keeler as she tenderly holds her cat's paw, having been hurt by life. The magnificence of the industrial landscape of Port Talbot's Steelworks.

Our planet is insanely beautiful. Just looking at the beauty of the kingfisher, for example, is enough to convince me that we live in a paradise of physical beauty. We literally have heaven on earth. I've become more aware of this as I've got older.

My painting is probably quite unfashionable, it doesn't deal with issues or have academic aims and objectives. But I've always been a bit of a lone wolf and I can't really paint anything if I don't feel it.

RP: How would you describe the experience of curating?

FW: The actual art of curation is fascinating. I started a project, back in 2016, to examine the life of sixties icon Christine Keeler, and as part of the ACE-supported touring exhibition 'Dear Christine' (2019–2020) I curated paintings, sculpture, ceramics, drawings, music and film paying tribute to her in three very distinct spaces. Basically, you can end up with very different exhibitions depending on how you curate works and it's something I loved doing – seeing how the exhibitions changed in the different spaces depending on my curation and how these spaces also dictated the curation. However, outside of the big galleries, when you say 'curate' these days in terms of exhibitions it usually means not just curating the works but organising the exhibitions. This means securing funding, collection and delivery of works and the physicality of dealing with them, editing and printing of catalogues, marketing and promoting the exhibition and working with many other artists, contributors and gallery

managers. It's intense and hard work and requires a lot of dedication and patience. Actually, the effort that goes into these sorts of projects is often really not understood.

I'm really proud of what we achieved with 'Dear Christine', and I enjoy the practice of curating but what goes with it as extra work is exhausting, especially for someone who is a perfectionist, and recently I feel like I've neglected my own painting. I'm looking forward to rekindling my relationship with my easel.

RP: You mostly paint in monochrome, why is that?

FW: Monochrome is something that I ended up with after painting myself into a corner. I've always struggled with the anxiety of choice when it comes to colour. When I started painting, I painted quickly (I still do) and very expressively. I found that making decisions about colour interfered with the spontaneity of painting. I did go through a stage of painting with lots of colour but mostly my instinct is to use it in a restricted way. The more I focussed on teaching myself the basics of painting the more I moved away from colour and ended up with just black and white. Now I want to paint myself out of that corner and re-embrace colour (albeit in a limited palette) and also the more expressive painting I started out doing. Having said this, I do love the power, contrast and starkness of black and white paintings. They do really appeal to me. I think there's a kind of purity to them, without the distraction of colour. There's an austerity to limiting colour that I really like. Grey will always figure a lot in my work. I've always loved grey and I think it's a very underrated and beautiful colour.

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