

Keith Murdoch

Interviews Lisa Denyer

KM: Hello Lisa, your paintings always fill me with a sense of joy when I come across them, so it's a real pleasure to be able to have this chat with you.

I notice that the works of yours found in the Priseman-Seabrook Collection date from 2014-2016, how would you say your work has changed since then?

LD: Thanks so much Keith - likewise, the feeling is mutual! Yes, the work has changed quite a bit since then. At that time, I was focused on quite a minimal aesthetic looking at paintings as objects and the materiality of a solid support.

I've always found that where I'm living has a big influence on the paintings. Just after I made the pieces in the Priseman-Seabrook Collection, I spent two years living and working in Berlin (2016-2018). At that time in the city there were a lot of exhibitions referencing post digital/screen aesthetics. I think that in terms of what I saw there on a daily basis including those exhibitions, fashion, graffiti, logo and graphic design etc. brought out a very geometric side to my work and a saturated colour palette.

I feel that the work changed again when I returned to Manchester and, now that I'm in Edinburgh, I can see that there has been a shift towards landscape. I started out as a landscape painter making large-scale, semi abstract pieces so I definitely feel as though I'm revisiting previous ways of working now. I think the reason this has been sparked again is due to the many green spaces in Edinburgh, especially on the walk to my studio. I've always felt that what I take in visually comes out in one way or another on the canvas/support, whether I'm aware of it at the time or not.

KM: I can certainly relate to location impacting the work. Since I moved to the coast I use a lot more blue, almost in spite of myself. I find it really interesting that you channel your environment and experiences when making a painting, but is there a point in your process when aesthetic decisions begin to take over from the thoughts of landscape or environment? When the needs of the painting outweighs the desire to present an idea?

LD: It's funny what creeps into the work without you being aware of it. I can imagine you sitting in a studio full of blue paintings!

But yes, I definitely feel that there's a point when a painting makes the next steps known in terms of what's right compositionally; an element to balance it/make it precarious, or otherwise give it some point of interest.

That's something I've been thinking about quite a bit recently as I've moved away from quite a set process of first putting down spontaneous, gestural marks which would then be 'framed' by geometric elements which were more meticulously planned out using paper cut outs. I'm experimenting lately with a lighter touch, a less polished aesthetic which I feel brings its own energy and less certainty in the process.

KM: That lack of certainty can be a real positive when it comes to creating a tension in a painting, so I'm sure this new work will be fascinating. Experimenting this way can be emotionally precarious I'd imagine, and might lead to a heightened sense of doubt — I say "heightened" because there's always a natural element of doubt when painting, it's just part and parcel of the creative process I think. Do you have any specific methods for dealing with self-doubt? Also, perhaps related, do you consider an audience for your work at any point during your process?

LS: Absolutely! I think I just realised that my previous ways of working had become a bit formulaic, and I had become quite comfortable in those methods so it was definitely time to mix things up a bit. It does feel pretty uneasy stepping into new territory though.

I really try to go with my intuition with things like that, but if I'm honest there is always a part of my mind which wonders how the work will be perceived by others. Something that helps me cope with that is to remind myself that I have my 'day job' so that I can make the work I want to make with integrity, which doesn't have to be commercially viable and widely accepted.

KM: I'm also in the 'day job' club — it has its pros and cons, but the level of freedom it affords to explore and develop work relatively un-pressured is definitely something to be grateful for.

When you are in the midst of exploring new territory, do you refer to other artists? Perhaps old favourites whose work can offer a kind of motivation to keep faith with your own vision? And while we're talking artists, are there any whose work you're particularly excited by at the moment?

LD: I agree. I also enjoy the contrast between my job and the work I do in the studio. My studio time is solitary for the most part, and in my job I'm talking to people all the time. I actually really like the variety and in combination they give me a good balance.

I've been looking at other artists quite a bit while I've been negotiating this new direction in my work. I just came back from a trip to London where I saw the Hilma af Klint/Piet Mondrian exhibition at Tate Modern. That had a big impact on me. I've come back to her work time and time again over the years, and I can't help but admire her unique vision and her tenacious approach to painting.

Another artist I often think about is Philip Guston. There's one word which always comes to my mind when I think about his paintings and that's 'integrity'. The way he allowed his style to change and develop after having such success as an Abstract Expressionist painter is something I really respect. Despite the criticism, he stuck to his guns and painted what he felt compelled to paint, and that's something I remind myself of if I'm having any doubts about my own work.

In terms of contemporary painters, I recently went on a studio visit with David Iain Brown in Glasgow which was really inspiring. His work is multi-layered, ambitious and vibrant with such great energy!

KM: I can see why you would get a lift from your visit to David Iain Brown - there are visual parallels between your works, yet you're both strikingly individual.

You seem quite diligent in going to see exhibitions; something I've kind of got out of the habit of since I ensconced myself on this isolated edge of Northumberland. So I'd be interested to hear what you think about the state of contemporary painting in Britain at the moment; from your perspective of someone who actively engages with the British art scene as both spectator and participant?

LD: Thanks Keith, I'm glad you think so. I try to go to as many exhibitions as I can, and I really like to do studio visits whenever I get the chance. I think there's some interesting work being made in the UK at the moment, but these days it's not always easy to discover new painters on social media. I do think it's important to go and see exhibitions in person whenever possible, and I'm always excited when I find a gallery showing interesting work. There's really nothing like seeing paintings in real life as opposed to on a tiny screen!

I've always found the painting community in the UK to be very supportive and I feel very lucky in that, whenever I've moved to a new city, I've felt like I've had a ready-made network. It's a real privilege being able to meet new people to connect with other artists by doing studio visits. I've always enjoyed doing that, and putting people in touch who I think would work well together.

KM: I totally agree about seeing paintings in real life as opposed to online. When you mentioned earlier that you went to see the Mondrian exhibition, my first thought was that

you'd have gotten to experience the painterliness of his work and the extraordinary amount of decision-making left visible; something that never really comes across in reproduction.

Talking of 'painterliness', I see that you predominantly use acrylic paints in your work albeit with a mixed-media element. Have you always used acrylic paints or did you arrive at their use after frustrations with other media? And, this is possibly a question that only other painters would be interested in; do you have a preferred brand? Or do you use different brands depending on a particular colour?

LD: Yes it's those little clues about how a painting has been pieced together that make it really interesting, and that's something you can only really see in person. It always makes me smile when I see painters at exhibitions viewing work from the side to check out the materials and support. There are certain qualities of acrylic paint which really appeal to me, for example when using washes, the way the colour shines through from underneath. I like to contrast gestural marks and washes with thicker areas of flat colour, so emulsion or filler mixed into the paint work really well to get a nice chalky effect.

I tend to be drawn to particular colours rather than brands. I've never really been one to spend ages mixing colours, I like the immediacy of it coming straight from the tube and mixing on the surface. I have used oil paint in the past but with 'muddy' results. Recently I've been using oil stick which seems to offer a good alternative and I love the smell!

KM: I must admit that I tend to be much more of a straight-from-the-tube painter than I used to be. Some of the colours you can get nowadays are extraordinary - I wouldn't know where to begin to try and mix some of them. Do you find that working 'straight from the tube' (so to speak) has allowed you to be quite organised in the studio? I'm trying to imagine your working space and I'm guessing it leans more towards the organised pristine-ness of a Mondrian than the pure chaos of a Francis Bacon studio - I could be completely wrong of course.

LD: I really like the idea of having a chaotic studio and the kind of spontaneous energy that conjures up. However you are right in your guess, I'm actually quite neat and tidy (only in the studio though!)

As part of my studio routine the first thing I usually do is tidy and clean the space. I work on four paintings at a time, it seems to be the perfect number for me to concentrate on without getting overwhelmed or bored. There's something about having an organised, tidy space that seems to promote good energy around the paintings and I feel like I can see them clearly. Something I always do is to photograph the paintings in progress at each stage. I find this really useful for thinking about the next step especially when I'm not in the studio.

KM: I think a daily routine can be quite healthy and it certainly works for you. I know we've talked about what feels like a lack of opportunities for painters currently, but do you have any immediate plans for your work; exhibiting or collaborating? And looking more long-term... I was hoping to refrain from asking the dreaded "where do you see yourself in five years" question, but I am interested to learn how you hope your practice might develop in the long term?

LD: I'm looking forward to showing some new work in the *Winter Exhibition* at Detail Gallery in Edinburgh which opens next week. It's a group show of artists the gallery has worked with since they opened in 2022. It's been such a great experience exhibiting with Detail, especially as it's quite rare these days to find a gallery that continuously supports the artists they work with and wants to exhibit artists who are experimenting within their practice.

I've recently signed with London based agency Artiq. They have done a lot of exciting projects with artists I really admire so I'm really looking forward to working with them too. I feel very grateful that things are going well at the moment but I know that in the art world it's very much peaks and troughs, and when you're in a trough it feels like it's never ending! That's why it's hard to think about the future too much, but rather I think it's important to be present in the moment and recognise every opportunity that presents itself.

In terms of how the work will develop, I find that very difficult to predict. As soon as I think it will go one way, the opposite happens and the direction changes completely. I think that's part of the appeal and excitement of having a painting practice. As long as I'm happy with the work and I feel that it has integrity, that's good enough for me.

KM: I think that's a really positive note to end on, Lisa. I've thoroughly enjoyed chatting with you and I'd like to thank you for providing such a rich insight into your practice.

LD: It's been an absolute pleasure talking to you Keith, thank you so much for your thoughtful questions.

Interview completed on 14 December 2023