

Robert Priseman

Interviews Simon Carter

RP: Hello Simon, thank you for inviting me to your studio today and for showing me your more recent work. It is a real pleasure being here.

You are in your early 60's now and have been a painter for many decades. That must cause a pause for thought and reflection. I wonder if you might share some of your meditations with us on what it means to spend a life in art?

SC: We can spend a lot of time denying that we are getting older but 60 does seem a bit of a landmark. Coming to terms with that takes time for anyone. I have found recent years difficult for various reasons and am probably more reflective as a result. Part of that is coming to terms with getting older. There is now less time ahead than behind, but hopefully I am better at what I do, making more astute decisions, problem solving quicker and with more daring. I want to guard against self-deception and falling into lazy habits so I don't allow myself any easy satisfaction... or time off.

RP: Was there a moment you can remember when you first thought to yourself "I want to be a painter"?

SC: If there was such a moment it would have been at primary school. I can't really remember not thinking I was some kind of painter. Mrs Neal, my class teacher when I was 7 or 8 years old, showed my parents a drawing I had made of a galleon in full sail and suggested to them in the future I would do something with drawing. It was not until I left art school that I stopped and wondered what to do, or rather how to keep doing what I felt I had to do.

RP: It's interesting that you remember drawing a galleon. Because the place where man meets water is a central motif to your work. Can you expand on this for us please?

SC: Looking at what I make and where I walk it is all about those places where the land meets the marshes and the sea. I walk into the landscape along the seawalls, thin threads between land and sea. I have sometimes wondered why it is that I invariably look out from the seawalls, away from the land into what... the unknown? These coastal landscapes are our commons, largely unowned and unfenced. We are free to wander without knowing we are doing so by permission. So there is a sense of freedom and also an awareness of the larger and wilder unknowns.

RP: A few years ago I visited Pluscarden Abbey in Scotland. The monks there follow the rule of St Benedict, an order which does not demand the brothers need do any good works in the community. Instead, they inspire through their adherence to a strict daily ritual. They sing beautiful Gregorian chants several times a day, hold mass and inspire through their dedication to Christ. They also make themselves available to others seeking retreat, contemplation, and guidance.

Sitting with you here today, I see many similarities between how the Monks of Pluscarden spend their days and how you live your life. What do you think of this reflection?

SC: That is an interesting observation, and there are parallels. I sometimes think my life has no particular discipline. I have a faith and go to a non-conformist church but find contemplation and prayer hard work. It is easy to assume that it is a lack of discipline and application, or an inborn apathy. But I come into the studio every day, I draw and paint whether I feel like it or not. It is what seems to me to make sense of things and it is what I do, maybe even what I am. The act of painting and the discipline of studio life are both rigorous and rewarding. I am not sure how to rationalise this, but I sense that drawing and prayer are if not the same, then very close. The non-conformist tradition does not have a great history of visual art, and I sometimes feel at odds with my church traditions, but it might be the shortcomings of that particular tradition rather than mine. Though I do tend to think it is my failing and keep it to myself.

RP: Reflecting further on religion, we see how many people today reject the idea of universal truths, and instead believe in a series of personal truths rooted in the “lived experience.” What strikes me in your practice as a painter, is that you bring your personal truth to the studio every day and then present it to a series of what might be regarded as universal truths; that we all share common experiences as people, rooted in a physical landscape. That that landscape exists outside of ourselves, but within it we have the space to dream, think and feel.

How does this resonate with you?

SC: I would like to think that what you say is true or at least hope that it is possible. I walk out into the landscape and make rudimentary drawn responses to it. This is a personal and subjective act. In the studio I'm interested to see what marks I made, how I responded to observation. It is the objective analysis of those basic drawn marks that feeds the painting process. The painting is about finding a way to maintain that fresh, off-hand mark-making while building it together as a painting. Always looking to make it fresh and new, not settling to a method or a considered way of proceeding.

RP: If I were to expand my observation a little, I would say your individual experiences lead you to walk out daily and engage in a personal meditation with nature. One gets a sense that the land metaphorically and emotionally embraces you, while the sea represents some kind of great universal truth which is to be contemplated and navigated. In that context (if I am reading it correctly), do your drawings and paintings act as a meditation on something bigger than yourself, something universal?

SC: That question poses several points, all of which feel true to me. There is a desire to be at the edge, not only of the land, but also of what I think I might know or my abilities. It might be good to leave all our learning and ability behind and head out un-armoured, not making assumptions, not knowing how to do a particular thing and without anything rehearsed ahead of time.

There is a sense in which walking into the landscape is about personal experience, noticing and breathing in the day. And, also, as you say, that contemplating the things on the seaward side of the seawall is contemplating some greater truth. The drawings then act as some kind of meditative action, akin to the way prayer is embedded in the routine of the contemplative life

RP: A lot of people in the arts have begun to comment on a growing separation between the “art world” and “artists” over the past few years. Do you have any reflections on this?

SC: I think I have always felt there are two worlds going along in parallel, but with very different agendas. The one is about promotion, achievements, money, being seen and being seen to do the right things. The other, in the studio, is about the mechanics of making, about paint and paper and mess and mistakes. It is here that aiming high, over reaching oneself, is essential. I am not much interested in the other world.

RP: In this light, I want to return to something you mentioned earlier. That “coastal landscapes are our commons, largely unowned and unfenced.” This statement indicates that you may hold a potential plurality of view. That your work as an artist could be both outside of political consideration and also simultaneously political. On the one hand painting is free and outside of political observation, concerned with individual struggle, yet on the other hand could also be making observations in your case about global warming, pollution, and land ownership.

What are your thoughts on this?

SC: Some painters are more public than others, some have more to say about the functioning of the world than others, some protest, some are political, some not at all. I don't think any of these things makes a painting better or worse. Its value lays somewhere else.

The act of painting is both a solitary meditation and a political act. Solitary rather than private, in that making a painting does at some point hope for an audience. That painting is a solitary activity does allow a large degree of freedom, the audience being at a great distance. But painting is also a political act, not because of subject matter or the politics of the artist, but because painting in itself is a small stand against utilitarianism, against everything having a function and a purpose. I feel that one of the great things about painting is its purposelessness. It doesn't do anything, its value is in its being a painting. The real message is not in the painting, it is the painting, just as the real value of a tree is not in all the many uses we might put it to, but in it just being this marvellous thing we call a tree.

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