

Robert Priseman

Interviews Br. Daniel Morphy

RP: Thank you for agreeing to this interview.

Your studio is set in the beautiful grounds of Pluscarden Abbey in north Scotland, where you are also a monk. Yet you studied art at Camberwell School of Art. These two venues seem worlds apart from each other. How did you transition from London art school to monastic life in Scotland?

DM: Good question. The contrast is quite stark. I entered the monastery at the end of 1998 at the age of 41, about two years after graduating from Camberwell. There seemed to be a kind of ‘artless’ quality to the place in comparison to the deliberate ‘artfulness’ of art college. This is not entirely the case, but monastic life deliberately cultivates a species of cultural vacuum, a ‘desert’ environment, in order to facilitate the encounter with God without distractions. In my first years here I studied traditional icon painting, something which I began before entering but carried on as part of my monastic juniorate studies, and this helped with the transition. That ended when I took solemn (permanent) vows and at that point I felt drawn to revert to the more ‘secular’ type of art that I was making previously. This I think was in part to stake a claim to my own identity in what was still at that time quite a strange environment. I feel much more integrated now after about 25 years here but I still like to make art that contrasts creatively with the religious milieu.

RP: You produce drawings and paintings of extraordinary imagination. They are like extreme surreal visions. How do you develop your images?

DM: It’s a mysterious process. I sit down with a sketchbook, listen to some music and doodle; or ideas come to me when I’m doing other stuff and linger in my head. These feature things that have made a strong impression on me over time; natural shapes such as shells, animal forms, cartoon characters etc; taken out of context and rearranged in counter-intuitive and striking combinations. Classic surrealist procedure I would imagine, although not particularly dreams. The majority of these random scribblings may come to nothing but when leafing through the sketchbook later something will strike me as worth developing for reasons which are hard to account for. A drawing may seem uninteresting at first but if I go back to it, it could be years later, then it can come to life and generate more work.

RP: In the past you have mentioned how you find line drawing easy, yet struggle with colour in painting. Yet you wish to persist with the struggle. Why?

DM: When I take an idea into a pen & ink stage it becomes something very controlled and precise; I usually work with technical pens on Bristol board and feel on top of a technique I have developed over many years. If I take a drawn image into paint, that is oil paint, then I am less in control; Apart from the icon course, I never studied painting academically, my work in art college was mostly constructions – relief sculpture, found objects & so on. I more or less taught myself oil painting after discovering a batch of oil paints left in a drawer here in the abbey by previous artist monks now deceased. I find the way paint works fascinating, the kind of accidents that can emerge from the mark making and gestures involved but, aside from a fairly limited palette featuring regular favourites. I am not really a colourist; my strength is still more in line. So there is a process of taking something very controlled into a new and less safe environment in which it undergoes a metamorphosis. There are risks and rewards.

RP: That's really interesting. I think most people who have studied at art school after the 1960's, and wanted to study painting, had to teach themselves.

Who do you cite as your core influences?

DM: How long have you got? Just about everything that has happened in art in recorded history from cave painting to post modernism. In fact, particularly cave painting; these deceptively simple religiously charged ur-images have prompted the way I frequently draw human or animal shapes using a very pared-down minimal outline. In my late teens and early 20's I was very drawn to the early surrealist movement, particularly Magritte, and also the more abstract work of Paul Klee & Joan Miro. One day in the early 80's I wandered into a newsagent's shop in Fulham Road in London and discovered by chance a bumper volume of 'Bijou Funnies' for sale; this being collected comic strips of the American Underground Comix movement from the '60's; featuring the work of Robert Crumb, Art Spiegelman, Justin Green & others. This really turned me around and gave me a cue to start something and it is this, more than anything, which is behind the drawings in the Priseman-Seabrook collection and much other work I have done.

RP: I'm reminded also of 'Marginalia.' The 800 year old illustrations sketched inside the margins of medieval illuminated manuscripts. They were made by the hands of monks, just like you. Showing the imagery of the bizarre, from monkeys playing the bagpipes to human-animal hybrids, weapon wielding rabbits and mermaids. This strange and irreverent historic humour appears very close to your own cartoons. What do you think about that?

DM: There is a clear link between these marginalia or gargoyles and modern cartoons. One could say that our comics are marginalia brought to the centre. The classical centrepieces of pre-modernity having been banished to the margins for better or for worse. The mountains levelled and the valleys raised up so to speak. A significant element and perhaps the soul of

marginalia is the subject matter of anthropomorphised animals which has long been close to my heart. It featured in the ancient animal-headed gods of many cultures and in our time in cartoons, comics and the characters in children's books such as the Narnia Chronicles and Winnie the Pooh. I have always wondered why this has such a perennial appeal; does it point to some sort of pre-lapsarian instinct of primordial innocence, or an eschatological vision of the New Earth when the lion shall lie down with the lamb? Either way the idea of humanised animals is very powerful.

RP: To change subject a little, anyone living in the UK at the beginning of the 21st century can't help but notice how British culture, Christianity and masculinity specifically are under attack from a vaguely defined 'liberal ruling establishment.' It is broadly observed in the media, galleries, theatres and so on, and has been coined the "culture wars." As a British Christian monk, what reflections do you have on this? Are you on the front line as it were?

DM: As a monk in the far north of Britain I am situated somewhat out of firing range of these wars. The impression I receive from this perspective is the extent to which this is puffed up by the news industry and social media should not be discounted. 'Scandals' are manufactured and thrown up as a ping-pong battle between opposing sides for the 'shocked' entertainment of the consumer. Of course there are genuine victims, just as there were in the Roman coliseum or the auto-da-fe's of late medieval Spain.

I wonder who this 'ruling establishment' is though? There are a number of these in modern Britain and not all take the same line. If we are thinking of the education-media-arts establishment(s) then there is probably a case to be made. These, by definition, foster a 'creative' and thus innovative agenda; so 'tradition,' i.e. conservative values and particularly Christianity are definitely out of fashion and have been so for some time. But is this a monolithic situation? Are there not dissenting voices?

One can easily get carried away concocting elaborate pan-cultural theories to explain this. But, to put it in perspective, I get the impression when I visit my family in London (mostly non-Christian) that the ordinary folk of our nation are, on the whole, uninterested in this issue. Where opinions are expressed, 'wokeism' if it can be called that, is not particularly favoured; and very little animus against Christianity. Of course, they may be just being polite. I realise that this may sound a bit smug. Feelings can run high about these things for those who are actually in the firing line. One hears sad stories about people in the academic world for example.

RP: That's a very balanced and even handed over view. It reminds me how many other cultural shifts have occurred through history. The reformation, with the dissolution of the monasteries and sacking of churches, the English civil war, fights for the right to vote and so on. Yet despite all these battles, life somehow manages to just keep going. And where the

intellectual pendulum swings in one direction, it seems inevitably to swing back the opposite way.

What you say also reminds me how most of us wish to keep our heads down and just get on with each other. Living our day to day lives as simply and stress free as we can. I know as a monk you have several daily religious observations to keep. Do you also keep a daily routine with your art practice?

DM: When I have some artwork to do I try to give it an hour or so during the morning work period. The whole period lasts for about 2½ hours, so I can fit in some other stuff as well. We have a similar period in the afternoon which I give over to outdoor work in the grounds or whatever else arises. This all being structured around the liturgical horarium, which is about 4½ hours in total split up throughout the day. If it can keep to a regular rhythm I find one thing flows into another and a kind of ‘ecology’ of time and action develops in which each thing feeds into the rest.

RP: Would you say you make art for yourself, or for an audience? And in making your art, do you feel you benefit from being “out of the firing range” and far from cultural and political distractions?

DM: At the risk of seeming self-centred, primarily for myself. I think it was C. S. Lewis who said that he wrote for himself first and that if he liked the work then it would be more likely that others would like it too. Ditto. I make it because I enjoy it and would stop if I didn’t.

Having this ‘self-indulgence’ provides a kind of counter-balance to the monastic ethos which necessarily asks for a challenging degree of regular self-renunciation. There are pros and cons to being out of the firing range regarding art. I am not really in touch with the ‘art scene,’ except for occasional trips to London. And to that extent I’m out of touch with galleries too and the possibility of exhibiting and selling my work. The advantage is that being supported by the monastery, I don’t have to and can just get on self-indulgently making art.

And of course one hears of ‘wars and rumours of wars’ in our out-of-the-way enclave, not only in the world but also in the Church in a less bloody way. This seems like a protected place, but not cut off; our motto is “in this place I will give peace.” Our many visitors feel this too. A good place to make art that is out of touch with the world.

RP: Something I’m curious about, is an idea that in the past we viewed art as having some kind of linear development. Evolving and growing like a tree, with various branches coming off from it. From cave painting to classical art, the renaissance to academia then the explosion of the ism’s through the 20th century. Now, in the 21st century it seems almost like

art history has stopped and artists largely make work around their own experience, borrowing forms and norms from the past to create a kind of individualistic eclecticism.

I wonder if that is true, and if it could also be applied to your work as an artist?

DM: I think that kind of linear progression of history concept is out of favour generally these days. The idea that classical art, for instance, is a 'progression' from cave painting no longer appeals to our egalitarian values. Post-modernism has exploded all this and the debris hasn't landed yet, like the Big Bang and the expanding universe. Yet this is a period of history too, in which the individualism you mention sends artists into increasing isolation from each other and a common purpose. But this is just one aspect of the more high profile 'art scene'; are there not always enclaves of group action under the radar? As for feeding off forms and norms of the past, no one creates from nothing; that is God's prerogative. We inevitably receive from what has been handed down to us from the past, that is what 'tradition' means, whether it is classical or comics – or even an anti-tradition like post-modernism.

Yes, I am physically out of touch with the art world as I have said. I always wanted to be involved in some kind of art movement, like surrealism or Dadaism, but that is easier sought than found, particularly as art movements seem to have died out – we just don't believe in 'ism's' any more. So I am really thrown back onto my own resources in terms of generating ideas and what I make. I don't have any regular critical input from outside, although the occasions when this does happen can sometimes have quite an impact; I have been enabled to turn some interesting corners at these times.

So here I am on planet Pluscarden, a good community even if not an art community – do I mind? *In loco isto dabo pacem.*

RP: Your world seems like quite a good place to be. However, I suspect it's as much a state of mind as much as anything else. If you had any words of advice for a young artist starting out today – what would they be?

DM: The ('fine') artist normally has two choices: make art that you like and make no money or make art that other people like and maybe make money; i.e. you can make art for love or for money. For a favoured few both seem to come together, however I sometimes wonder that if even for them market constraints still apply. Even the high-profile uber-artist must still be subject to the demands of patrons and galleries, the burden of huge amounts of money...what a life!

On a different level the more craft-oriented artist can often find a ready niche market and job satisfaction if you don't mind hard work – stained glass work or iconography for instance.

Moral: get a day job that you like.

RP: I think you are absolutely right. Most committed and compelling artists I know have to supplement their practice in one way or another. 'Get a day job you like' seems like a good place to conclude.

Thank you very much for being so open and expansive with your answers Br. Daniel. It has been fascinating to glimpse a little into your world.

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