

# Robert Priseman

## Interviews David Manley

RP: You were an art student back in the 1970's, having studied at Exeter, Falmouth and Birmingham art schools. This was a time when abstract painting was at its height. How do you feel abstract painting has evolved over the past 50 years, and how has it managed to remain relevant in the 21<sup>st</sup> century?

DM: I studied at college as we were entering the last gasp of modernism's 'rules' and I recall a statement from Frank Stella's early Penguin monograph about the rules and rigidity of painting's progress that seemed to me to be fairly ridiculous. And perhaps inevitably, less than a decade later he overthrew them for a frankly excessively plural practice, that alongside everything else going on was a signal of the advent of the post-modern era.

When painting recovered from the onslaught of the conceptual and the advent of neo-Duchampian tropes it nestled into a very homespun and personal practice for most serious painters whose passions for the handmade have only seemed more and more relevant in the digital age. Nowadays painting seems to me to be more comfortable in its skin than many of the various forms of digital creativity. And I suspect AI will only accelerate that comfort. The capacity of painting to slow down our visual receptivity and transmit very personal and internalised emotions and ideas I hope keeps painting alive for a long time yet.

RP: I suspect you are right. It's been around for about 40,000 years so far, so there is clearly something deep at play. In your own practice, you cite many different sources of influence, from jazz music, to the geography of the landscape and basic geometry. Can you tell us a little about your working process? How do you synthesize a multitude of ideas down into paintings?

DM: My practice oscillates wildly between different notions depending on what I see, read, what I hear and where I travel...But I try to have at least one broad idea bubbling under as I work on the ones currently on the go in the studio. At present I'm working on a body of small paintings that focus on the towns & villages of each district in Leicestershire. That's been ongoing for a decade now, alongside a new group of paintings that take the idea of enclosed gardens as a starting point. But I'm already thinking, visiting and reading widely about the coast of the British Isles that will be another project in a year or so.

However the thinking goes, each project uses a fairly standard template of photos, sketches and (nowadays mainly) digital collages to kick start the imagery and forms. Though the physical act of painting often sees these skewed greatly in the making.

RP: Can you tell us about your colour palette, brushes, and the sort of surfaces you choose? And why you choose to use them in particular?

DM: That's quite a tricky one! I generally choose what seems to me to be the appropriate approach to the project in hand. Last year it was acrylic on paper, right now I'm enjoying going back to oil on canvas. The colour palette is just as varied. Inevitably greens predominate the garden paintings, but generally I am wilfully promiscuous as far as colour is concerned. The tools have accumulated over many years, and the brushes are a mix of all sorts, sizes, and makes - I also use a lot of palette knives, pipettes, sand papers and other paraphernalia. So the short answer is probably that I've no idea!

RP: Who do you consider to be your biggest influences?

DM: Equally hard I think. As I do not have a particular or specific 'brand' it is hard to pin down any obvious stylistic precursors. As a student I was by turns obsessed with Peter Lanyon & Patrick Heron, then Morris Louis & Sam Gilliam, before briefly falling for Richard Tuttle. But over the many years since I've had many passions for other artists not just painters. Perhaps the biggest influences are the paintings I've acquired over the years and that I live with every day, especially two who briefly taught me, Michael Finn & William Gear. And of course, others such as my wife Sarah R. Key, and I pass a small panel painting by a certain Robert Priseman every morning!

RP: Ah! You are very kind. I'm a bit embarrassed now!

I wonder, what do you think are the hardest challenges facing an artist? My wife often says it is not so much doing the work, as keeping your emotions regulated. Do you feel this is true, or are there other factors at play such as money, fashion, and politics for example?

DM: Fashion and politics interest me greatly but not in the studio at all. Money is useful for getting by and things done and so on. But again, I'm lucky enough to have a modest sufficiency nowadays.

I think that's a very prescient remark from your wife. Once I'd set my course to be an artist, around the age of 15 I think, I don't believe a day has passed that I've ever thought not to do it. Why and what to paint occasionally perhaps, but it's simply what I do and I can't imagine ever giving it up. Though the emotional, intellectual and intuitive responses when you are alone in the studio confronted by the canvases can be difficult and even terrifying. But if it wasn't so, then there wouldn't be a reason to carry on.

RP: Did you grow up in an artistic household, or were you the first in your family to become an artist?

DM: I was only the second in my entire extended family to take any form of further or higher education and whilst my mother was very keen to help me get a decent education I don't think it ever occurred to them I'd do a degree in Fine Art, or even what that might mean. But I have a really early recollection at around age seven of being taken from school as we were moving home across the city and the teacher telling my mother that she wanted to "tie me to the chair as David is so good at drawing"... I guess it's the classic for most of us who've had a career in art. By the time I was at secondary level it was a fierce ambition for me - and I was very lucky to have an Art Master who arranged both extra art lessons including blagging us into life & art history classes at the local art school. And arranging an annual exhibition at the local Museum & Art Gallery, so that I was able to start showing work from age fifteen. So that's where I got my really intense education in this 'business.'

RP: If I may, I'd like to ask your thoughts on the differences between painting which has more of a global expression and that which is more defined by landscape.

If I am correct, the earliest roots of abstract painting begin with Ukrainian born Kazimir Malevich's *Black Square* painting of 1915 and slightly earlier abstracted landscape paintings by Moscow born Wassily Kandinsky. As the abstract movement evolved it spread across Europe and then the USA. With much of Kandinsky's abstraction being inspired, like a large part of your own, by music. Because this is already abstract and does not represent the physical world. But aims instead to represent something of our internal life and emotions. Is this the case for you? And if so, how do you manage to visualise the internal?

DM: I think you correctly identify one of the key strands of abstraction though there's also now of course that fascinating connection to theosophy through Hilma Af Klint and latterly Mondrian to consider. I recently re-read the revised edition of Julian Bell's excellent *What Is Painting?* where he reminds us that the spiritualist Georgiana Houghton was exhibiting automatic paintings, several completely abstract, in London in 1871. But your question is really hard...I don't think I have that form of synesthesia where I 'hear' colour or 'see' music specifically but I do associate individual approaches to the canvas, the actions that lead to the forms, grounds, washes or strokes and so on, that one creates with particular types of music. And I've spoken before about how I tend only to listen to instrumental music when working.

Ultimately one's internal dialogue is - I suspect - a jumble of the now and those things past that it is impossible to analyse and probably pointless to try. Though if I turn to paintings that have been on the go for a longish time (often my way) I find myself trying to think my way back to the impulse that originally got me started.

RP: Picking up on something you mentioned about the advent of AI, one of the things that strikes me in the first part of the 21st century is how much of the world's culture is now considered to be global. Especially in the art world. And that local expressions are becoming less and less important in the arts. Especially in the light of the internet and social media. Yet I am also struck by how important our geography and local manifestations still are to us. We might imagine walking down a high street and seeing restaurants serving Chinese, Vietnamese, Nigerian, Mexican or French cuisine. Or learning some Japanese, Korean or Polish if we wanted to travel to any of those countries.

You mention that you are currently developing a series of paintings focused on the towns and villages of Leicestershire. And I'm reminded of the word "glocalization" which comes from the Japanese word dochakuka means "reflecting or characterized by both local and global considerations." Can you talk a little about this push and pull between the global and the local please?

DM: It's one of the less appetising aspects of now, that the 'big brand's' are led by what we might consider to be artist CEO's. Whose works are bought by billionaire 'citizen's of nowhere' and end up in Freeports dotted across the globe, conveniently situated at International airports.

But I still think a lot of painting is specific to its general location or even closer to home. So I'd very much agree with you. Years back when I was teaching regularly I used to give a lecture on abstraction in current painting and posed the question of whether there were still national or regional characteristics in the work being produced. I gave as one of my examples a number of Spanish painters, Luis Gordillo, Juan Usle and Ferran Garcia Sevilla amongst them and contrasted them with the Brazilian Beatriz Milhazes with whom I felt they shared certain characteristics. And several British painters such as Ian McKeever and Fiona Rae, who I suggested were very different in sensibility. I'm not as familiar with current painting outside the UK but from what I can see there are still echoes of the local in current painting.

For myself I really do believe that some form of percolation takes place in my 'village.' Painting that infuses the purely non-representational, the vaguely suggestive and the occasionally obvious references in the forms, colours and surfaces into the final picture. I certainly want to try and create some kind of 'essence' of the place in each work though it gets harder as I go around the county through places that are often quite similar. It's an interesting line of questioning as the origins of this project came from an observation that most of my previous work up until the millennium was based on my visits to other places, Italy, Russia, Portugal and elsewhere and 'why didn't I look closer to home?'

So that started an undertaking that so far already comprises over 130 works with more than that yet to come. I visit every place make photos and sketches, that are synthesised to make

each painting and hopefully though thoroughly abstracted some specific and particular quality of place comes through. That said I'm always at pains to say the painting stands in for the place not as a factual depiction. And yes, inevitably, given the ubiquity of the image across media platforms, the global backwash of current and past painting also has its affect on the outcomes, all the more so as the amount of information piles up!

RP: That's really interesting David. It reminds us how Malevich's national identity was so important to him while at the same time he was engaged in an international project.

Your observations also bring to mind the quote by the psychotherapist Carl R. Rogers who wrote in his book *On Becoming a Person* "What is most personal is most universal." So perhaps there is a truth in there, that as an artist we draw upon our surroundings and experiences to create personal responses to things. This is exactly what you are engaged in with your newer projects, where you are looking closer to home. And perhaps the more completely synthesised they are the more successful they are. Not in terms of financial recognition, but in terms of being successful expressions of art. Does that sound true to you?

DM: I'd love to think so Robert. However I'm very conscious of the gap between me and my thoughts and actions and what any viewer might infer from looking at something that is almost entirely abstracted. For me though that's the challenge of painting that I've accepted, and mostly over a long career, that I've tried to stay close to. One of the many painters I've admired at close quarters - I first encountered his work at eighteen and last saw him in Birmingham not long before he passed - is Bert Irvin. I've always been captivated by something he said in a catalogue entry back in the late 1980's. He emphasised his passion for abstraction, his consciousness as a "living, pulsating, loving being" and that if that "awareness" got into the work and spoke to others then "that is the ambition and I would be mad if I didn't attempt it." I'd like to think, dare to hope, that's what also keeps me making paintings for the past half century and more.

RP: That's such a beautiful quote David. It seems to cut to the very core of why any of us paint, or indeed create anything.

**Interview completed 22 April 2024**