

# Robert Priseman

## Interviews: Jeffrey Dennis

RP: Can you begin by telling us a little about what you consider to be the core message of your paintings?

JD: I am quite resistant to the idea that they have a singular message. I rarely start a painting thinking ‘this is going to be about ...’ The ‘incident’ in a painting — its lever on your imagination — usually only becomes apparent to me during the actual painting process. Although I do have some paintings that dwell on some quite loaded imagery, from a variety of sources, including sequences of film-stills, more often I start from photos, drawings and patterns that have little pre-existing significance. The satisfaction is in being alerted to emerging meaning.

Our relationship to the paintings we look at is quite complex. In his essay *Between Two Colmars*, John Berger wrote about revisiting the Grünewald Altarpiece, ten years after first seeing it; of being forced to reflect on himself, on how he had changed, or been changed by everything that had happened around him — life, politics, etc — in between, and how that, in turn, changed the way he experienced the painting.

RP: What is your working practice: how do you evolve your paintings from beginning to end?

JD: They evolve, but I wouldn’t say that’s something I’m entirely in control of. Commencing a painting, I have come to rely on a small number of strategies that are fairly constant: starting with covering the canvas with a simplified version of a William Morris wallpaper or textile pattern, something that would have remained much more visible, like a background landscape, in my earlier work, but is now more likely to become an entirely hidden structure (still, I hope, carrying some of the legacy of Morris’s aspirations; a background ‘hum’) in the finished work. Colour is built up gradually in layers of small marks (I call them a ‘bubblescape’), larger, more physical blobs and slabs of thicker paint (like mortar) and a scaffolding of drawing (tubes, dragged charcoal lines or cable-like connections around the painting), all of which tend to force a slippage from any initial plan.

I may place, provisionally, some transcribed, inset images, like windows, from my inconsequential photographic archive (things in the studio; things from ‘outside’). They may more around or sink back, in relation to my understanding of the painting’s emerging ‘meanings’.

RP: I imagine your paintings which begin with covering the canvas with a simplified version of a William Morris wallpaper or textile pattern would include works such as *The*

Confinement of Richard Dadd (1985) at the Tate and Strange Fruit (also 1985) in the Arts Council Collection?

JD: Yes: they were examples of paintings where I proposed an explicit, psychological link between the entangled but formalised 'nature' of the Morris designs and the narrative incidents I embedded within them.

RP: When I look at your work I can't think of anything else quite like it. It's highly unusual to be so unique. Only a handful of artists occupy such a space, artists like Francis Bacon or the composer John Cage. How does that feel and who if any would you cite as influences?

JD: Proposing any kind of relationship to the monumentalised artists of the past seems preposterous, like Cary Grant clambering over the faces of Mount Rushmore in North By Northwest. The achievements of artists from even the recent past like Louise Bourgeois (who, in a 'sliding-doors' moment, I failed to meet by about ten minutes) become ever more quickly mythologised into a starry cultural pantheon. But it is important to feel you can negotiate some kind of 'working relationship' to the work of anyone you admire. When I was at the Slade I tried to learn from painters like John Hoyland, a champion for the power of non-representational colour and form. But I was already stepping away from that influence towards the end of the course (I remember the impact of Narrative Painting at the ICA, curated by Tim Hyman in 1979). I suddenly discovered (through working at Whitechapel Gallery, during Nicholas Serota's directorship, in the early 1980s) all the 'New Image' painting that had been brewing up in Europe (and its links back to artists like Max Beckmann), the kinds of painting that allowed everything back in.

RP: What do you consider to be the hardest challenge in being an artist?

JD: When I was young I felt a kind of feverish competitiveness; a hunger for validation. I've been lucky in having had enormous encouragement from a whole range of mentors and peers. Getting older, I find I care a little less about what anyone thinks of my work, but still feel an obligation to keep exploring, to press doggedly on, with an uneasy awareness of all the other people who 'drew the short straw'.

RP: Something about art today puzzles me. In 1936 Walter Benjamin wrote his seminal essay The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction. In this he said traditional art forms of painting and sculpture had been produced, viewed and consumed exclusively by the ruling elite. Because the "aura" of a work of art is defined by "its presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be." Benjamin felt that with the advent of photographic means of reproduction, the doors were opened for the democratization of art. And that what was lost in the facsimile of the original was compensated for in a new egalitarianism.

We are nearly a century on. Yet it feels that despite the explosion of mass media, social media and the ready availability of images, the art world hasn't been democratized as Benjamin hoped. I wonder if you have any reflections on this? And more broadly, what do you see as the future for painting?

JD: You are fortunate if that's the only thing about art that puzzles you. But Benjamin's speculations, despite being limited by the horizon of foreseeable technology available to him, have stood up fairly robustly, it seems, or else he would no longer be so widely read. I wonder whether his sprawling Arcades Project (layered, encyclopaedic, unfinished) may have an even longer shelf-life, as may his (in contrast, devastatingly succinct) interpretation of Paul Klee's *Angelus Novus*.

Any measurement of the democratisation of art may depend, I guess, on where you focus the discussion: on museums, producers, collectors, audiences or education, and what kind of art? Even if you narrow the discussion down to the current availability of art education in the UK, there are gains as well as set-backs. Despite cynical discouragement at government level, and the enormously increased expense, there appear to be ever-increasing numbers of people wanting to study art at university level, and they look much more diverse than they did when I started teaching in art schools.

I cannot claim to be a disinterested commentator, but part of painting's enduring vitality may be its paradoxical nature. It can be a supremely direct, simple and physical means of expression; but as soon as you make a mark on a surface you potentially start a conversation with every other painting that's been made in the last few thousand years.

Part of its attraction for me is the reflexive thing I mentioned earlier. A good painting throws questions back to you, and can press you into a sort of time-sandwich: your apprehension of the steps and actions taken by the artist making the painting, perhaps an evocation of time within the work, the effects of age on the work (a sense of its endurance), and the time you spend looking. The painting doesn't care how long you look, or how you look: a brief glance, an intense meditation for hours, or Berger's return visit after several years; no prescribed beginning, no definitive end. But in the physical proximity to a painting you can become intensely aware of a material presence (close to what Benjamin described as an aura?) which is also more than that: a whole host of complex signifiers that have a convoluted relationship to everything else you look at in the world.

RP: Thank you so much for sharing such a fascinating range of insights with us.

**Interview completed on 17 April 2024**