

Robert Priseman

Interviews Lucy Cox

RP: Hello Lucy. We've been good friends for a long time, so it's really nice to be able to interview you about your work. Especially when you have interviewed me in the past, along with many other artists. So perhaps we could begin by asking about your painting. You are essentially a hard edge abstract expressionist painter. Can you elaborate on this and describe your work in a broad sense for us please?

LC: Thank you, Robert! This is the first time I've been interviewed; it makes an exciting change to be on the other side of the table. My journey to becoming an abstract artist wasn't planned, at the outset of my art education I knew I wanted to paint but didn't know what. I explored various styles on my foundation courses without much satisfaction. On enrolling at UAL's Wimbledon College of Art to read and practice fine art painting my mind was very much a blank canvas; in fact, it was unnervingly blank. I was a working-class girl surrounded by an intelligent, middle class student community all bursting with ideas and competing for attention. I remember installations and plants were popular despite it being nominally a painting degree! I went down innumerable cul-de-sacs and even painted exaggerated nude self-portraits out of anger rather than any artistic inspiration. Eventually I started to experiment with shapes, colours and what I called "windows" which evolved into an abstract style I practice today.

I make use of simple geometric shapes and for the most part a limited colour palette with extensive use of grey, a sparse but frequent use of red and in some works, windows containing vibrant coloured geometrical shapes. My paintings (with one exception) are non-objective, that is they're not inspired by or are depictions of objects or events. I think it's hard to classify my style. When you strip everything away the geometric shapes and non-objectivity point to Suprematism with some paintings containing elements which could be ascribed to other styles. Abstract painting generally seems to have so many labels I tend to revert to the comfort of the early 20th century when the foundations of abstract art were established. I feel more grounded that way. When asked what inspired a particular painting, I find it hard to say it was "my feelings" or try to explain non-objectivity when the questioner is hoping for something more tangible. I normally answer by asking what they see in the painting. I would consider it a success if ten different viewers gave ten different answers – even "I don't get abstracts" is a result.

I hinted earlier that I made one objective painting: Fionn Wilson asked me if I would like to contribute a painting for an exhibition paying tribute to the late Christine Keeler, a key figure in

the 1960s Profumo scandal. At first, I thought I couldn't participate until I saw the photograph of a semi-naked Christine sat astride a delta-backed plywood chair, I had my object, the chair. I painted a work in grey and black with a small splash of scarlet red to hint at Christine's allure. I titled it "The Chair" and it is recognisable as such although there is some ambiguity as to which way it is facing. Without the title and context, it is a non-objective geometric composition, even more so if you rotate it ninety degrees. But mention "chair" and you always see a chair no matter which way up it is, I think that's quite fun. Does "The Chair" signal a move to more objective work? I don't know, perhaps if a meaningful opportunity arose or if I run out of road with non-objectivity.

RP: Who would you consider to be your main influences as a painter?

LC: Kazimir Malevich, the more I researched him the more at peace with my art I became. I used to worry about the non-objectivity of my work when all around me artists were producing paintings of "things" and political, social, and cultural issues. Malevich's suprematism philosophy which asserted that art no longer cares to serve the state, religion, history, etcetera, and can exist for itself was a revelation! I could enjoy what I do without feeling guilty or pressured to go down a particular path. Other Russian avant-garde artists have also influenced me. Lyubov Popova's suprematist work made use of geometric shapes and simple colours but she also wasn't afraid of using curves and introducing colour shading. She became a founder of Constructivism, the antithesis of Suprematism, which also made use of geometric forms but was coupled with revolutionary zeal and making art to apply to production for social purposes. Popova died at a tragically young age but what she helped co-found (often not acknowledged) had a huge impact, not only on art, but architecture, film, design, and later movements such as Bauhaus. To me she is as much an inspiration as an influence. Sonia Delaunay is another artist I admire, her use of vibrant colours and geometric shapes and the impression of movement they give.

RP: As a painting form, abstraction is only about 100 years old, making it a relative newcomer. One might argue that its high point was mid-century when the United States adopted it as a form of US cultural expression, post-war. What appeals about abstract painting today and how do you think it can be relevant into the 21st century?

LC: I'm fascinated by the radical ideas which brought about abstract painting, especially the fifteen years between 1910 and 1925. When you analyse subsequent decades and the multitude of abstract art movements and styles, they all have roots in those remarkable years. I agree that post-war New York was certainly a high point, like the city itself it was brash, loud, exaggerated and with the exception of Lee Krasner very much a male preserve. I was fortunate to see a major

exhibition of Jackson Pollock's drip paintings and black pourings at Tate Liverpool, they are mesmerising when seen in the flesh. They didn't appeal to everyone; I remember one local commenting they looked like his garage floor! But then Pollock has always evoked strong feelings.

Abstraction still has much to offer today in both its objective and non-objective forms. There are some wonderful artists here in the UK, such as Susan Gunn. Susan has produced outstanding work using an array of materials and techniques I would never have dreamed of. Her paintings are executed with extreme skill; yes, I am a fan! In most of her paintings the canvas is the geometry, the paintings are often one or two colours at the most, Malevich would have approved. She also encourages a greater or lesser degree of desiccation of the surface which creates a network of fine lines or cracks. To me it appears as if the artist has exerted some control over the cracks which add an additional abstract dimension to her work; they are superb. Other British artists such as Terry Greene, Lesley Bunch, Laurence Noga, Mali Morris, Basil Beattie are all producing important work in the 21st century. Internationally artists such as Albert Oehlen and Julie Mehretu are making visually exciting work. Is it relevant? If people want to view it then yes, it's relevant, even though, as is the case with Mehretu's work, it's unapologetically harking back to Constructivism, but that doesn't matter.

There's a threat from AI-generated abstract images. Sure, they aren't paintings, not yet anyway, but just Google the subject and see what comes up. My fear is not so much the use of digital techniques to create abstract art but rather the prospect of AI replacing artists and the death of art.

RP: Notably, in the US, abstract painting was funded by the CIA and utilised as a form of soft-power. In fact, when we look historically many art movements have been capitalised on by governments to promote their "message." How do you feel art is being used today by government?

LC: It is true in the 1950's at the height of the Cold War the USA wanted to promote itself as a country of artistic liberalism in contrast to the restrictive conditions Soviet bloc artists had to endure. Abstract painting specifically Abstract Expressionism was in vogue so naturally it was one of the tools used in this effort with the CIA covertly funding exhibitions in Europe for example. The irony is that it was in the Russian Empire and the early years of the Soviet Union where artists such as Malevich, Rozanova, Lissitzky, etcetera, had a major influence on abstract painting.

In the UK I think governments have relegated the arts to the periphery of their responsibilities, it makes their lives easier by having arms-length operated Arts Councils. It is questionable whether

the Arts Councils are promoting a government message or the views of those sitting at the apex of those organisations, who knows? As an artist based in England, I think our Arts Council is too big, responsible for too many things and totally unsuited to address issues important to individual artists or small artist groups. It costs over forty million pounds a year to run Arts Council England before they hand out a penny which I find staggering. If like me, you have tried to apply for funding you will know how difficult it is. I gave up half-way through my application because as an abstract painter it is near impossible to meet all four of the Art Council's investment principles especially 'inclusivity and relevance' and 'environmental responsibility'. I've heard of cases where artists game the system or use advisors skilled in gaming the system in order to receive funding, I'm not prepared to do that.

RP: A central part of your practice has been interviewing other artists and curating exhibitions. What have you come to observe in a broad sense about how artists are working today?

LC: My initial foray into communicating about artists started when I was still in art college writing exhibition reviews for the now defunct South London Art Map online magazine. It progressed from there to interviewing artists I found interesting, hosting panel discussions and making podcasts. I'm inherently a shy person, some would say introverted, and it helped my personal development and ability to communicate with others. Some of the interviews I've had were quite intense, I would put you and Andrew Litten's in that category, besides being artists I admire, you are also friends. I gained a lot from both of those interviews.

I enjoy curation but finding the time and suitable venues is always a problem. The first exhibition I co-curated at Simmons & Simmons, a London law firm, featured works from major galleries and museums such as the Tate, Serpentine Galleries, Transition Gallery etcetera and provided a valuable insight into the inner workings of the art world. Fellow painter Freya Purdue and I co-curated "Colour: A Kind of Bliss" at St Marylebone Crypt, an exhibition of abstract paintings with a focus on colour, it was great fun and was very well received. I'd love to curate more exhibitions if had the time to spare, I am formulating an idea which might happen in 2025.

It is good to see so many artists working "physically," particularly after the pandemic. People desire the tangible, actual "paint and stuff," as much as they do the convenience of digital technology. Figurative painting has seen a resurgence over the last few years. I can't pinpoint exactly why, perhaps social media and identity culture, both of which are heavily geared towards the body, have been an influence. And, of course, painters of all types are still facing many of the challenges they've had throughout time. Keith Murdoch, for example, talks about painting as a "constant struggle" and the feeling some of his works lacked integrity resulting in him reworking a significant number of paintings.

RP: Thank you so much for sharing some of your thoughts on your practice and the arts more broadly with us Lucy. I really enjoyed it.

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