

# Robert Priseman

## Interviews Marguerite Horner

RP: Hello Marguerite, thank you so much for doing this interview. I want to start with an observation on your work. All your paintings share three common themes: They are all black and white, all square in format and all landscape paintings based on photographs you have taken.

How has this approach evolved and what benefits does it offer you as an artist?

MH: My paintings are not actually black and white, I never use black. But they are monochrome and are made up of two colours, madder brown and Prussian blue. This came about when I was doing research on Whistler and found out that he often used these two colours. It also coincided with the discovery that the dynamic of warm and cool tones was something Lucien Freud used in his paintings. The push and pull of receding cool tones juxtaposed with advancing warm tones creates an interesting tension. Sometimes my two colours separate on the canvas, which I like.

The square format came about when I was asked to be in the show that had a theme of 20/20, so, to be in it, I started a painting that was 20 x 20 inches in dimensions. It also served to separate my work from the format of the photographic imagery I used. The re-formatting and editing process also led to some interesting distortions that helped remove my work from the reality of the outside world, helping me to get closer to something quite mysterious, more in tune with my inner life.

I decided to keep making my work in a square format from then on. I had read somewhere that Francis Bacon had two sizes of canvases - very large and then smaller canvases that were the exact dimensions he used for the face area on his larger canvases. By adopting this idea of using the same size canvases I was able to focus on what I was trying to do and not get distracted by having to think about different formats all the time and so work more spontaneously.

RP: On your website you state that your practice is “concerned with the non-material, a reality that we can access through contemplation and painting.” Would you be able to elaborate on this please?

MH: There is the reality of the material world that we can see, but there is a spiritual reality that we cannot see, for instance, we cannot see feelings, but we know they exist because we have them. I’m very much influenced by what Tolstoy describes in his book *What is Art?*

“To evoke in oneself a feeling one has once experienced, and having evoked it in oneself, then, by means of movements, lines, colours, sounds, or forms expressed in words, so to transmit that feeling that others may experience the same feeling - this is the activity of art....”

“...by words a man transmits his thoughts to another, by means of art he transmits his feelings.”

RP: That’s really interesting Marguerite. It makes me think that one of the reasons your paintings are so evocative is because although they look like ‘realistic painting’ - they are in fact far closer to being like glimpses of the imagination. When we see pictures in our mind’s eye or as dreams, we do not often see in colour, but more usually monochrome. And what we see is usually vague and fragmentary with little actual detail. I’m reminded here of Sir Joshua Reynolds’s *Discourses on Art*. In his 11th discourse he said that in order to produce great painting, works had to appear as we see them in our imagination. Vague and without detail. This is because he felt they then aligned with a Platonic ideal.

Does that feel true to you?

MH: I am not familiar with the writings of Sir Joshua Reynolds, but on thinking about this idea that works of art had in some way to aligned to images as we see them in our imagination, I recognise that much of what we ‘notice’ in the world is subjective and we always focus on what we perceive to be significant. The camera does not make any decisions, it records the surface appearance of the world without understanding or imagination. In fact, when I was studying Gerhard Richter, I came across an audio-recording where Richter said that he wanted to paint ‘reality.’ And as he had not been taught to paint in the way Lucian Freud had been taught, he had to resort to using the photograph to copy from. The interviewer pointed out that the reality of the photograph was only that of emulsion on paper. Perhaps this is why, when I see photo-realist paintings they leave me unmoved. So even though I use photographs to capture transitory moments that trigger my imagination, they are an aide-memoire. It is only through an editing process that I start to get nearer to what I feel I want to express.

I am reminded of an anecdote recorded about Pablo Picasso that demonstrates how an artist can get closer to the essence of something in his imagination when Picasso painted a portrait of the prominent writer and art collector Gertrude Stein. Several viewers of the artwork complained that the image was inaccurate. Picasso confidently and astutely replied with a remark similar to this: “It may not look like Gertrude Stein now, but it will.”

RP: It is interesting that your paintings do not feel photorealist, yet, as you say, you use photographs as source material, an 'aide-memoire.' It is clearly therefore something else that motivates you. As a Catholic, does your Christian faith inform your practice as an artist? Or would you describe it as something separate?

MH: I think my whole life is guided by my faith. All my decisions on what I'm going to do with my time on this earth have been informed by my faith and my struggle has been to follow the teachings of my faith, how to discern what is the good and right thing to do? I am very much guided by the command that Christ gave to his disciples which is to "love one another as I have loved you." I think this is the basis of all my thinking whenever I am undecided as to what I should be doing for the best.

When I completed my MA in Fine Art Painting, I left with the premise to keep in mind what Christ had said "whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable - if anything is excellent or praiseworthy - think about such things." However, when I tried to use the word 'lovely' in my first draft of my artist statement, the dealer I had at the time said to me "you cannot use the word 'lovely' ... It's not okay in the art world to use that word 'lovely', but I replied "that is just semantics ... Its deeper meaning is perhaps that of beauty, or pleasing, amiable, congenial or pleasant." Besides, why should I be controlled by critics, curators and writers, for as an artist I assume I have the ultimate freedom to find my own path in exploring what interests me and be responsible for my work, the struggle for me is to be authentic, and there lies the deeper meaning.

For me, when prayers are answered I see this as the existence of God's love, especially when it results in peace of mind, assurance, and zest for life. Seeing glimpses or moments of reality from an early age is what inspired me to be an artist. That is why I take photos of when these moments happen and later develop them further through my work.

RP: Thank you, Marguerite, for being so open and honest in your answer. I really appreciate it. Your encounter with the art dealer is very interesting and something I'd like to explore in a little more depth with you if I may?

I assume the encounter must have been in the late 1970's or early 1980's. And what is so interesting to me, is that when we look back over the past one hundred years we see that beauty has been largely erased from the art world. Essentially beginning with Duchamp's inversion of the urinal, the rise of modernism and its eventual replacement, post-modernism, which we have today. The resulting art we predominantly now see in contemporary galleries is concerned with political and ideological messaging. So, in many senses, perhaps you were both right. An artist can do what they wish and be concerned with the beautiful, but if they do, then they will have to work out side of the 'art world.' What are your thoughts on that?

MH: The conversation with the art dealer was shortly after I graduated from my MA fine art painting course at City and Guilds London Art School in 2004, she was opening a new art gallery that represented only women artists. I was made to understand that the aversion to 'lovely' and 'beauty' was because it had been hijacked by the advertising world to seduce and sell products and therefore seen as rather superficial or even manipulative. In John Berger's book *Ways of Seeing* he explains the mental process of what "fires together wires together". For instance, we all have basic needs that we all strive to fulfil and he explains that by putting an image of what we desire next to a 'product' we subconsciously associate the two together, such as illustrating an image with the product of a bottle of alcohol alongside a crowd of interesting people, we subconsciously assume that buying that bottle of alcohol we will fulfil our need for companionship, then by using the aesthetics of beauty the advert grabs attention. No one is really seduced by ugliness or the banal.

Yet I think we all need to transcend our everyday or sense of uncertainty, we need hope and beauty. In a way this was what Matisse set out to do, give people a rest, take them out of themselves and allow them to enter his perception of the world.

I feel cynicism is what I am battling with. When I started my MA in fine art I was informed in one tutorial that my paintings would be great if they were ironic, but the tutor suspected that I meant what I was painting. I realised I had a choice, I could play a 'game' with my art or not. Then circumstances in my life made me very aware that life and death are very serious experiences, and so a different kind of work emerged because of this realisation. I was not concerned with the 'art world,' I was more interested in making something authentic and not necessarily fashionable.

As for getting a platform, it would seem social media has given us all a platform to 'show and tell' especially Instagram. And there are numerous opportunities to enter art exhibitions and prizes in England so that your work can be seen and maybe bought. There are many art worlds, you just have to decide which one you want to belong to. But for me it is the making of the work that is important.

RP: You have put that so well, about there being many different art worlds and platforms that exist today. Just as journalists, presenters and comedians, for example, can exist outside main stream tv and newspapers in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, so too can artists.

Naturally John Berger's book I know, and in fact still have an original copy. Though while I feel there is much to it, like you, I do not feel it offers the complete story. Advertising clearly uses beauty to sell. And product designers employ it too. With car manufacturers like BMW making early use of boat builders spline curves to make their cars look more beautiful. Which

enabled them to charge more money for their cars. Now beautiful design has evolved through the use of polynomial curves to design iPhones, chairs and a whole host of consumable goods.

So, I understand that beauty is regarded in the arts as being 'bourgeois and elitist.' And perhaps this is where a major shift occurred in the art world? That they did not wish to be seen as 'commercial.' Yet I feel beauty, as well as beguiling us to buy products, can also attract us towards universal truths regarding our common humanity. Which, as you say, "transcend our everyday or sense of uncertainty."

As I see it, beauty falls into two broad categories: Firstly, there is beauty which inspires awe. This is something we may encounter in nature when we see a beautiful sunset or landscape for example. It makes us feel small and insignificant, which is strangely reassuring.

Secondly, there is beauty as an expression of love. We may notice this in a garden or meal that has been made with extra care and attention. Where each decision is made with tenderness. Anyone can throw some pasta in a pot and add a readymade sauce. Yet to make the same meal by making your own pasta from scratch, preparing your own sauce in just the way you know your guests enjoy it – that is a meal made with love. It adds something extra of the creator and considers the audience. In painting, we might see this in each brush stroke being applied as a caress. It arrests our attention and suggests there is more to the world than the mundane. In fact, I feel this in the way the brush strokes are applied on your canvases. That they have been applied with great tenderness and sensitivity.

What are your thoughts on this Marguerite?

MH: I agree that beauty is universal, no one has the monopoly on beauty and in the right context it does inspire awe. It is awe that inspired my current body of work and happened when I was visiting my eldest daughter in Beachwood Canyon LA one Christmas. I was travelling along the Californian coast by train to see some friends in Del Mar, the winter light was low on the horizon... it was so exciting, dazzling on the water. My friends then took me to a place overlooking the beach in Del Mar. There I watched the dark silhouettes of the people walking below, casting long shadows on the flat sand next to the sparkling ocean. They looked so tiny against the vastness of the sea. I just had to explore this in my work and the idea of the 'numinous' developed after the body of work took shape. The notion of the 'numinous' is a concept defined by the Lutheran theologian called Rudolf Otto that indicates the presence of divinity.

RP: I haven't encountered the term 'numinous' before Marguerite. It's really fascinating and I agree with you. Your paintings do convey a sense of the 'spiritual' and 'mysterious.' In a significant way, I would also say the 'numinous,' 'other worldly,' 'beauty,' or however one

wishes to frame it, acknowledges that our suffering cannot be compensated. It offers an alternative focus to where we might direct our pain.

MH: Yes, I think beauty takes us out of ourselves. When I come across the juxtaposition of some colours in nature, maybe some flowers in a park or side of a pavement or an amazing sunset, it stops me in my tracks, though ironically, I use very little colour in my work. I am more about form with the odd glaze of colour here and there. It is the ephemeral nature of these experiences I would like to capture forever and share. Suffering comes and if we do not linger upon it then time will move us forward... 'This too will pass'... But you cannot hurry grief, it is a process, but in the meantime, beauty can lift us out of any pit of despair or despondency, if only for a moment.

RP: I feel that is so true. Picking up on what you have just mentioned, do you regard grief and catharsis a central to your work? It is of course something Aristotle wrote about in his *Poetics*.

MH: I think most of my work does come from my subconscious and I have experienced some significant losses in my life and I now recognise in hindsight that much of my work relates to this process of grieving, though it was not intentional. I follow my intuition and then afterwards the meaning of the work is revealed to me. The feelings I am processing in the paintings come across to others I believe. I am not illustrating the feelings, my work is not designed to follow this function, but naturally emerges in the act of creating the work.

RP: As well as being approached by a dealer who only represented women artists, in 2018 you won the 'British Woman Artist Award'. Can you tell us a little about that please, and how you feel men and women might be different as artists?

MH: I put my best paintings forward and the judges picked my work for the award. It was a huge surprise and very encouraging. I think peer group review and validation is so important. When I am making art, I am in a constant state of doubt, because as an artist one is creating something out of nothing, so it is bound to look strange once it is completed because it has never existed before.

It's hard to say how men and women are different as artists, as I only know what it's like to be me and my own subjective experience. We are all so different from one another and yet we can all respond to beauty, justice and truth. However, I have observed that we have different characteristics and expectations, both through nature and nurture. I had five brothers and a sister and grew up in a competitive family. My father was an Irish doctor and he greatly esteemed art, he was always drawing on his newspaper in the evening. As a result, I never doubted that being an artist was something to aspire to.

The main difference I found from not being a man was my female nature and hormonal disposition to nurture others and my desire to have a family - I have four children - and all the head space this takes up made creating work very difficult, but not impossible. I found a way to channel my desire to create and afford the child care I needed, by working commercially. Commercial work is something many other artists have done at some time in their life, for instance Edward Hopper was an illustrator and Andy Warhol worked as a graphic artist. In my case I took a job as a scenic artist at the BBC and then worked freelance for 15 years painting large landscape and other images as backgrounds for photographic shoots.

For many women artists, unless they have independent financial support, child care and a 'room of their own' it can all seem too overwhelming. Yet, I also see child care being shared much more equally these days.

They say you cannot have it all but perhaps you can - just not all at once.

RP: It is fascinating to hear you talk about this Marguerite. I also appreciate you noticing more people sharing child care – it's something my wife and I did, dividing the responsibility equally. Perhaps many of us do not always take the time to hear things from others perspective. And as you talk, I am reminded how your paintings feel neither masculine nor feminine. It is more like they have been nurtured into existence by a benign soul. They look like the world we know, yet appear ethereal and other worldly. And as such, they seem to speak to some deep sense of our common humanity.

Thank you for sharing your thoughts with us, I have really enjoyed it.

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