

Robert Priseman

Interviews Phil Tyler

RP: Hello Phil. Thank you so much for agreeing to this interview. I wanted to begin by asking you a bit about your background. Where were you born, and do you come from a family of artists, or are you the first?

PT: I grew up in East London and my career prospects back then were either the building site or borstal. My grandad was a bricklayer, brother an electrician, mum a cleaner, and my dad in the rag trade repairing sewing machines. So, I was the first person in my family ever to go to university. Nobody had any experience of art, although my grandad had done tattooing during World War 1. And I recall we had a painting he made in our house (he died when I was seven).

If the truth were told, it was not easy for me to go to art school. It was completely out of my family's experience. But it was clear to me that I didn't fit in anywhere else.

RP: One of the things I really admire about your paintings is your confident use of the brush in making marks. They have an urgent, vigorous feel. Yet everything feels as if it is where it needs to be. I guess this is because you paint directly from life and have done so for many years. Am I right?

PT: Yes. At the start of my second year at Loughborough School of Art, I went on a student exchange to Richmond Virginia. The experience of visiting MOMA, Metropolitan, Guggenheim as well as Washington DC, the National Gallery, The Smithsonian and The Phillips Collection had a major influence on my growing artistic language. By the end of my second year I was making large gestural abstractions informed by the brush mark.

When I eventually returned to working with the figure, those large brush marks became part of the backgrounds.

Moving forward 30 years, with thousands of paintings and drawings now made, that confident positive use of the brush can be seen throughout the painting. And is certainly informed by drawing so much from life as well as the needs of alla prima painting in oils.

RP: Your works falls into two main categories, classical landscape painting and paintings of the single human figure. Some would argue that there is not much left to say in these areas. How would you respond to them?

PT: How can one say anything different to what has already been said? Every bookshop has all the words in them that could possibly be used. Every piece of music uses the same set of notes. I don't think I can make an abstract painting any more nor have much interest in painting badly with a symbolic approach to narrative. For me, I see the things in front of me and some of those trigger a memory.

The motif in my work, whether the landscape, figure or still life is a carrier for emotion. Certain emotional circumstances bring about the desire to communicate with myself in order to come to terms with my own presence in the world. A desire perhaps to leave a small trace behind.

RP: You have spent a long time producing a series of self-portraits. I'm reminded when looking at them of the Rembrandt series of self-portraits. Is there a sense that you are pitting yourself against the greats of the past and seeing what you can achieve in their light?

PT: Of course, when one tackles the classic genres of landscape or figure painting there is a long tradition to understand and to learn from. I cannot be David or Gericault, I am never going to be Freud or Courbet, but I can take something from each.

I spent a few hours yesterday drawing in galleries, a practice I've done for years. Drawing an art work really helps you see it. Looking at Egon Schiele, Klimt's landscapes or Heinrich Schrodter yesterday, Frans Hals, Alice Neel, last year and so on, to even doing copies of Vuillard, Bonnard, Sickert, Wyeth and Vermeer in the early 90s. All these encounters teach you something new. If I ever feel like I have no ideas, I hit the galleries and get drawing. That usually kick starts me.

I find it funny that some artists state that they are self-taught. Apart from school, no art tutor ever picked up a brush and showed me how to paint. Very few pointed me in the right direction. I pretty much started again after my MA turning my back on abstraction and started working from life in about 92. I learned how to paint by looking at a lot of paintings up close and reading a lot of old books on painting. Teaching myself the craft and occasionally asking other artists questions. I finally feel that I am getting to grips with oil paint and there is still so much more I want to understand

RP: The American painter RB Kitaj, who lived and worked in London between 1959 and 1997, believed the human figure created the foundation on which all great art is formed, and argued that art's core mission lay in unearthing the reality of significant and sacred human experience. In 1976 he put together a selection of works by British artists for an exhibition titled *The Human Clay*. In this, Kitaj stated his criteria for selection quite simply: "I was looking mostly for pictures of the single human form as if they could be breathed on,

whereupon they would glow like beacons of where art has been and like agents of a newer life to come.”

I feel this is exactly where your self-portraits fit. What do you feel about this observation?

PT: That’s very flattering for you to say so. I would like to think that my figure paintings command attention even when they are small. I believe that they capture the essence of a person, their humanity, pathos and presence. I keep battling with the desire to capture likeness and the need to move my paintings beyond that to something more expressive, but Kitaj’s objective is a good starting point

RP: *The Human Clay* opened at a time when abstract painting was the fashionable and dominant trend in the art world. Figurative painting was deeply unfashionable. Yet many of the artists in the show, people like Michael Andrews, Frank Auerbach, Francis Bacon, William Coldstream, Lucian Freud, David Hockney, Howard Hodgkin, Leon Kossoff and Euan Uglow went on to become very famous. So there is this sense that “real” art is unfashionable and lives outside of the mainstream. Now many would argue, it is not only figurative painting which is unfashionable, but painting itself.

In this context how do you justify spending time and money, making art which is against the grain of the main stream?

PT: I didn’t see *The Human Clay* exhibition at the Hayward, but I did see *The Hard Won Image* show and *The Forgotten Fifties* in the mid 80s. Both had an impact on me that would take a long time to filter through. Many of these artists were not being talked about at that time. Andrews, Bacon Uglow, Medley, Auerbach, Freud, Moynihan none of these were mentioned to me at art school. The new kids on the block were Howson, Currie, Clemente, Chia, Kiefer, Immendorf, etc.

RP: This raises another interesting phenomenon we notice in the first quarter of the 21st century. Kitaj’s show, and a lot of the art world up to the late 20th century appears to have been comprised primarily of male artists. And in the space of 50 years we have seen a shift from male dominance in the art world to the art world becoming primarily female led. Does this affect you at all?

PT: I’m nearing 60. And a white straight, male artist who makes paintings of recognisable things. Which basically means that I won’t be appearing in any major shows soon. Yet, I think what artists like Kaye Donachie, Doron Langberg, Chantal Joffe, Jennifer Packer, and Ann Gale are doing is really exciting.

But I don't think artists generally, including those in *The Human Clay*, make paintings as a career move. They have to make paintings and can not stop themselves. Like them, I feel compelled to draw and paint. When I'm not in the studio I'm either drawing in my sketchbook or 'painting' on the iPad. Despite the numerous rejections I get every year I still keep painting. My career is teaching and that pays the bills. My vocation is painting and I won't stop until I am no longer able to. I can justify the cost of art materials as it's my indulgence. I get a huge amount of pleasure from making good paintings as well as a huge amount of self-doubt from making bad ones.

The only problem I have is a house full of unsold paintings. I'm having to paint over a lot of these now as I can't justify taking up more room in my little studio, but I can convince myself of overworking old work as it takes up the same amount of space. It's also fabulous when you turn a not so good painting into a much better one.

RP: It's so fascinating Phil, to witness an artist like yourself who has a passion for painting. One gains a compelling sense that the creative spirit thrives where ever it emerges. And this creative spirit isn't something inherited. It is rather something which appears to occur randomly, like a spring emerging from the ground. It matters little what the art world vogues and fashions of any era are. Be it a focus on abstraction, gender, expressing political stances or observations on the environment, creative practice itself is a constant. So, while the various trends of the art world come and go, committed artists continue to make work regardless of them. Because they are driven to express something of our universal human nature. And I think that is what you are doing Phil.

Thank you so much for sharing some of your thoughts with us.

Interview completed on 14 April 2024