

Robert Priseman

Interviews Pippa Gatty

RP: I would like to start with an observation if I may? I notice that artists often like to work either in major cities or in the middle of nowhere. You studied fine art in Chelsea, and now live and work on the remote Isle of Mull. I wonder, what drew you to Mull and what are your observations about the pitfalls and benefits of working in such an isolated setting?

PG: As long as I have a studio and the time to go with it, I think I could work anywhere. Graham Crowley once said to me that location doesn't matter in a painting practice – it's always the same problems you face wherever you are geographically, and I tend to agree. Initially it was hard getting to know the art scene up here and I'm still not sure that I have. I've found Glasgow is pretty closed unless you've been to the art college there and rural arts are another whole can of worms.

I was born in London and had spent most of my life there. After college in 2008 I just couldn't face going back to work full time. Our bills were so high and time so scarce that it seemed inevitable if we stayed put. My husband was offered redundancy at that time and the children had gone off to college and seemed supportive of the idea, so it seemed the perfect opportunity to make the break. We wanted to go somewhere properly rural, a different life (grow some vegetables, keep some animals) and somewhere where we had a connection, so that narrowed it down. My paternal grandfather grew up on Mull and its somewhere I have known all my life and visited often. The place we ended up living in is extremally remote and on the northwest coast and most importantly it came with studio space. Ironically, I seem to have filled a lot of the space in my life with animals. We have a saying in this household – no more animals... Hmmm....

I love my life here, but I do feel that I could live and work almost anywhere.

RP: What I love so much about your paintings is they appear like visual poems. They are small, yet appear big, and have the feel of being windows into the mind's eye. How does that description resonate with you?

PG: I have never thought of them like that before. It's a description I love. I can't remember who said it, (maybe Shamus Heaney) but it's something like: "writing a poem – it starts with one word, you don't know where that word will lead." I wish I could remember properly, but it's an observation that resonated with me at the time. I start a painting with a word (maybe it's the title), or a palette/an idea/maybe something I've witnessed eg: light through trees - something along those lines. All the scrapings and sanding and layering is a response to the

start. I hold on to bits that work for a while and then I may lose them too. I never know where it will end up. Although normally they do retain the essence of the start. They hold onto the narrative - like a palimpsest.

They are very personal and in that respect are a window to my mind's eye but I hope that they are universal too. They are very much a response to my life in my environment.

RP: Is the intimate scale of your work dictated by practical considerations like cost, or did it develop that way as you developed your practice as an artist?

PG: There are practical considerations regarding scale. I need a solid back on these paintings due to the process. Paint is expensive as you know, and that also comes into it. Space always used to be an issue, but not anymore. The practicalities of moving them around is however. I used to think that a natural progression would be to get bigger, but I've come to realise that this just is not possible for these paintings. On the few occasions that I have made bigger ones I think they look rather pompous. They just don't work so well. They look a bit like I'm shouting. They embarrass me a bit.

I would love to make some bigger paintings, I think I will one day, but they will be very different paintings.

RP: Do you know what a finished painting is going to look like before you start it, or does it evolve organically?

PG: I never know what it's going to look like. I like the surprise of making something I hadn't imagined. The knack is to spot it. It's hard to see things clearly when you're in the thick of it. It's easy to dismiss things as they happen, and to lose things that are good. Leaving them for a while allows you to see them properly, but I struggle with this as once I get my teeth into a painting, I just don't have the will power or patience to take it slowly. I work on loads at a time, maybe over 10. This helps.

RP: How much of what you do as an artist is driven by a desire to "say something to the world"?

PG: I don't think I particularly want to say something to the world. I suppose I'm more interested in documenting my experience of it. I feel like the paintings I've made since I've lived here are a sort of archive of the spirit of this place, and of my life and all the animals... and of my history (can't seem to shake that one off – can we ever?)

It's often things that move me that I find returning when I'm in the studio. The other day whilst out walking I came across a young deer, lying in the bracken, up against an old stone

wall, out of the wind. I knew it had gone there to die. It looked right at me, held my gaze... its eyes were so bright. There's something in the way that wild animals die, without drama, they just sort of give themselves up to the earth. I knew that there was nothing I could do for it, except remember it.

RP: What a beautiful and moving story, I can picture the deer in my mind now. I often think of art as being a sacred practice. And I think of the sacred as being an exploration of the threshold between life and death, just as the deer you describe is poised on the threshold of death. What are your thoughts on this? And also, might the encounter with the deer stimulate a painting for you at a later date?

PG: These encounters are memorable and do emerge in paintings whether you want them to or not. I wouldn't start a painting depicting the scene with the deer – but it will come through at some point in a roundabout way, I have no doubt.

I agree, there is something of the sacred about an art practice... When I was about 19 one of the first books I ever read that had real meaning for me as a young adult was Herman Hesses *The Glass Bead Game*. I didn't really understand it and I was only just beginning to think that I was going to be some sort of artist at that time... but the whole idea of pursuing a process and attempting to master it really struck a chord with me. I suppose this could also be likened to a religious practice. Loosing yourself in something entirely. I know now that that's when good painting happens - but maybe that is similar to prayer/meditation... not sure.. I did go on to work as a gilder for a framing workshop for many years. Contemporary gilding is all about trying to achieve a level of perfection – lots of sanding, lots of burnishing, lots of repetition, lots of treasure (which holds a relevance for me also). I think of it as a very relevant step in my development actually. By nature I am impatient and slapdash, so it was a good training to try and overcome this instinct and prove to myself the point in trying to overcome the urge to rush at everything... or at least to see that for what it is.

RP: The way you talk about your work and the world has a religious feel to it. Do you practice a religion or not?

PG: I don't. I am very drawn to religious painting and music tho... A lot of my family are Catholic but I am not... (I got the guilt but none of the benefits). I don't know what label I fit under, I believe in the Sun and the Earth and I believe in art and music.

RP: Something that has come to intrigue me lately is the difference between universal truths and individual truths. Some people might argue that there are no universal truths, only your truth and my truth. Each based upon our own experiences. Yet there are universal truths. For example, that all life ends in death, as with the deer you encountered. And in addition, that death itself is a great mystery. And I think this is the territory your paintings explore.

And when I think of this, I also begin to think of some of the great paintings of the past. Paintings by the likes of Caspar David Friedrich or Francis Bacon. What makes them great is they seem to be exploring the territory of where individual experience encounters that which offers a universal mystery. Just as you going out for your walk, then meeting a dying creature.

What are your reflections on this?

PG: When you speak of individual truth, this 'your truth and my truth' suggests that 'Man' is the center of everything. That if there is no one to hear the tree fall then it makes no sound. For me this doesn't wash. The universal truths... the sun, the moon the stars, the elements. Life/ death. Maybe beauty and love even. I believe everything is affected by these truths. I don't want to go on about the animals, but they share these truths too. I see them – they watch a sunset – they know beauty. Who are we to say that a tree or even rock for that matter or a hill or a shoreline doesn't have some sort of consciousness or even some sort of memory. I suppose this is animism. The consciousness' of all things. When I think of the changes that the rock around us here have witnessed, it's pretty mind blowing. I can see the warm swampy waters that were here thousands of years ago. The volcano on Skye spewing out its magma. Its all-wonderful stuff. It's just a matter of scale and time that separate us – we're all matter and all a part of one big being.. Gaia, I suppose.

Religious myth, stories, call them whatever, they are so engrained into our consciousness that it is impossible to extract the influence of them from our understanding. Especially when you consider the role of historical painting and music. I think of it as a part of our DNA now. Can't do anything about it... its there and its real.

Casper David Frederick was all about the sublime and wonder and I see a joy there too. Even a religious zeal. As for Francis Bacon, he famously said he had no religious feeling – although the theme persisted in his work. He was from an Irish background, wasn't he? ... and was a very outspoken critic of the Catholic Church. I don't see joy in Bacon's work and maybe for that reason I find it more to do with addressing ideas of a universal mystery/ universal truths/unknown forces. Maybe religious certainty gives you a freedom. It sounds nice.

RP: Yes, Bacon was a critic of the Catholic Church, and even said that he couldn't imagine anything worse than being looked after by nuns. Yet despite this, he spent his last days in a Catholic hospital under the care of The Handmaids of Maria. Above his bed was a crucifix. I went there and even painted a picture of it. And find it kind of spooky that the artist who famously painted *Three Studies for Figures at the Base of a Crucifixion* ended up dying under one. It's almost as if he could foresee his own death.

I want to thank you Pippa for agreeing to this interview, I have found it fascinating. I think what you are doing in your painting is powerful. For me, it contains many of the important qualities artists like Bacon portray in their work. A kind of teasing out of the profound. An exploration of something which lies just beyond life but is not quite in death.

PG: Its been a real pleasure Robert. Thank you for inviting me.

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