

Robert Priseman

Interviews Enzo Marra

RP: It's a real pleasure to be able to talk with you about your work Enzo. I wanted to begin by asking you about two of the core influences you cite to your practice: The School of London painters and the Art Brut movement. Both located in northern Europe in the 20th century and both considered to be unfashionable to the art world when they were at the height of their creative and productive powers. Yet now regarded as core to the development of modern art.

What most appeals about these movements to you personally?

EM: The school of London and the art brut movement allowed me to see and attempt to comprehend different ways of using figurative concepts. Each artist using and consistently reappraising what they are trying to achieve and how they hope to be able to achieve it. However abstract my works have become, there is always a link or bridge to the real world within them. The journey from concept to each final statement allows for so many different directions to be taken. Whether they were as figurative as mine were previously, or reduced to how I visually think now, something from the outside world has always been visible and accessible after the last brush stroke has been made. The opportunity and freedom to take risks, make and work on from mistakes and errors, conversing with what each painting needs to be, draws me back into the challenge even when time is short to get deeply involved. When an artist has an authentic and hard-fought presence in their paintings, I have no choice but to seek opportunities to experience and comprehend further. The immediacy and strength of Leon Kossoff's drawings and oils which still inspire me when I interact with his works, the way that Dubuffet opened up what could be considered to be art, legitimising materials and languages that would have previously been disregarded. If I had never discovered, learned more and spent time with works from both of these movements, I wouldn't be the same artist that I am today.

RP: When Michael Peppiatt wrote the catalogue essay for the *School of London: Six Figurative Painters* exhibition in 1987 he said "...over the past thirty-five years a body of work has evolved in London which possesses a power and a relevance to the future of painting that would be hard to match anywhere else in the world". Yet by the 1990's many in the arts declared painting dead. And new art forms such as video, installation and performance art came to dominate the scene. Only in the past 10 years or so has painting begun to have a resurgence. What would you say it is about painting that makes it enduring, despite all the different art forms we have around today?

EM: I think the reason why I have been and am still so drawn to painting is the mental and physical process of the activity. The chances of disaster or success, the way an additional brush stroke can destroy or elevate it to what you hoped it could become. Painting is very personal, each painter can only work in their own individual way. Forcing the image into other directions that are not natural to the artist, will only result in half-hearted statements. The honesty and directness of a truly felt painting has to be experienced in person. In this digital age the instagram impression can only hint towards the effect it will arouse in a gallery space. This change in personality and presence when seen as a silent conversation during an exhibition, always inspires me when I visit and take them in. I am glad paintings cannot fully convey through secondhand sources, as the experience of an exhibition and how paintings juxtapose and comment upon each other, keeps me urgently needing to see and be challenged and surprised by the fruits of other artists studios.

RP: I'm intrigued about your subject matter, which focuses on art galleries and studio spaces. About how artworks are commodified in commercial spaces. And how studio spaces which are private yield art for public consumption.

At heart your work appears to be interested in exploring paradoxes. The private production of art to the public consumption of it. The deeply unfashionable nature of "Outsider art" contrasted with the highly fashionable "Art World." Some today would say that the art world is no place for artists. What are your thoughts on this?

EM: I was initially inspired to produce artworks that commented and visualised the processes of the artworld, as I was struggling for a direction and meaning to propel my works forward. I used very tonal means for them to concentrate attention on the subject matter and the painterly qualities I could introduce into their execution. I also had a period as an invigilator at a gallery and the drawn studies of other invigilators interested me enough to continue with them for quite a time. I also would take quick undercover photos of visitors to galleries, to get another viewpoint on the experience of being involved in such a space.

The difference between the art world and the outsider art is something that I feel is very relevant, as painted and drawn approaches can become illustrative and close off interpretation when purely commercial concerns are at the forefront of the artists mind. Outsider approaches seem to be more alive and spontaneous which can allow me to feel more involved in the viewing of them. The flaws and shortcomings can somehow add to an image, making them that bit more human and less corporate in a world of products and replicated streams of potentially excessive variants.

The art world is a world of business and commerce, as artists we are either invited in or we hang around hoping to arouse attention. The older you get, the more those initial youthful expectations become appropriately rational. The act of painting and discovering what can be

achieved is still what consistently inspires me. If they are fortunate to end up on a gallery that is definitely a bonus, but it is certainly not why I am lost in trying to translate what happens in my head. To create solely as a premise for sales without being enamored by what I am attempting to translate into a stilled image, would seem empty and worthless without me learning and growing during the process.

RP: Turning to more practical issues, can you tell us a little about your painting process? How do you begin a painting and has your approach been directly informed by any artists you admire?

EM: I have had many periods of working in different ways and with different anticipated results. Throughout all of them, drawing and preparatory studies are activities that give me a clearer vision of what I am working towards achieving. In the past I would have been sourcing photographic imagery to develop from, or drawing from life to gain an impression of the scene that was engaging me. Nowadays all of my imagery is mined direct from my mind, and is pushed forward via repeated drawn variations until choice ones give me the feeling of their potential beyond their current state. I am finding with utilising abstracted yet figuratively inspired concepts, that more thought and consideration is now needed to ensure I am 100% certain on each successive step forwards. This change in approach that is consistently evolving, allows the process of creating to always seem fresh and alive to me.

RP: That's really fascinating Enzo. I could never manage to conjure up something purely out of the imagination. I like what you say about the physicality of paint too. These concepts remind me how much the plasticity of paint can act as a metaphor for our emotions. I certainly feel this when looking at the paintings of Auerbach or Kossoff for example. They feel like you are witnessing the inner emotions of the artist laid bare on the surface of the canvas. I feel this when I look at your paintings too. Is that a correct interpretation though?

EM: I feel that an emotional feel or reaction is an aim I always hope to work towards. A reason beyond pigment or surface that draws an eye towards it. Something that is there but cannot be pinpointed, which makes the image that bit more whole. There are a handful of paintings that whenever I am fortunate enough to again see them transport me to their own personal world, where emotions seem to rise out of the artists personal language, keeping me close by, unable to leave their orbit. *Portrait of the Artist Listening to Music* by Howard Hodgkin is one of those I have been fortunate to be able to experience a number of times in different exhibitions, always filling me with that unmistakable feeling of connection and intimacy. To be able to even achieve a sliver of the effect I experience then would be an achievement, something to be thankful for and to build from. The personality, presence or emotional pull that can be conjured out of mere pigment, a balancing act that can never be predicted or demanded, a challenge to constantly strive towards.

RP: Can you tell us a little about your palette? I notice it is mostly earthy oil colour. Do you use a wide variety of colours or maintain something fairly limited?

EM: I tend to prefer a more limited palette. The constituents which I feel the need to use, tending to alter and totally change as each new challenge arrives. I have found that with each change in imagery draws me to a certain medium, from stokes oils, to enamels to hammerite, to inks to watercolours, to tempera and nail varnish which are my current concerns. I do tend to gravitate to reds, yellows and blacks though, their hues somehow more attune with what I am hoping to visually achieve. I feel that by reducing the range of colours used, that the presence of the imagery that I use becomes that more visible and perceivable by the viewer. As it doesn't become obscured by additional details and qualities that muddy its potential immediacy.

RP: How long do your paintings take to produce, and do you work on several at a time?

EM: My paintings can happen very immediately, or they can take their time deciding where they need to go next. This conversation as it progresses, involves necessary risks to give it that needed voice, which don't always succeed. The more abstract my works have become, the more consideration and thought I have to work through to arrive at an image that needs to be made to exist. They can happen in hours or they can span years, allowed to rest till they give me inklings of a final resolution. The whole unpredictability of each stage of a painting allowing the process to remain fresh and unexpected, however many years I have been involved in it.

RP: I am really struck in our conversation by how important the physicality of the real painting is to you, its presence in time and space. The very tactile nature of your work, the sheer physicality of the paint helps emphasise this point.

I was talking with Jeff Dennis about Walter Benjamin's *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* and how Benjamin felt the democratisation of art was enabled by photographic reproduction. And although the special 'aura' of the original painting was lost in this process, it was more than compensated for in the fact that everyone could now enjoy art. Not just the ruling elite Benjamin stated it was made for.

Do you think Benjamin's argument misses something though?

We see how art museums and public galleries are a corner stone of your subject matter. And your work shows us that art has been democratised through this form of collection and display. As you state earlier: "The honesty and directness of a truly felt painting has to be experienced in person. In this digital age the instagram impression can only hint towards the effect it will arouse in a gallery space."

Indeed, the image can point us in the right direction of original works of art and hint at what they have to offer in terms of a real physical experience. And we can then choose to visit them in person and encounter that special 'aura.' Today we can have the best of both worlds, and I feel at it's very core this speaks to the essence of your practice as an artist.

EM: I can see how the democratisation of art has allowed the concept and recorded image of art, to be made more readily available to those who are interested. I have appreciated the television of art programmes since my youth, the publications I leafed and learned through, and how they led to me being the person I am today. With technology the screen has become the primary interface, nowadays largely through instagram, where it seems the number of likes has become the decider of quality. A way of participating that has a certain value, but is also rather black and white in its received and delivered effect. Unfortunately, it has also reduced the experience to those artworks which can't be captured well photographically. Most artists who I love spending time with, have a certain quality which is stripped away when seen through a camera lens.

Technology is an aid and also a hindrance. It can speed up and artificially accelerate knowledges, that could be allowed to more slowly and more thoughtfully progress. I hope it doesn't lead to a safer and blander, and more commercial artworld to be nudged further into existence. Familiarity and smooth accessibility, are not necessarily the best deciders of the artists personality and voice when compared to real, to life eye to eye. Those verging into suitable madresses, fearless experimenting, rule breaking, enamoured by routes unsigned, unmarked, all detours, could become more difficult to discover, follow and see. If they are not perceived to be popular through permitted shows of support, maybe these experiences will become rarer, galleries potentially being unwilling to risk showing them as they don't fit into what our society reacts to readily.

We are now in a technological world and have to find our own strategies to use it, to allow our ways of working to become interactable with in a meaningful manner. An additional quandary on top of managing to make our imagery exist beyond first thought initial ideas and concepts. A challenge certainly but not an impossible one.

RP: Thank you so much for sharing your thoughts with us Enzo, it has been fascinating.

Interview completed 4 May 2024