Robert Priseman
Interviews Charley Peters

RP: Hello Charley, thank you so much for agreeing to answer some questions on your painting practice. I really appreciate it.

If I may, I would like to start by asking you about your childhood. You grew up in Birmingham and were drawn to computers and digital images at an early age. Somehow you fused this with a love of abstract expressionism. Computing and painting seem worlds apart, yet you have bought them together to synthesise a unique and striking visual world of your own. I wonder if you can tell us a little more about this please?

CP: In some ways computing and painting are very different. There's an inherent logic that is connected to computing that isn't there in painting. The computer-generated visuals that I loved as a child have an aesthetic that feels in direct opposition to the process of painting; linear, pixelated and designed. But even as a kid I was drawn equally to both the materiality of painting and the disembodied experience of computers. I like to bring opposites together in the studio and this includes aspects of high and low culture, my mental catalogue of inspiration spans the everyday vocabulary of the internet, video games, cartoons and science fiction, but also a learned knowledge and understanding of art history and critical theory. I love mixing up different sensibilities in my paintings – high/low, hard edged/gestural, abstract/real – and this feels like a very contemporary way of thinking that relates to how our post-internet brains experience and process information from different visual and contextual registers all at the same time.

I'm also interested in those less obvious spaces where the two different worlds of painting and computing are connected, and for me this includes the capacity of them both to present opportunities to define a unique sense of self. By this I'm thinking of our everyday experiences of the digital space as somewhere where we can invent an identity defined through avatars or an online presence that may not be a true version of ourselves but moreover, a creatively expressed presentation of ourselves. This detachment from reality is also present in painting. They are both spaces in which we can step outside of the material world and experience 'seeing' and 'knowing' in an expanded way that relates to our own being.

RP: Your practice as an artist is quite multi-disciplinary, encompassing writing, painting and some very high-profile commissions, such as working for ITV, Wembley Park and Meta. Do you find commissions require something very different from you? That when you are

working for someone other than yourself, do you find it has to come from a different part of your psyche?

CP: It can sometimes feel like it has to come from a different part of my psyche, but the important thing to maintain is that it feels authentic and not like a compromise in terms of my work or thinking. In the studio I usually have the freedom to make the paintings that I want to make as part of an ongoing creative enquiry, but when I'm working for a client where the finished artwork will be seen outside of a gallery context there are always other concerns to take into account that might relate to material research, health and safety, client expectations and accessibility. Whereas in the studio my paintings exist within 'my' world, when I work on public commissions I'm definitely having to consider how what I make will fit into 'the' world. It involves more planning upfront and an amount of clear logic that doesn't necessarily come into play in the studio, where the paintings often feel like they make themselves by a process of just being around paint and canvas. This can be difficult as I'm naturally more able to solve creative problems through the act of painting itself, but clients will always need a visual proposal (often a digital render) of the finished work before you've even started to make it. I've had to develop ways for this process to still feel like it makes sense to me by doing quick intuitive – almost automatic – drawings on paper before I go anywhere near a computer to make a visualisation for a commission proposal. You have to trust in yourself and the robustness of your practice to make something that still feels connected to the studio but exists in another context.

RP: How do your ideas evolve for each particular work?

CP: For all my work, either in the studio or large public art commissions I start by thinking in terms of colour, specifically colour temperature. All my consequent decisions while developing a painting are relatively formal, exploring spatial relationships on the canvas and some of those oppositions I mentioned earlier, such as bringing together different visual languages or sensibilities. I move in between intuitive processes and slower, more laboured areas of painting which add structure and define compositional balance. I use ways of painting that might reference modernism but locate that next to something that looks like a contemporary 3D render or a motif from a video game. I'm interested in making connections between sometimes disparate visual languages to challenge what we understand as the outside edges of painting practices.

The paintings I'm working on now are evolving from these concerns. I'm currently working on a series of paintings where I am in conversation with an AI about what an approach to abstract painting for today could look like. I started by describing my own paintings to the AI to see if it could construct an image that looked like something I might make in the studio – it couldn't – but it did do a lot of strange and interesting things that I am now working with to create new 'sketches' from which to make paintings. The AI doesn't have an imagination of

its own and what it generates is entirely based on my ideas about how to consider abstraction in a post-internet visual world and visual references that it finds online. It's making me even more mindful of the resilience and relevance of painting as a medium. It always survives and continues to feel new.

RP: Do you listen to heavy metal music whilst making painting?

CP: This is such a great question…and no, I don't! I went through a heavy metal phase in my teens, Birmingham has a massive metal scene and in the 80s and 90s there was some fantastic metal album cover artwork that I absolutely loved. I don't underestimate how important this was in my developing appreciation of "art" from a young age. I haven't listened to metal for years now, but still love the aesthetic of the retro airbrushed sci-fi and fantasy art and can't deny that the ghost of my metal past is present in my work even today. I think there's something about it's "hardness" or "loudness" that I like now, and I wonder whether there is something about transgressing gender ideals that makes me love it even more – that women are traditionally meant to be connected to nature and painting delicate, organic subjects, but I like to make bold and confident work that has an edge. This is important to me …I feel strong, free and happy being my own weird self, and my work only feels right when it reflects this.

RP: You described yourself as a child as being "painfully shy." And that led you to spend time more in an imaginary world rather than the real one. One of the things that intrigues me with this, is that when one makes art, it is a form of communication with others. Yet many would say "putting the work out there" requires a lot of emotional courage, as you are exposing your inner feelings to others. Is this something you have had to contend with, or did your shyness naturally fall away?

CP: My painful shyness turned out to be a bundle of neurodivergent conditions, so no, it didn't just fall away! My life is a constant process of reflection and self development in order to be the artist and person I am now who is able to connect with people and feel like I am 'fitting in'. For me "putting the work out there" was always different and much easier than "putting myself out there." I feel separate from the work that I make, I don't feel emotionally connected to it or consider it to be part of me as a person. I have always found the most comfort and excitement in my creativity and over time it is being an artist that has enabled me to have a voice through which I can communicate with others. I'm incredibly grateful for this, being an artist has changed my life and the place that I feel I can occupy in the world.

RP: Which artists have you been most influenced by and who do you find interesting today?

CP: There are so many artists that I return to consistently as inspiring figures. I value artists who have been taken risks and moved their practice into new arenas, those who have been

curious, experimental and brave. I think Rauschenberg and Stella are great examples of artists who went on incredible journeys with their work, embracing new materials and ways of working for the whole duration of their careers. I am inspired by the great women painters of Ab Ex, especially Joan Mitchell and Lee Krasner for their big, ballsy and smart paintings. And I love Eva Hesse, especially her mechanical drawings, which she made during a challenging time in her life where she was unpicking her work and trying to move it into a new direction. The struggle to discover something new is clear in the drawings and they feel fresh, exciting and raw. I have been looking at these drawings again recently as I'm working with AI and thinking about painting in a post-digital, posthuman world. Today I am always interested in what Jacqueline Humphries is making, and there are so many others; Amy Sillman, Charline von Heyl, and Albert Oehlen to name but a few of the painters that I consistently look to.

RP: In an interview David Sylvester in October 1962, Francis Bacon had said "…what is fascinating now is that it's going to become much more difficult for the artist, because (they) must really deepen the game to be any good at all."

What are your thoughts on this observation? Do you feel it is possible to deepen the game of painting in the 21st century? And if so how?

CP: It's always possible to deepen our own game, deepening "the" game might be less easy or relevant. We are surrounded by massive amounts of visual material now and painting is so easy to see online – there's a lot of noise in our world and it can feel difficult to think about how painting could ever be new or challenging anymore. For me, developing a practice of painting that acknowledges the largely digital world that we live in today and how that might change how we "see" things is important, alongside exploring the interaction of material and virtual experiences. I'm fascinated to watch how technologies like Augmented Reality and Virtual Reality could be used to expand the experiences of seeing painting over the next few years. We don't live in a world of cohesive artistic movements anymore where painting is something that needs to be challenged, deconstructed and rebuilt as a radical act, but I do think that we should be able to see it as a lens through which to understand ourselves at a given moment in time. But overall I'm less concerned with "the artist" as a generic idea and more interested in taking personal responsibility for my own approach to painting and how I can keep asking questions through it.

RP: This is so fascinating Charley. What really interests me is that your practice seems to be right at the very cutting edge of where our thoughts on art, creativity and the dawn of the digital age, and more specifically AI, currently are.

If I may, I would like to return to something you mentioned earlier. You said "AI doesn't have an imagination of its own." I completely agree. I've heard some people say AI is creative, but

they seem to miss the point that it is only acting under instruction. It is in fact the instruction which is creative. As I understand it, artistic creativity is the visualization of metaphors – something which comes about when two disparate and unconnected elements are fused together, specifically where one object is labelled something it clearly isn't. This process creates new ways of viewing the world. It gives us fresh angles of approach. In language it's like saying the "the table leg" or "mouth of the river." When first made these metaphors have a vibrancy, but that vibrancy eventually wanes over time and use and new metaphors is sought. This is the heart of your practice in, as you say yourself - "bringing opposites together."

So, what fascinates me now is, can you imagine a time when AI can create metaphors for itself?

CP: This is an interesting question because at the moment, no I can't. AI learns from people – from the data we input and the algorithms we write for it. It is like holding up a mirror to the human world and not an alternative to it. ChatGPT is a good example of this. It isn't able to invent new knowledge, so when we ask it a question what we get back is basically a sophisticated form of predictive text; the AI has been trained to give us the most likely answers to a question we input based on the data sets it was trained on. The speed at which it does this is what distinguishes it from a human brain because it doesn't go through the relatively slow and imperfect human process of "thinking", and that can feel alarming to us, but the content of what ChatGPT generates isn't any "better" than the content of our own brains should we have the time to think through things ourselves. So, to go back to your original question about AI creating its own metaphors, it might appear to be able to do this on a surface level – it can understand the rules of human metaphors through a process of pattern recognition and be able to use this knowledge to construct something that appears to be new – but it couldn't do so without people training it. However, I'd never say never. I'm well aware that I'm just a high street consumer of widely available AI and there might be many more advanced developments in a lab in Silicon Valley that none of us know anything about yet…

RP: That's so beautifully put Charley, I completely agree with you but hadn't thought about it in this way before. I think you get to the core of what the artistic process is here – that it is a way to slow down our thinking and meditate over the nature of our existence.

You mention how you "feel separate from the work that (you) make." It seems at first glance like an odd thing for an artist to say, yet I know many artists like to "disassociate" when they paint, often by listening to music or a radio. From my own experience I would say that one's ego or psyche brings you to the beginning of making a painting, yet in order to make it well, you then have to place your ego to one side to let the work speak. In the past people have talked in terms of artists being like shamen, somehow tapping into the spiritual.

Does this idea of disassociation resonate with you? Do you yourself find ways to disassociate when painting and, more specifically, do you feel this could be fundamentally what separates out the human from the digital?

CP: Taking your ego out of the painting is such a good way of articulating it! I always come back to what Agnes Martin said about "painting with your back to the world" when I think about being in my ultimate studio mindset and it's a form of disassociation where the daily life version of me transitions into my studio counterpart. I have a very hyperactive brain, it churns through thoughts like an analogue radio racing through 100 channels and never settling on any one broadcast, but when I'm painting I'm able to find clarity and calm in a way that evades me at any other time. I find listening to music too emotive and distracting, it can affect my mood and change the feeling of my painting. But I do love listening to podcasts because they require enough attention that I can't obsess about and overthink my paintings, but at the same time I can drift in and out of concentration when I need to respond to things more mindfully on the canvas. Plus I like learning about new things and podcasts are a great way to take in new information without trying too hard! Dissociation is definitely a strategy that humans need and the digital doesn't…machines don't second guess themselves, they just get on with performing a task from a given set of instructions. Self-doubt and procrastination are the curse of the oversensitive creative human brain…

RP: Last year I was listening to an interview with a Trans Activist and they said they had a feeling of "having been born into the wrong body" before transitioning. It struck me as a really interesting observation, because it implies that there is a self which exists separate from our physical identity. Buddhists, Christians and other religions might refer to this separate self as a soul, spirit or psyche. Do you feel there is truth to this yourself? And if so, do you feel creating a detachment from oneself whilst making art is something which allows access to this non-physical part of ourselves; to a kind of deeper humanity? I wonder if this is what could be the heart of a separation between humanity and AI?

CP: I think this relates to what we are saying about dissociation, that in order to channel the authentic essence of our creativity onto the canvas we have to suppress the part of our brain that is closer connected to the outward-facing version of ourselves to find something that exists on a deeper level. There is something otherworldly about the part of us that can make something magical out of nothing; to put colours together that make people feel intense emotions or to create an imaginary world that changes how others see reality. I believe that deep down we all have a profound understanding of who we are – maybe that's what a spirit or a soul is – and that one of our lives' missions is to live authentically as ourselves and to be proud and grateful for the uniqueness that we bring to the world. It can take some of us much longer to find the real us than it does others, but once we do then that's what we can use to connect with and touch others. For artists, that's our work. AI doesn't have the same depth as

humanity; it can't love, empathise or be self-reflective. Maybe that's why I'm not scared of it, it'll never surpass the complexities of humanity or feel the very human experiences that I think are best parts of being alive.

RP: I think that's a wonderful place to end, thank you so much Charley, I have really enjoyed our interview.

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