

Robert Priseman

Interviews Claudia Bose

RP: If I may, I would like to begin by asking you about your childhood. You were born and grew up in Germany and moved to the UK when you were 17 years old, to study nursing. Then, when you were around 25, you secured a place at the Royal Academy in London to study painting. Can you tell us a little about this please? Why did you decide to move to England and what prompted the change from nursing to fine art?

CB: I grew up with my parents and brother in Bavaria, in the South of Germany and visited England as a teenager several times. My Grandmother spoke English and Russian. After my schooling I wanted to spend more time in England. I worked for a charity looking after people with learning difficulties near Oxford. England, its people, attitude, past, music, art and trees I liked. So I decided to stay and study Mental Health in Oxford for three years. There was something about life I needed to find out before moving on.

After living in Oxford I moved to London where I completed a foundation course in art, continued at St Martin School of Art and Design in painting and another three years of painting at the Royal Academy Schools. How come I ended up in England studying painting? It was suggested to me by Jane Dowling that I get a place at the Royal Academy schools.

RP: Can you expand a little more for us on the art you enjoyed seeing in England? Which artists inspired you? Did any artist make you feel – “I’d like to be doing that.” And is there something you might describe as having a very specific ‘English sensibility’?

CB: I can’t say specifically, but the artists I most admire and have been influenced by include Paul Nash, Henry Moore, Barbara Hepworth, Paula Rego, Frances Bacon, J M W Turner, Lowry, Kitaj, Aurerbach, David Hockney, later Howard Hodgkin, Patrick Heron, Bridget Riley, Mary Fedden, Gillian Ayres, later Bridget Riley and Eileen Cooper.

RP: That’s so interesting. Looking at all these names from the 20th century makes it easy to see just how rich and vibrant the visual arts have been in the UK. In fact I’m reminded how R.B. Kitaj commented on this in the 1970’s. Like you, he moved from to London from the US (in 1959) and was asked to put on an exhibition of British painting by the Arts Council in 1977. In the catalogue for that show he wrote of what he saw as the: “...artistic personalities in this small island (are) more unique and strong and I think more numerous than anywhere in the world outside America’s jolting artistic vigour. There are ten or more people in this town, or not far away, of world class. In fact, I think there is a substantial School of London.”

It's not something our country celebrates enough – our visual arts heritage.

Most culture in the world is defined by geographical boundaries. We might think of languages, styles of architecture and variety of cuisine for example. Do you notice any significant differences between the arts in Germany and Britain?

CB: Germany is surrounded by eight countries and these boundaries define our differences significantly in positive and negative facts. Having had a war not so long ago we know how important for example, libraries, art, music venues, laws and education mean. Every town has got a kind of exhibition space or museum. The war with the Ukraine and Russia is further away from here and the Germans are thinking about war in Europe for the first time.

RP: As a result of the war in Ukraine, do you think more artists in Germany beginning to engage with the subject matter of war and grand social narratives? Or like England, is there a broad focus on the individual lived experience?

CB: This is a very interesting question. As I lived in England for a long time it is not easy to answer this very complex situation. I never thought that Germany would ever have to think about fighting another war in Europe. I am sure this and Israel will produce new narratives for German artists but we can only speculate. If I was in Germany now I would probably be working like a maniac.

RP: That's so interesting Claudia, it brings to mind how so much of the drive to create is driven by our emotions. And our emotions are not controlled by us, but stimulated by external events, like wars or love. The only control we have is in how we respond to our feelings. Part of that is through artistic expression.

You have been involved with many art exhibitions over the past few years. A clear emphasis of these has been on women only shows such as *Obscure Secure* and *Women 100* at the Ipswich Museum. What have you found most exciting and positive about this focus?

CB: It was very exciting that kind of suddenly we were able to show our work in an open, playful as well in a serious manner. We had mixed participating audiences, which were mainly supported by smaller alternatives as well as local museums.

RP: One of the things which emerged from these and many other shows, was a sense many women hold at the beginning of the 21st century. That a focus on men in the arts had been too much for too long. And that shifting the focus toward women was long overdue.

Do you feel women approach painting differently from men?

CB: I believe so. Half of the story has not been told yet. A lot needs to be tidied up now by women. A few books here and there need to be written to clarify details, images, contexts, and some facts about financial equality.

RP: I'm curious about your mention of financial equality. Can you tell us what you mean please? What does financial equality involve for you?

CB: Equality in finance means all women and men get paid equally for similar services. There are several ways of sorting it out. Big chapter.

RP: That's interesting and I guess perceptions of equality can differ widely between people. And even where the law provides protection it may not always be enough.

In terms of your own practice, I remember a few years ago you telling me how your paintings are often focused on making abstract works based on small and apparently insignificant details around you, such as how the dust settles on a surface. Can you expand a little more on this for us please?

CB: The dust we see, it makes up part of life. For me this makes it a great subject for painting. Also, birdshit, the things around us like that – I like painting things that have not been widely painted yet. It is about things people like, but are not confident to say or explore.

RP: What do you feel is the hardest thing about being a painter?

CB: Having chosen painting, living with it, I would say it is always having no money.

RP: I agree with you. It has always struck me that to be a 'proper artist' one has to live and work without the consideration of money. Which means one either has to learn to live with very little, or be wealthy to start with. So often today, and I would say throughout history, most great artists have learnt to live with little in order to produce great art. I think because the masterpieces are uncompromising, unapologetic. And to take that stance one cannot be subject to someone else's considerations.

There is also something else Ally and I began to notice a few years ago too – that true creativity never gets financially rewarded at the time it happens. Whether that is raising a child or producing a ground breaking work of art. Financial reward only seems to come when the creative period is over and mannerism has taken its place.

If you could go back and talk to your younger self, what would you say to her?

CB: Train to become a plumber. Get an instrument and play with others.

RP: I like it! Thank you so much for agreeing to do this interview Claudia – I have really enjoyed it.

Interview completed on 23 June 2024