

Robert Priseman

Interviews Maria Chevaska

RP: It's a real pleasure to interview you Maria, thank you so much for doing this. I wonder if we can start with you telling us a little about where you were born and grew up?

MC: Thank you, Robert, for proposing an interview with me around my work. I was born in London, as my parents were living there temporarily. We then returned immediately to live in Oxford which is where my maternal grandparents lived and my mother had grown up. My mother had met my Polish father soon after the end of WW2. He had earlier found himself with the Polish army sent to Edinburgh. As the war ended he then went to Oxford to complete his Polish Law degree at the University, and my mother at the time was a student at the Oxford Art School. In early growing up, I was close to my grandparents, but we were also a part of the Polish community in the city. Later, I went to board for my school years at a catholic convent school in Abingdon.

RP: Who would you consider your earliest influences on your desire to become a painter?

MC: I think that I was fortunate to grow up in Oxford with its incomparable museums; Ashmoleum, Christchurch Picture Gallery, and the Pitt Rivers Museum. All of them free entry and available to visit. Together with seeing wonderful art in those museums, we made regular trips to the National Gallery in London – it had been my mother's interest too with her practical art background. I also recall a visit to the Uffizi in Florence, and so many churches in Rome, where the paintings were very real and extraordinary to me.

RP: Where did you train and how did your work evolve during your early years to your mature style we see today?

MC: My foundation year was in Oxford – at what is now Oxford Brookes University. As you know foundation courses give some experience in many art and craft areas. Only a small minority of the students chose to pursue fine art for their degree. Our head-of-department, an RA, favoured the Byam Shaw School of Art in London that offered only fine art practices. As is the way of things Byam Shaw has since been absorbed into UAL and lost its individuality. I did four years there, that included a one year post-grad. In retrospect, I was appreciative of the various visiting artists, and talks, but I think that being a student is just that – however dedicated an artist one feels, it is a partial learning experience, until later, and mostly through travelling that one pieces together the jigsaw of art through time, and geographies. For me, it feels such a long time ago, although at the time I recall some major and exhilarating exhibitions that were in London. For example, the knockout effect of the Rothko room

installed at Tate Britain. And, much mid-century American painting, the Abstract Expressionists, also the Pop artists, land artists, and others.

Perhaps because I was curious about American art, my first trip on leaving college was to stay six weeks in New York discovering the art museums and galleries, and meeting a few artists in huge loft studios. Back in London I moved in to a group studio straight away and slowly my work developed in tandem with other significant influences – such as mid-century European ideas; Arte Povera has been a lasting appreciation and a major influence, Support/Surface in France – these were materiality, and conceptual. Then to add into this mix in the 1970s/80s the overt visibility of Feminist actions, art objects, and writing/literature. It takes a long time to personalise and unpick these ways of thinking through work, and I have always remained interested to evolve my art. Now over more than four decades I have been producing individual series - each spanning about three years in the making. The methods and various materials used have been specific to each body of work – and language is often at the root. It is unusual for me to consider having a mature style - because always a ‘style’ suggests to me a boxed-in practice to avoid. I admit that is not a commercially minded way to work, yet I believe creativity needs the oxygen of invention and perhaps experimentation in the long-term. After all, many artists expect to be producing work for life! I feel the benefit of maturity is in having a greater trust of my own gut reactions, and currently an ease with oil painting – I think it is a confidence that comes with doing it, and the passing of time.

The body of works currently in my studio have been influenced by recent life events, such as moving to a smaller studio space, and, significantly by the pandemic lock-down periods when I worked at home, on drawings, sculptural works with paper, and a series of note-books. My current paintings are now mostly on a smaller scale, and I am interested that they are primarily about an intimacy with the viewer.

I desist to describe them more in words, but I do welcome visits to the studio.

RP: As an artist, you have had a very distinguished career, exhibiting in many venues internationally. Your work has been acquired by major collections including those of the Arts Council England, British Council, Gulbenkian Foundation, New Hall College Cambridge and Kunstmuseum Heidenheim. And you have been a Professor of Fine Art at Ruskin School of Art, University of Oxford. Yet often on the inside, even with external signifiers of success, we can still feel like we are struggling for recognition. I think this is something common amongst many people. I sense this a feeling you also have, that real success is somehow elusive and just beyond your reach? If so, do you feel it may be connected to something at the core of human experience, that we are always striving for something just outside of ourselves?

MC: ‘Success’ is a slippery question, as I think, you imply. At the time that I left art college it was common to try to make a living by teaching in art schools – part-time jobs existed, and it seemed the perfect solution to maintaining a career as an artist, and a means to keep in touch with other artists. It was fortunate that in this way I could maintain a studio, and a living. Now, sadly part-time teaching in art schools barely exists.

In the 1980s the Whitechapel Gallery initiated probably the first in-gallery education program led by Jenni Lomax – the idea was to invite young artists (rather than art historians for example) to run workshops, and to give talks within the gallery exhibitions. This was placing the contribution of artists in the public eye and it was my first real contact with talking about art in the public sphere. I was also funded to spend a rewarding year as artist-in-residence at a secondary school in Hackney.

Most recently, as a professor at The Ruskin School of Art it was enriching to work with such promising student artists there – so, I hold no regrets in maintaining a teaching position alongside my own practice as a committed artist.

Over years I have worked with several galleries – unfortunately, none here in London, or in Paris have managed to survive to the present due to the extraordinary cost of leases for gallery spaces. I think that this outcome is such a loss to artists – the gallerists that I had experience of working with were all very dedicated to the art. Of course, none of this personal history means ‘recognition’ in the long-term, or indeed much commercial success, yet, I am very aware that recognition for so many is out of reach – particularly artists from my generation.

The Andy Warhol quote comes to mind – ‘we all have 15 minutes of fame.’ I had been startled during a talk by the curator of a solo exhibition I had in Helsinki 2008 who said that my ‘moment’ was the 1980s, something which I could only think had passed my attention! Some really wise thoughts on artistic success I always find in Rainer Maria Rilke’s *Letters to a Young Poet* – whose words more than a century later are frank, very grounding, and a guide to integrity.

RP: I love the idea that your recognition ‘moment’ had passed your attention! I think that is true for so many of us. As you are at a stage in your practice where you can look back over several decades of work and experience, I wonder if you can share some thoughts with us? I would say that the 1980’s through to 2020’s have seen significant cultural change in the arts. Most notably there has been a shift away from a male dominance in the field in the 20th century to an overwhelmingly female one today. I think many artists coming through today would really value your thoughts on this. What was life like for you as a woman artist in the latter half of the 20th century, and how has the rise of feminism impacted you?

MC: The immediate thought is that it has been a long time coming – because, culturally, exclusion means that we have all missed out on some great art. For me, exhibitions by a range of female artists, historical and contemporary in the last few years have been some of the most impactful. Now, we have had our eyes opened, yet I cannot objectively say that there is parity of expectation for female artist's career prospects – art schools are packed with ambitious female students – yet, there is not evidence of their numbers taken in to museum collections, which is still underwhelming (see Gorilla Girls!).

As young artists in the C20th we were not given great expectations for an art career – it was the time – perhaps particularly for a female painter. Conventionally painters were considered to be male, therefore, some peers decided to work in video, and performance that were newer languages in which they could and would make a mark.

Importantly, though, in society itself feminism was present and was bringing change – especially through the contributions of writers. I feel grateful to those earlier feminists who laid the ground for myself and others to live our lives with the freedoms of body and mind that also affected our art practices. This enables current generations to rightfully take their own choices for granted.

However, the art world is less transparent – I don't yet fully believe there are equitable opportunities – real evidence would be in the statistics of, for example: national collections, and large survey exhibitions. But, I agree that it is going in a positive direction. From my own experience, I know that every artist needs staying power and resilience, and, a love for engagement in making the art that reflects their lives.

Who knows the future?

RP: I want if I may, to return to your Catholic upbringing. Many of your titles have a religious implication, such as the one we own in the PS Collection, *Every Angel is Terrifying*. I believe you are not a practicing Christian today. But I wonder if you might reflect on how your upbringing has impacted the creation of your works today.

And in a broader context, how do you think artists working today approach their work differently from artists of the past. I suppose what I'm getting at is, do you think working for the Church or something bigger than yourself as an individual creates a different mindset to being an artist who works for themselves? As working today for example, where ideas are based around the self?

MC: One legacy of a catholic upbringing is the familiarity with a rich visual world of Icons from around the globe, Medieval carved figures, and Renaissance and Baroque paintings and sculptures. Historically Western art was first seen by the general public in churches, before museums and white cube gallery spaces were developed solely for that purpose.

My painting in the Priseman/Seabrook collection '*Every Angel is Terrifying*' 2018; this title is the first line of the *Second Elegy*, by Rainer Maria Rilke, published in 1923. I had previously drawn on the *Second Elegy* in making numerous paintings, and also for a collaborative exhibition in Berlin in 2007. During his life time Rilke had been questioned about his frequent mention of angels in his poetry – he specifically said that they were not to be understood as Christian angels, but as a pure metaphor – as more than human, powerful and sensuous creatures – the angel being the unity of the invisible and the visible. For me, those four title words are both concise, and vast simultaneously.

We know that art has not in general been commissioned by the Church for centuries now and therefore it is rarely seen or received within that specific context. Yet, although contemporary artists are addressing a secular audience whose context and concerns are often around the self, and identity in 21st century society, these ideas do not diminish the very flesh and blood beings that populate the earlier commissioned religious works – with all their grief, joy, pain and ecstasy, as they are not so different to our own experiences. For example, we can think of the current wider public appreciation of religious-subject Caravaggio paintings, and the visceral touch of Titian. I think that both artists are depicting and contextualising themselves just as much as fulfilling a religious, or mythical commission.

As a contemporary artist and painter I aim to embody in my works a reflection on our world now with its complexities and concerns, while also thinking that painting is not good at simply conveying a literal message - invention, atmosphere, and materiality are its unique and enduring character. The writer Isabelle Graw in her 2018 book *The Love of Painting*, has described painting as a 'success medium' because it continues to communicate so much about self, and other, through its own language to those viewing it.

RP: Thank you so much for sharing some of your thoughts and experiences with us Maria. This seems like a perfect place to conclude.

Interview completed on 14 June 2024