

Robert Priseman

Interviews Anne Schwegmann-Fielding

RP: We've been friends for many years Anne, so I know a lot about your background as an artist. You moved to Tolleshunt Major near Maldon in Essex with your parents and siblings and went to art school at Wolverhampton. Central to your practice as an artist is the idea of recycling what society discards and transforming it into something beautiful. Taking broken crockery, bus shelter glass, pennies, buttons and so on, and re-fashioning these fragments into sculpture. This is a core philosophy which underscores your work and daily life.

And we've often joked about how you are one of the most successful artists I know, because you have made a full-time living from your work for most of your life. Yet it hasn't always been easy. When you started out you set up and taught a course in Oxford on women artists. I wonder if you can tell us a little about your early life, what motivated you to become an artist and about the course you taught please?

ASF: I've always drawn, for as long as I can remember. I love the absorption of the creative process, the escape of living in the imagination. Seeing something I've just created, that wasn't in the world yesterday, still fascinates me. My parents, who weren't creatives, were always encouraging with my drawing as a child. They did raise concerns about challenges I might face at Art school after considering an English degree as an option. I just remember waking from a dream one morning with the decision to do an Art Foundation course (I always had typing to fall back on). I went on to study Fine Art where my interest in discarded everyday objects really developed.

The course in Oxford was chance. I had moved to London after finishing my degree and was working in a bookshop to pay off student debts, whilst occasionally making collages. Some friends in Oxford had heard a call out for tutors for a course on women artists for the WEA at Ruskin College. Being a fearless 23 year old, I said yes, then panicked and read Whitney Chadwick's *Women, Art and Society* cover to cover. Four years studying Art, it seemed I could only name a handful of women artists. This was a time of real discovery, I researched and read all the books I could find on women artists, learning how many women were successfully creating alongside the men and the movements I knew so well. I used to borrow slides from the V&A slide library, suffering imposter syndrome with my cropped white hair amongst the learned older scholars. There was a women artists slide library but access wasn't easy. Postcards or large coloured prints were practically non-existent. Out of all the postcards at the national gallery for example, maybe one was by a woman artist. Most of the images I used, were photocopies gathered from various sources. There was *Feminist Artist News* and another women artist magazine, great activist postcards by guerilla girls and if I was lucky,

I'd find some sculptures and paintings in exhibitions. It was hard to find much information about women artists throughout history, there might be one image in a book full of male artists. This was all around 1991/2 days of libraries and books, all pre-Google and so much has changed since then.

Then, an armed robbery at the bookshop in London, triggered my resignation. The course had run for a couple of years by then, so leaving London prompted the end of the course. Two course attendees, both art history graduates whose degree had taught them little about women artists, took over the running of the course. I moved back to Maldon and set up my first studio, with four solo shows in the first year and began a part time diploma Artists in Schools, a fabulous partnership course, training artists to work with teachers. I soon moved to Colchester and began creating a series of public commissions for Essex Hospitals.

RP: That's so fascinating Anne. It is hard to imagine now, 30 years later, how one sided towards men it all was back then. Your observations about women artists and feminist art throws up an interesting question. Do you think there is a difference between art made by women and feminist art? My sense is that the two have somehow become intertwined in recent years. What are your thoughts on this?

ASF: I would say there is a difference. Feminist art is a movement, just as surrealism, nouveau realism or other isms. Women's art is art created by women, with styles, concepts and themes as diverse as the women who have created it. And some of those women are addressing specific feminist issues. It is only partly our gender that makes us create what we make in the way we achieve it. It is our experiences and concerns within that world, that creates our focus. Maybe with an increase of women creating art and feminism being fashionable the two have blurred?

RP: What you say about "our experiences and concerns within that world, that creates our focus" is so true, and for all artists. I was talking with a friend over supper the other night and she loves reading women writers and doesn't tend to read books written by men. She is also an aspiring writer. It struck me that I was the same, only the other way around, that I love looking at paintings made by male artists of the past, like Vermeer, Constable, Holbein and so on. And a large part of that I began to realise, is because I like to understand their life stories, as that helps me imagine that perhaps if they could make great art, maybe it's possible for me too.

Do you feel that the lack of female representation in the arts in the past made it more difficult for women artists to imagine a future for themselves? Or was there something else at play?

ASF: Interesting, with regards to reading, I probably read books by men and women in equal measure, it is the subject which draws me in. Also, if fiction, the author doesn't always write

from the perspective of their gender. I read a lot of biographies and books about journeys and I definitely judge by the cover. Looking at the artists who inspire me, it is similar in that their philosophy, their life story, style and materials are what I connect with. Out of three artists who are my main inspiration, two are men and one a woman.

In the past, I'd say lack of female representation in the arts was definitely a factor for women considering an artistic career. Being an artist simply wasn't an option, they were the muse, supportive wife/mother. Art encouraged as a pastime but not career. There have always been women artists, but most books about artists were also written by men, who wrote about the male artists they knew. Artists like Artemesia Gentileschi for example, hugely successful in her time, went largely forgotten and only more recently been recognised and celebrated as the brilliant painter she was.

It is perhaps not just lack of female representation in the arts, but also about female role models in general and especially within the family which may have impacted on options for their future. Would having a mother or aunt pursuing a creative career make their daughters more likely to follow in their footsteps, or at least open up possibilities and ambitions? Quite possibly. But would daughters whose mothers didn't pursue a career, creative or otherwise, be less brave and less creative? You could say it might be the opposite, encouraging them to follow what they wanted to do because their mother hadn't? The more things shifted, more women did become artists, so maybe it is true. So much has changed and it certainly feels for young women artists today, anything is possible.

RP: Thank you so much for sharing your reflections on this, it certainly gives a lot of food for thought. Turning to your own work, you have many artistic heroes. Most notably perhaps are Niki de Saint Phalle and Nek Chand. And you were fortunate enough to spend time with Nek Chand in Chandigarh, India working in his sculpture garden. Can you tell us a little about that and how it affected your own practice?

ASF: Meeting Nek Chand was something I will always cherish. I was awarded a residency at Arts Reverie in Gujarat and during this time arranged to meet Nek Chand in Northern India. He was gentle, a man of few words and a soft humour, we got on instantly. We walked around the park together, discussing his life, the sculptures, materials and his motivation. He simply said, creating these sculptures was something he had to do, like a gift from God. *The Rock Garden of Chandigarh*, started in secret and unauthorised, is the second most visited place in India after the Taj Mahal.

Nek Chand and India had a profound effect on my work. It further advanced my love of decoration, embellishment and colour, something often frowned upon in the Western Art world. Chand's use of Indian bangles, directly inspired a new collection of spoon sculptures and he was the first person to receive one of my finished "Schwegspoons." Creating a

sculpture in the park and immersing myself in the gardens confirmed my desire to build a magical space, to use the materials which surround me and create a place of wonder for people to enjoy.

RP: Like de Saint Phalle and Chand, you would like to build a sculpture garden of your own. I imagine it will be quite a magical place, drawing many visitors when it comes into being. Can you share with us how you envisage this?

ASF: I'd like to create a magical space, a place where there is sculpture, adornment, transformation, colour and wonder. Somewhere you can walk around immersing yourself in someone else's imagination at play, where sculptures weave around gardens, planting, fruit trees and food and look like they have always been there. The building, our home, if within the grounds might also be transformed. Like my sculptures, the garden will be designed to a point, but will evolve more intuitively.

The whole place would encourage creativity and conversation. I'm envisaging a community run café, workshop space for creative workshops, changing exhibitions of Artists working with recycled or natural materials along with special events. Essentially, I hope to find somewhere neglected, unwanted, unappealing, perhaps a bit of land of no interest to developers, a ramshackle cottage with no access or derelict toilet block...Just something I can transform. I want to create something magical out of something ordinary, something discarded. For me this is what I am working towards now, finding this space. I have sold my house and ready for the next adventure, the next big creation.

RP: Thank you so much for sharing your thoughts with us Anne, I have really enjoyed it. And I really hope you get to build your sculpture garden.

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