

Robert Priseman

Interviews Barbara Peirson

RP: Thank you for letting me visit your studio Barbara, it's a real pleasure to be here. We are in a large log cabin in your back garden with wonderful views over the countryside of Wivenhoe. It's also beautifully chaotic and you seem to have about 50 different paintings on the go at the same time. Can you tell us a little bit about your working process please?

BP: Well, I come here every day first thing when I wake, it's usually pretty early: 4 or 5 am and I start painting straight away, before I begin thinking too much. It feels like a race against my own thoughts or the demands of daily life. My mind is at its best at this time of day – not cluttered up by the mind's chatter and dreams haven't fully slipped away. It feels like my creative energy is at its strongest then, coursing through my veins in fact, especially if I've had a good night's sleep.

The secret is to get out of the way of the process, if I can stop interfering that feels great. Obviously, there's a point when the critical faculties must be engaged with but for me, not before something spontaneous has happened and I've made something, painted something that is now outside of me, in front of me, something that I can look at and begin to negotiate with. Then the process becomes about looking and querying. It's important to be able to judge whether something is working or not without being judgmental, in other words encourage curiosity about what's in front me: Is it working? What happens next? What's not working? What is it asking of me? What's hidden in the painting? What's inside the marks? Do I like it? How can I get to like it? And these questions can take ages to answer, they are problems to be solved, sometimes it takes days, weeks, years! And so, in order not to wallow in the discomfort of not knowing, or trying to force the next step, I will move onto another painting – hence the 50 paintings scattered around.

RP: You began your working life as an actor and combined a career in theatre with teaching acting. During that time you always drew and painted for pleasure. Then around 10 – 15 years ago you began to take that hobby more seriously, moving into a studio and exhibiting your work.

BP: Painting has never been a hobby for me, it's not something I've saved for my time off, for as long as I can remember it's been a daily practice, it's part of the whole work. I won a Blue Peter badge with a painting of 'Where I Live' when I was about nine (perhaps one of my proudest moments!). I wanted to go to art school when I was eighteen but after encouragement from teacher ended up at drama school, leaving fine art hovering as a thread waiting to be picked up.

Since drama school I've kept detailed notebooks for all my work whatever its form - acting, directing, teaching, painting. In the notebooks I explore ideas and work everything out. The notebooks are just as much sketchbooks, they are full of drawings and paintings and they're scrapbooks too where I've saved and stuck patterns, pictures, mementos. Each art practice speaks to the other, everything is interlaced. The ideas and themes thread through it all via the note/sketchbooks.

Directing theatre, which I've done a lot of, is in many ways like painting three dimensional pictures – playing with light, figures in space, objects, colours, mood and so on, as well as arranging elements of sound and space. What fascinates me too is how the creative process, aside from specific techniques, consists of core elements that are the same regardless of the art form. The patterns of the process; the way the mind works; the feelings that emerge; all follow laws that are consistent. These are ideas that I love to explore when working with students, I learn so much from teaching – it is research in practice through dialogue and it all feeds back into the work. I started teaching straight after I had my first theatre job because I wanted to explore further everything that I'd learnt from the professional workplace. I'm still teaching now, having added the teaching of painting to the repertoire.

You're right, I began my working life as an actor and my working life now is mainly as a painter. Painting has taken over as the main practice. I picked up the thread. What's more, it's immediate and it depends on no one but myself. Making theatre is a collaborative process so the opportunities to do it are dependent upon assembling people together. It's frustrating not to be able to just get on and do it when I wake up each day. But I can paint whenever I want to, I only need myself and some paints. The decision to be creative, to get on with the work, is not in someone else's hands.

R.P. That is so fascinating Barbara. What emerges is that central to your life is being creative, and the core focus of that creativity can shift over time. This is also true for artists like Derek Jarman, who was most famous for his film making until he contracted AIDS. Then he bought a small cottage in Dungeness and created a sculpture garden which has now been bought for the nation and has become his most famous lasting legacy.

A few years ago you had a stroke. That must have been very traumatic, yet it also seemed to have had a dramatic impact on your painting. Because the beauty, quality and integrity of your work seems to have blossomed and flourished. Would you mind telling us a little about that please?

BP: I wanted to keep it private for a long time. I felt embarrassed, conspicuous. I worried that people would see me differently, pity me or write me off. I was inspired though, by other people who'd emerged positively from having had a stroke and shared their experiences.

Eventually I came to see it as my lucky stroke because weirdly, it has felt like a privilege. I am very lucky in that I recovered quickly which isn't everyone's story. Obviously, like all brushes with mortality, you take stock and re-evaluate what's important in life. But something else happened: while I was still pretty much paralysed down one side, I experienced a kind of euphoria which endured. I later read more about this being a phenomenon of a stroke on the left side of the brain. The right side of the brain comes to the fore filling the gap created by the subdued left side. The right side of the brain perceives things more boundlessly, more intuitively and though it's less intense now there's still a residue of that sense of freedom and expansiveness. I've been reconfigured, re-aligned. I haven't consciously utilised this experience when I'm painting but I'm sure it has imprinted itself on the things I do.

RP: Thank you so much for sharing Barbara, it is so fascinating. When we look we can see many artists work affected by a physical condition. Most famously Francis Bacon, whose screaming Pope series of paintings now appear directly influenced by his asthma – in that they could just as easily be gasping for breath and life.

When I look at your paintings I'm reminded of several things simultaneously. They make me think of children's book illustrations, outsider artists, summer holidays by the beach and a desire to escape the real world and enter the world of the imagination. They have hints of the work of artists such as Eric Ravilious, Delia Tournay-Godfrey, Mary Fedden and Arabella Shand. Your paintings often feature a lone figure, usually a woman, who is perhaps walking a dog or standing in front of a beautiful piece of landscape.

Whilst your landscapes are often rooted in real places, their essential essence seems to be around the idea of entering the mind's eye as a means to escape the "real world." Some kind of dream world, which is like the "real world" but without any problems to worry about. They could so easily be sentimental, yet they are not. I think that must be a very difficult balance to make work. Can you tell us a little about why you painting the images you do and what they mean to you?

BP: I don't feel a need to escape the real world. The real world to me is what I see, hear, smell, touch, taste, what I experience through my senses filtered through the mind's eye, which for me is memory and imagination and I suppose my values and concerns too. I don't think ahead much about what I'm going to paint (unless it's a commission), colour is the starting point.

I start with laying on colour then look to I see what I see in it. Some colours recede, some marks come to the fore, and I follow their lead. That way, I can access my subconscious and allow memory and imagination to work their alchemy. It is a sort of dream world. Usually, a landscape emerges and then I wonder who is there. Who is inhabiting it or passing through it? It's like an invitation. I don't know who they'll be until I make some body-shaped marks,

then I read the body language and go with that. It is like setting the scene and waiting for the characters to arrive. Often, they have their backs turned because I don't want to close the narrative down or close off the relationship with the viewer. That instinct comes from theatre experience too, where there's always a conscious endeavour to remember to leave room for the audience to bring their own memories and imaginations to bear. So, I suppose I'm trying to leave space for the viewer to do the same in the paintings. I hope the viewer will want to ask questions of the painting, be curious, as well as moved in some way.

RP: It certainly works that way for me! I mentioned a few artists I'm reminded of when looking at your work. Can you tell us who inspires you?

BP: So many! Yes, Mary Fedden, her use of colour is masterly and her interpretation of everyday objects is – I was going to say inimitable but actually she is much imitated! She also borrowed from Mary Newcombe whose work I find so moving – such a private, personal and humorous observation of her world. Victoria Crowe's work is sublime, I'm in awe of her acute observation, consummate skill and yet so full of feeling. Winifred Nicholson, Gwen John, Roderick Barrett, Cecil Collins, Chagall, Bonnard, Vuillard have all inspired me and Hockney too for his playfulness and prolific output. Alfred Wallis for the simplicity and freedom in his interpretation of what he sees. And yes, I'm very influenced by illustrators. Hours and hours of reading to my kids when they were little introduced me to Brian Wildsmith, John Burningham, Pat Hutchins, Raymond Briggs, Judith Kerr, and Quentin Blake, amongst other brilliant illustrators all of whom I felt huge gratitude towards. Having to read the same story over and over again to children who have an endless capacity for repetition, I'd find immense sustenance in the illustrations and plenty of time to observe them in detail.

RP: Over the course of the 20th century we've seen the rise and decline of many art movements. Where artists would identify themselves as abstract painters or conceptual artists, minimalists, expressionists, surrealists, stuckists or a host of other movements. Now in the 21st century these identities have been replaced by artists working as individuals who identify themselves by their race, gender, sexual orientation and so on.

I wonder how you think of yourself as an artist and what you might feel is the core message of your work if you have one?

BP: I still feel like a beginner. I tell myself that every painting session is a painting lesson – I'm still learning. And that reminds me not to mind too much when it looks awful, it reminds me to keep playing and experimenting

Perhaps you're saying that my work isn't political. It isn't. It's not the place where I feel I can usefully protest or educate - what could I say anyway that isn't already being said and said so

brilliantly by other people? Most of the work I've done throughout my career in theatre has been political and perhaps I think theatre does it better, if the goal is to change minds, change the course of history. In teaching drama I created a signature course: Theatre and Human Rights – telling stories of injustice that were hidden from view – shining a light on issues that were not being addressed in the media. But everything is in the media now and although the democratisation of the media has immense benefits it is in many ways our biggest problem. In this post-truth, AI generated world where does art position itself? Any conscious attempts I've made to 'say something' with painting haven't felt sincere. And sincerity seems essential.

For me the greatest political act now is to spread hope rather than despair, to elevate the human spirit, create connection, to find honesty, integrity. I don't want to amplify despair or anger or separateness or guilt. I'm interested in human frailty, compassion, the longings of the soul, the things that connect us, the naivety and ridiculousness of the human condition, in our humanity.

RP: That seems such a beautiful place to end. Thank you so much for sharing your thoughts and practice with us Barbara, it has been really fascinating.

Interview completed on 25 July 2024