

# Robert Priseman

## Interviews Harvey Taylor

RP: Hello Harvey, thank you for inviting me into your home and studio. We have known each other for many years now and live quite close to each other, and I have admired your work all that time. So I want to begin with an observation if I may?

When I look at the art I most admire, some of it amongst the most famous ever made, I notice a few similar patterns. And they are also patterns I notice in your practice. The work is often made in modest surroundings and in humility. It is often produced without grants and is funded by the creative themselves. This is true for Vermeer, Jane Austen, van Gogh and even Francis Bacon.

You work full-time as Head of art at Colchester VI Form College. Then come home and paint for two hours at the end of each day. When I first visited you had your easel and paints set up at the end of your dining table – which reminded me very much of Jane Austen, tucked in the corner of her living room, writing what would become some of the most famous books the world has known.

Can you tell us a little about what motivates you to paint every day and what your rituals are?

HT: Yes, you're right – my teaching job takes up most of my day, so I try to keep a schedule where I sit down at my easel and paint for a couple of hours daily, often extending to four hours on weekends and during holidays. This routine was inspired by writers who commit to writing 1,000 words a day, and it initially came about when I was working on my realist paintings from gridded-up photographs. The two-hour sessions helped me focus and provided a structure, allowing me to pick up where I left off the previous day. Before adopting this method, I worked in a more haphazard, abstract way, often unsure of the next step and sometimes going in circles. Now, my approach is more linear, with each step following the last, inspired by artists like Chuck Close and Malcolm Morley.

My painting space was originally in the corner of the dining room, which worked well and it allowed me to step back from my work and even go outside to view it from a distance. A few years ago, I moved my studio to the back bedroom as the dining area was getting too cluttered. The new space has a great view of the back garden, though less room for stepping back. I usually close the curtain and use a modelling lamp for light because the window light can be distracting. A north-facing studio would be ideal. While I paint, I listen to the radio, usually tuned to 6 Music. As my work progresses, I bring it downstairs and hang it above the fireplace. I used to have a studio in larger complexes, but I find I need to be very close to my working space to stay motivated.

RP: That's so interesting. It is important to be able to stand back from the work and judge it from a distance isn't it? Yet equally the need to have the work close at hand is a further consideration. You

highlight perfectly how there is no ideal set up for any of us really, just the best we can manage. Then it's just a matter of getting on with it!

I wonder, would you describe yourself as an abstract, realist or photorealist painter? Or something else?

HT: My work appears photorealistic, but I don't categorize myself strictly. I appreciate abstract and loose figurative painting, and often, the photorealistic work I admire, like Richard Estes's, has a loose and free quality up close. When I paint, I focus on a small part of the photograph, interpreting shapes on a larger scale. This process can feel quite loose and abstract. When the painting comes together, it appears photorealistic.

RP: I sense that your paintings fall into three main categories: large size portrait heads, landscapes and close up views of nature, such as a view of leaves or a stretch of water. Each person is known to you and every landscape somewhere close to home. Have you always painted in this way or is it something that has subconsciously evolved?

HT: Since I started working in this way, I've always chosen subject matter that's around me. I was initially inspired by my daughter when she was young, and I wanted to paint her. This led to a series of larger-scale works of her, followed by paintings of other family members, focusing mainly on the head. I particularly enjoyed painting hair, which eventually led me to other subjects like the sea. I was inspired by Gerhard Richter's choice of subject matter and Lucian Freud's approach of painting only what he knew. I enjoy the challenge of painting trees and plants because you can get lost in the detail. The tree paintings enable me to get more space in the work as well. The tree paintings depict woods near my studio or around Colchester, places I've often walked through. The sea paintings are inspired by places I've visited on walks. And my parents live near the sea, making this subject close to me as well. The leaf paintings and other natural forms come from a desire to create an all-over composition, balancing realism with a hint of abstraction.

RP: Yes, I remember the early paintings you made of your daughter while she was asleep. They reminded me of a gentler version of Victorian family post-mortem photos. It was a wonderful series you made of her, infused with a deep sense of love and careful observation. And how fascinating that you became captivated by painting hair and that this then translated in to a desire to paint nature. I can see it now but would never have thought off it if you hadn't mentioned it.

Given the variety of your subject matter, I wonder if you can you tell us about your palette please? What type of colours do you use, how many and which brushes or knives to apply them with?

HT: I tend to use the same colours depending on the subject matter. For portraits, I use titanium white, naples yellow light, transparent red ochre, yellow ochre, transparent maroon, and phthalo turquoise. For landscapes and sea paintings, I use the same palette minus the red ochre, but I might add

ultramarine, winsor yellow, and a bit of payne's grey. I always use the same size brush – a cheap round No.4 from Daler and Rowney. I go through many brushes as they lose their sharp point quickly.

My physical palette itself has evolved from being a white ceramic plate to my now using layers of baking paper, which are easier to clean. I rip off a layer of white baking paper and slap it on top of the previous one for my palette, building up layers of paper.

RP: My wife and I have a painting of yours on our living room wall. It is titled *Sea at Mersea*. It hangs right above our settee and when friends and colleagues come over they often ask about it. They usually think it is a painting by an international artist of a piece of the ocean somewhere exotic. And I love to tell them that it is by a friend some five miles up the road who has painted a view of the sea we can observe from near our home. It reminds me of two quotes, the first by the psychoanalyst Carl Rogers, that "What is most personal is most universal." And the second by Leonardo da Vinci that "art thrives on constraint and dies on freedom." I would say these are close to your practice as an artist. What do you think?

HT: Yes, I totally agree. Too much freedom gives me too many choices, which I find overwhelming. I like the way I work now, where I can pick up where I left off. The method allows me to focus on creating the work. Limiting my subject matter also makes things easier, although it has evolved over the years. Recently, I've been working on a coloured ground, whereas I previously worked on a white ground. The sea and woods paintings are of places near me, but they could be anywhere in the country.

RP: Something I've noticed is that many creative people do not come from a family of creatives. The creative energy just seems to emerge from them like a spring might emerge from the ground. Can you tell us a little about your family? And also about the artists who inspire you to paint?

HT: My mum was a big inspiration growing up. She was an expressive painter who kept going with her work even when she was busy with three small children. She would make the time and space to paint, and our house was always full of her colourful paintings. She encouraged me to draw and paint and take 'A' Level art, and both my parents supported my desire to be a painter. They supported me when I did my foundation course and then my degree in Fine Art at Winchester School of Art. When at school studying for my 'A' Levels I went to a Lucian Freud show at the Haywood Gallery and this really inspired me at the time. Then it was Howard Hodgkin and Richard Diebenkorn on my Foundation course as well as Frank Auerbach. Then on my degree at the beginning of the 90's Terry Winters and John Walker were major influences.

Later on, seeing a show of Gerhard Richter portrait paintings at the National Gallery was also amazing to see as I was developing my own portraits – I especially related to the ones he did of his daughter Betty - as well as his *Panorama* show at Tate Modern. The pointillist paintings and other Impressionist and Post-Impressionist paintings at the Musee D'Orsay are also inspiring. Some other

painters who have influenced me or inspired me along the way are Vija Celmins, Georgia O'Keeffe, Chris Ofili, Jenny Saville, George Shaw, Stanley Spencer, Richard Diebenkorn and Franz Gertsch.

RP: That is so fascinating. I think we all need heroes we look up to, those who inspire us in our lives, especially when we are starting out.

You paint a beautiful picture of a personal practice, which appears to act in many ways as a form of daily meditation for you Harvey. My wife often says that most creative people don't really make money from what they do – but instead, it is being engaged in the creative act itself which is the gift.

What are your reflections on this?

HT: You're right; most creatives don't make a lot of money directly from their artwork. For me, painting brings a sense of purpose to my day. The hours and days I spend accumulate into a finished piece, and eventually, a series of works. It's wonderful to have something to dedicate my energy to. If someone else appreciates the work and maybe even buys it, that's a huge thrill for me. Being part of group shows and gaining acceptance from fellow artists is also very important.

**Interview completed 31 July 2024**