

Robert Priseman

Interviews Alex Hanna

RP: Hello Alex, I want to begin by asking you what first inspired you to become a painter?

AH: I think it was my mother who was interested in art and paintings and had a collection of books of works by the great masters. She would take us as children to some of the local galleries in the area, the Lady Lever, Williamson and the Walker Galleries all provided great works to stimulate an early interest. My Great Aunt, who was an Edwardian lady, had a series of water colours that she had produced when travelling through Europe. I was fascinated by the technique and detail. My father made an easel for me and then had me wear a beret and smock and stand (pallet in hand) for a photograph in front of my oil painting. I suddenly felt like an artist, it felt strange.

RP: What a nice story about your father, I can picture you there now having your photo taken. There was clearly a lot of family encouragement to engage with the arts in a positive way.

With the mature practice you have settled into, you work on mostly still-life paintings in your studio. The subject is often discarded pill packages or cartons, sitting on a table top in front of a wall. The colours are muted. One of the things I find most fascinating about them is you use a hand-built camera obscura to compose each painting – possibly inspired by your father building you an easel. And the objects you paint are at mostly 1:1 scale. Normally artists paint larger than life size or smaller than life size, psychologically what you do is very difficult to achieve.

I wonder if you can walk us through all this please?

AH: The aim with these paintings was to keep the whole thing simple and remove a series of technical adjustments that would accompany the construction of an image. By keeping the scale consistent with the object, the translation is very directly linked to arrangement of reality before the picture plane. It initially started with an unselfconscious attempt to paint some empty ibuprofen packets which I randomly placed leaning against a corner of the studio. The aim was to just look and interpret their shapes, proportions and muted colours using a limited arrangement of colours. Capturing the light and mood in that small slice of what one might describe as reality.

RP: Your use of the term reality is very interesting. Sixty to a hundred years ago the term wouldn't probably have been thought of very much. Yet today it appears to have a number of interpretations. Some people refer to their 'lived experience' or talk of 'my truth' and how that is different from the truth of others. It is a subjective view of the world which contrasts to the natural sciences view which aims at objectivity, being rooted in a tested observation.

The 'lived experience' is embedded in personal encounters with the world and can often be seen to reject concepts of universal and objective truths. I would say that this way of thinking is fairly prevalent in 21st century painting. Yet when we come to your work we see something which perhaps brings together the personal encounter with reality and applies a more scientific approach – a meeting of the subjective with the objective. What are your thoughts on this, does it resonate with you?

AH: Well, never before have we lived through a time when we might question reality, or should I say 'our reality'. A grasp on perceived reality may require a sense of trust or belief. Visual perception has many fascinating nooks and crannies (at least my visual perception does). The strange thing is that a huge amount of my visual perception is based upon knowledge and lived experience, not actual visual sensation or retinal absorption. I have to question what it is that I'm looking at and try to rationalise it, then attempt to make a flimsy version of this information. I want to try to find a way into this visual experience and tether it within the picture plane.

RP: Ah, well now that sounds really interesting. It reminds me that a lot of our looking is about interpreting our own psychological perceptions. For example, there is an area in our field of view which is our blind spot, but we don't notice it because our brain "fills in the blank" for us. So our brains trick us. The same way it is believed our sight is partially predicted by our brain. Which could part explain why eye witnesses to an event can see the same thing yet have different interpretations.

Thinking about this, it almost seems as though you are a scientist conducting experiments on visual perception. How does that resonate with you?

AH: I think one has to be open and aware of some of the strange possibilities associated with what we are seeing and how this can change our understanding of a particular visual sensation. The understanding bit is significant in that it enables awareness of possible issues with interpretation and realisation during the act of painting. Viewpoints as you indicated, can play an important part in conditioning our interpretation of an object or body. We fill in any missing or ambiguous data with knowledge or visual memory to 'make sense' of paradoxes. Looking at a bird's silhouette in flight against the sky we can struggle to identify with certainty its species and its size or scale because of limited comparative visual data for our brain to cease upon in order to build evidence.

I was painting an artist's model against a warm Cadmium Yellow sheet in daylight. I noticed how the flesh in many areas looked as if it had a pronounced purple blush. Once I had identified that this was based upon the law of simultaneous contrast, I could then choose how I was to deal with this in the painting. Ironically, I was trying to create a realistic interpretation of the subject. And to enable this to work I had to allow the same phenomena to occur on the painting surface. In this example illusion had to rely upon reality to come to its aid. In this respect illusion became dependent upon reality (within known perception and scientific reasoning). Can it work the other way round? Could tested reality depend upon illusion? I think that is possibly an area I'm not quite ready to address! Art and paintings poetic interface with science.

RP: Why does it matter to paint what you see? Rather than place a sheet of film in the back of your camera obscura and let light itself record what is there? Is there an emotional injection at play which is different to photography?

AH: Taking an image from the camera obscura or for that matter a photograph or image gleaned from digital resources into the medium of paint can represent a strange and compelling morphology. In the camera obscura that image (the one projected and turned through 180 degrees and switched from left to right) is actually living, things are moving, until the piece of photo sensitive paper is inserted. Once its impression has been collected and assembled, according to how we want to see it (through the technology/device), we can then let out a sigh of relief. Behold, it's real! Safety at last. We possibly want that sense of reality. However, using paint, whether that's to interpret a sense of what is seen directly or translated from a technological device throws open the doors for new and exciting possibilities. It starts to tell its own story and can, at points reveal its frailty and vulnerability.

RP: Can you tell us about your palette? As I understand it, you use a traditional landscape painters' palette but on interior still life subject?

AH: Well, the pallet is actually a plein air pallet, designed for quick, instinctive paint application. Three main colours, Cadmium red, yellow ochre, and Ultramarine blue, with White (sometimes flake, dependent upon supply) and Ivory black. Sometimes additional colours are included, dependent on the dictates of the subject (Emerald green and occasionally Alizarin crimson, as a cool red). The pallet is on the warm side and doesn't contain any 'dominant' colours apart from the inclusion of Alizarin. The colours are laid out in an easy-to-use arrangement the point being that one can use the pallet almost without looking. This is why it's good as a plein air type pallet. However, it works just as well in the studio. Yes you have to sometimes engage in close and lengthy colour mixing to compensate for the absence of certain pigments, this also means that one becomes aware of the colour structure and balance of each colour mix. The white component is an important consideration. In my case I tend to see the white as forming the substance and form within the paint. It can sometimes make the paint more three dimensional and give it greater presence. It makes paint look like paint and enables the viewer to contemplate the notion of the painting as an object.

RP: That's really interesting Alex. Many artists don't use white or black. Black especially I would say as it's thought to deaden the other colours. Yet that isn't the case for you. Can you explain why?

AH: The dreaded black, I can't help thinking about the sketches from the *Fast Show*. Black is however a pigment, in fact there are a wide range of variants here and I feel that it's just as valid as any other. I've grown to trust Ivory black and recognise its potential as a coolant and as an adjuster and stabilising force. When compared to many other pigments, which can have a viral effect upon the colours being mixed (and the painting as a whole), this isn't the case with this particular pigment. It

sits back, its not trying to be the main event. It's not an imposter! Yes, its hard to pin down but let's not put it down.

RP: You are building up the idea in my mind of Alex Hanna the scientist again! But you said something very interesting about using white paint as a "forming substance." That it can sometimes make the paint three dimensional and create the idea of the painting as an object. I wonder if we can focus on this?

There is no need to paint any way other than flat. So why paint impasto? This is something which lies at the core of the art of painting. For me, paint, the substance of paint in a painting that is, has a metaphorical quality. It acts as a gel which represents the amorphousness of our emotions. A smear of emotion across a surface if you like. Which is then held permanently in place. This material quality of the paint itself is something so fascinating and transformative. It takes it from a straightforward image that represents something we see in front of us, into something we have feeling about. And it is this feeling about a subject which is the human part. Does that ring true to you? And if so, does this really mean that you are not in fact painting the objects you look at on the table top? But you are really painting an emotional response to how you see the things you are looking at? Is this in fact the real heart of your subject matter? An analysis of your own psychology around the art of looking?

AH: I certainly wouldn't argue that one needs impasto or raised areas of thicker paint, and many of my paintings don't feature impasto, not that that gets me off the hook. That said impasto effects have many functions and uses and have been common within paintings throughout history. Traditionally a painter would apply paint in steps, the impasto areas would be painted in Flake white at the start and a tonal Grisaille developed, following this body colour would be applied, though there are some exceptions to this general approach. Most of the colours and particularly the darker tones would be thinly applied (this meant that those colours didn't catch the light striking the paintings actual surface). The impasto was part of the illusion makers armoury, enabling the highlights to have more strength and function. Many painters became extremely skilled in this process. The use of impasto can alternatively, when applied coarsely emphasise the solid and objective properties of a painted image. Thus, taking the viewer from the illusion to actual, the here and now if you like.

If we work on the assumption that the notion of reality is questionable then we may have used painting to support our emotional response to what we are seeing. What we believe is an interpretation of the world through visual assumptions. Emotively based interpretations in this respect have created solid attempts at making sense of the known world. It has become an emotional record as much as a purely visual one. Perhaps it's impossible to avoid and is constantly breaking though the illusion we have attempted to build. If we can't with any certainty interpret or understand entirely what our eyes are seeing, then perhaps this has become a role and argument for painting? So, I suppose yes, it does represent an analysis of my own psychology around the art of looking, ha.

RP: Well, you have put that better than I ever could! That paint acts as a visual record of our own psychology. That certainly resonates with me.

Moving on a little, I wonder - what would you describe as your core values, and do you feel these are what you are communicating through your art practice?

AH: I have always struggled to explain the mysteries of creative acts and what may be at the centre of my practice. I think if I fully understood or was able to describe what I was doing I possibly wouldn't be doing it. However, I tend to be most caught up with finding and realising the image, understanding the composition and how it relates to the observed visual data. Seeing what may not be entirely visible and understanding the visual phenomena. Can it become a painting? Will it work as a composition? Can it be carried out technically? How can it be made? These are the sorts of questions that are asked, and one thinks about the viewer, what they will see? And how will they feel? Many times, an idea forms and an image can be found to fit with the idea, but under scrutiny it may not work as a 'made object', or the composition is at odds with the technical requirements. So, idea to image to composition to technical and practical requirements. That's the process, which for me is important. The practical, material and technical aspects are important and have such a bearing upon the outcome that they can and will affect philosophy.

RP: Thank you so much Alex, this has been fascinating.

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