

# Robert Priseman

## Interviews Delia Tournay-Godfrey

RP: Thank you so much for inviting me to your beautiful studio Delia, and for agreeing to take part in this series. If I may, I would like to begin with a few observations about your work. At their core, they depict mostly empty landscapes, often with a single figure or a couple. Sometimes an isolated house sits in the distance. The colours are muted and the scenes appear somehow haunted. They look like places we know, but they are somehow not them. Instead they seem to be a kind of imaginary emotional hinterland. Places we visit for a time to escape and reflect, before we return to the challenges of the 'real world.' What are your thoughts on these observations?

DT-G: I think you are spot on with your observations, however I would prefer to think of them as haunting as opposed to haunted. Haunting is evocative, arresting, thought-provoking, with the suggestion that maybe there is more going on than just surface appearances. Haunted sounds like there is an unseen spectral being threaded through the paint which is impossible to remove and remains whatever the subject matter. But maybe there is an element of truth in both of those descriptions.... I do bring emotion to my work, and can only operate with feeling in my work and in my life. I rely on instinct and a gut feeling, a conviction that this way is the right way and painting something else which leaves my senses flat and dull, would for me, be the wrong way. My mentor Ken Back used to say it is better not to explain too much about what it is you are painting, and not to worry too much if you couldn't explain it even to yourself. It is alright to have some ambiguity about it, so long as it felt right. He would urge you to paint from instinct, to paint if you had a gut reaction to something; if you felt really strongly that this is what you should be painting, as opposed to painting what others wanted you to paint. This would give your work strength and conviction. His mantra was to listen to your inner self and to remain true to yourself. His other mantra was, if in doubt, go for 'mood' as opposed to 'decoration' or 'nice'. I always interpreted that as 'atmosphere' or a 'concentrated something' which I am trying to discover as an artist.

RP: I would like to have met Ken Back. His ideas of painting from feeling seems absolutely correct to me. I think it is a great shame that so many artists today are rooted in a 'research based practice.' One of the great gifts of being an artist is that you don't have to reference your thoughts. Instead it is to respond emotionally to ones feelings.

Can you tell us a little more about your practice please Delia?

DT-G: My work is rooted in direct observation, working out in the landscape, on smaller panels and in sketchbooks. The hard work is in the looking, and the search for something to

paint. Recognising when a trigger or an emotional connection happens and being able to get that visual experience down quickly is the exciting bit. I observe all of the time, always looking, and always alert to the sensation or recognition that 'this is worthy of being painted'. The process of taking what I see and translating it into paint so that it feels right for me is totally absorbing. It's a wonderful experience to work from life, with all of the restrictions and frustrations that are involved. It is quite marvellous, and has an exciting sense of urgency about it. Creating larger paintings in my studio at home also involves a strong emotional engagement with the painting, but there is a more meditative, thoughtful quality to the process; there is time to paint and there is less urgency about trying to capture something quickly. I start by surrounding myself with the smaller paintings and my sketchbooks and then concentrate on just looking and feeling what would work. I use the smaller paintings to inform larger pieces, and I also bring images together from the smaller works and my sketchbooks to make a composite painting. I like to increase the surrounding spaces in the larger paintings, but also emptying those spaces of detail. The smaller paintings and sketches have already abstracted out what was of interest, and now it is a matter of finding something else, hopefully something stronger, and something which is saying more.....

Your intriguing observation of an emotional imaginary hinterland of places is a good description of the larger work, and a good description of my own feelings of wanting to escape from the busy, troubled world we live in. I like being on my own and I enjoy my own company. I love being outside walking in the landscape or being on a huge empty beach. It is a letting go of the world, a time to reflect and think, and a time to wonder about the great scheme of things. Maybe I am trying to find some spiritual connection to something, some otherworldliness which I am suggesting and searching for. I see this search in Gwen John's work.

RP: When we have talked, you have mentioned your love of the work of Gwen John. I can see a clear link between her work and yours. Solitary figures who are painted in a soft ethereal way which seems more to depict the essence of a person, rather than their real physical being. Can you tell us more about this please?

DT-G: I do recognise something in Gwen John's paintings, and feel I have a strong connection to her work. I enjoy the quality of her work; it is very distinctive and there is an alchemy of many things that are of interest to me. I like the way everything is pared back and simplified. Her figures are very arresting, and seem to be saying something more than being just a portrait of a seated person. They appear to have been arranged, scrutinised, and thoroughly executed in paint. They are paint, but you could say that about all paintings, so it is the way they are painted which is important. Her paint is sensitively and carefully applied, every brushstroke is considered, and appears essential to the whole. There is also a harmonious matt quality to her surfaces. Often there is an oddness about the figure, elongated arms, large hands, the tilt of a head which looks awkward, but it continues a curve or a line of

the overall shape of the figure within a composition. This appears to emphasise their shape and form giving the figures a monumentality within their surrounding space. I imagine this is all deliberate, and I find it very effective. Her use of subtle tones create a glow within the painting. The longer you spend with a painting your eyes adjust and this becomes more apparent. This glow or use of subtle light, suggests more than a dramatic bravura use of chiascuro does. I feel it has a spiritual dimension, and it is an act of contemplation to discover this in her work. To me they have a strength and a conviction which speaks volumes. All of this alchemy creates an atmosphere, a mood or an essence, that something else is going on. She is reaching another dimension in her work. They have a spiritual quality, a truth which connects to people and to me.

RP: I completely agree with you Delia. I believe Gwen John is one of our country's great painters, and for all the reasons you describe here. And although her reputation has substantially increased I would say she is not nearly as recognised as she should be.

Returning to your own work, the overriding word which comes to mind when I look at your paintings is 'melancholy.' Many artists in the past, artists like van Gogh, Edvard Munch and Caspar David Friedrich have been described as melancholic. You don't appear this way in person, yet your art reflects it strongly. Many think of the arts acts as a means to cathart raw and sad emotions, to reflect and dwell on them. Do you think this is true and might it be true to you?

DT-G: Yes I do think art reflects strong feelings and emotions, and is, for me cathartic. Anything painful which you have to live with inevitably shows in your work. The 'melancholic' artists you mention have all produced highly charged work, which expresses strong emotions and asks questions about the meaning of life, and our place in the universe. Van Gogh, Munch and Friedrich all seem to have been tortured souls. Art is a way of dealing with complicated, painful and deep emotions. I too have experienced many of those emotions over a long period of time, and I do acknowledge, along with the support of my family, that it is art which has given me purpose and gave my life meaning, it is art that has kept me going.

RP: How true this seems for so many artists we both know and admire.

I would describe your paintings as very beautiful. Yet this sets them at odds with the art world of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Following Modernism and Post-Modernism, ideas like beauty have been side-lined and marginalised in the arts. How does that make you feel and is it something you struggle with in your practice?

DT-G: I suppose it all comes down to what beauty is and what is seen as beautiful. I see beauty in the natural world all around me, and I also have a strong fascination with the figure, particularly small figures within a landscape. I like to have that focus, but even without the

figure there is always something that I feel quite strongly about, however small, which has the same importance in the painting, whether it is a small house, a tree, a moon or something else. I do have to get the point of focus right within the painting, so it feels right before I can resolve the rest of the painting.

I can only paint what I feel I should paint, not what someone tells me to paint. If my work is out of step with current trends then so be it. I have to accept this or compromise what I do which I am not prepared to do. It is a struggle dealing with the feelings of rejection, and lack of commercial success. Nowadays in the art world I would say financial reward seems to be the main goal. But if you are able to ignore that and are lucky enough to continue on your own path regardless, which I am, I'm not sure it will really matter in the long run. I have sold work slowly and steadily over the years, and I have a small group of appreciative collectors, which is very gratifying and encouraging. I have often been selected to show my work in some very good exhibitions, and by many galleries, but if the work does not fly off the wall, galleries then tend to lose interest. It doesn't alter my practice at all. I love the beauty of the natural world, I can breathe easier when I am surrounded by it, and so it is only natural that I would want to paint what I perceive as beautiful. Painting is a very complex and absorbing activity. For me it is visual but also emotional, making it about beauty and meaning, and I could not separate the two.

RP: So it would seem that the main motivator for you being a painter is not financial recognition at all, but the emotional drive to do it. And I suspect this is true for so many artists. Which often makes it a tough but satisfying life if one can get their head around not being successful in a traditionally financial way.

The cost of painting can be expensive though and I notice you seem to work with a very limited palette of colours. Can you talk us through your use of paint please?

DT-G: I think this might be the easiest question to answer! My palette is limited. I have used the same colours forever. I use Winsor & Newton Artist's Oil Paint. Two yellows, two blues, one red, one green and a white. I can quite happily work with those colours. I have two guest colours, another red and another yellow. I never use black.

The colours I use are: Yellow Ochre, Lemon Yellow, French Ultramarine, Cobalt Blue, Permanent Alizarin Crimson, Viridian and Titanium White. Guest colours are Cadmium Red and Cadmium Yellow. This palette of cool and warm primary colours, and a strong clean green, gives me a vast tonal range, all with a high degree of permanence. I use artist's white spirit as a diluent, gradually adding refined linseed oil to this if I am working in layers of paint. The extra layers then have a longer drying time than the proceeding paint, which will avoid cracking in the future.

I like working on boards, which I prepare myself by sanding them and adding two to three coats of professional acrylic gesso. I work with a variety of shapes and sizes of brushes and palette knives, and a good supply of cotton rags. I also work on Winsor & Newton professional ready primed and stretched cotton canvasses.

After about three months of drying I use a matt varnish. I do like a matt surface, it gives a soft and harmonious finish to the paintings.

RP: Thank you so much for sharing your time and thoughts with me Delia, I have really enjoyed it.

**Interview completed on 30 July 2024**