

Robert Priseman

Interviews John Brennan

RP: John, from 2011 through to 2018 you worked on a striking series of realist paintings. Then in 2022 switched quite dramatically to produce a series of abstract paintings. Can you tell us a little about this transformation and the thinking behind it?

JB: It was a return to painting after a break of around four years. I'd been tied up on a separate project, designing the house in which I now live with my family. The road from a virgin plot of land to finished building is long and all-consuming.

The move into abstract was the result of simply feeling more settled in the new studio and needing to put paint on a canvas again. It happened by accident. I was just scrubbing some paint around aimlessly on a figurative picture that wasn't really working and I liked the physical sensation and the marks. I wanted to feel the visceral quality of the paint. I like some of the results more than others. *Dry Dock* is interesting, more so than the others. Superficially the others feel like too much of a nod towards Richter, though I didn't set out with that intention, I just enjoyed the sensation of using the palette knife or a hard edge and the marks it makes.

The abstracts feel like a temporary diversion. I've since veered back into figurative, though I do feel more in touch with the paint itself as a result of having made them.

RP: That's really interesting. I think the sense of paint as a tactile medium is really important and perhaps something that is a little lost on some artists in the age of social media. It will be really interesting to see how this feeds back into your realist work.

How do you come up with ideas for the paintings you produce? I'm especially interested to know if you source images or have ideas and then find ways to bring them to fruition?

JB: Regards the ideas, they come from the world that's in my head. I realise that might sound contradictory given that for my figurative work I mainly begin with existing sources.

My own world owes a lot to the British TV shows I enjoyed as a very young teenager from the late seventies, mainly sci-fi adventure veering into psychological horror, some of them were just pure uncanny. *Flambards* has to be my all time favourite, it's probably one of those 'you had to be there' experiences.

I'm not really interested in explicit threat, it's the unknown threat at the edge of perception. I spent a lot of time playing on wasteland as a kid, we played in underground bunkers near my home in Liverpool and I'm still fascinated by liminal spaces and anything that veers into 'uncanny valley' territory. Same with faces that are neither smiling nor frowning. I feel a jolt from it and enjoy the sensation.

I've amassed quite a collection of images from Ebay, mostly from what are likely to have been house clearance sales. I also have many, many photos of my own. In fact I worked as a photographer for a short while and I'm still thinking I may exhibit some photography, this time as part of my practice as an artist. In itself though, photography isn't enough, I miss paint too much. A painting is a one-off object, photography is everywhere. Something happens during the course of a painting, it takes on a life of its own.

Regards the source images, as I sift through them, certain ones will catch me suddenly and make me stop. They have a certain quality, a tension between positive and negative emotion, of being caught in the moment, the sense of the unknown. That's a magnetic quality for me, it sits somewhere in the 'uncanny valley'.

I'll sometimes work from one image and change it in some way, sometimes I combine images to create a new scene.

What's been interesting is the AI bandwagon. I'm not really interested in tools like Mid-Journey, I quickly grew bored of that, but tools like Dalle-2 are far more interesting. The results from it are really crude, the figures consist mostly of blobs and smears, so you have to invent a lot yourself, but it's ideal as a way to construct scenes. I can input a prompt to get a scene that's inspired by the world in my head and can use the result as a jumping off point. I've actually only achieved this successfully with one painting so far though.

RP: I love the idea of imagining you playing on waste ground as a child. I'm a bit older than you and I think that kind of play was common for us, but likely all gone today. Being left on your own and in situations which may yield threat and danger. It's interesting and interesting that it could inform one's work as an artist in adulthood.

The way you form images from analogue photos is also appealing and reminds me that Francis Bacon and Walter Sickert used to work in a similar way.

What would you consider to be your daily challenges as an artist?

JB: Time! Life before kids was a different world. I find I need less sleep now and in many ways I'm more productive, but I'm spread between family, painting, design and more recently writing.

RP: I think that relates to 'Parkinson's Law' - that our work expands to fit the time available to it! Can you tell us about your working process, how you make a painting? How long does it take, do you work sequentially on one painting at a time, that kind of thing?

JB: I spent my twenties working as an illustrator and I was lucky enough to be widely published, so I was always busy, at least for the first seven or eight years. Producing images day in day out really hones your skills and your attitude. An acrylic painting back then took around three or four hours, then you'd have a courier ringing the doorbell and your work was done for the day.

Fine art painting is different. There is intrinsically no reason whatsoever for a painting to exist. It's a kind of madness really. It's an itch that has to be scratched. I still carry the creative discipline from my illustration days, so I have no problem focusing and getting into the flow, but I also have many false starts, paintings that simply don't work and have to be binned.

I tend to have two or three paintings on the go and switch between them. I can wake up and think, today's the day for such and such. I'll put on the right music as a 'soundtrack' and step into the picture as it were.

I've touched on the beginnings of the paintings already, but regards the painting process itself it's much looser these days than it used to be. I was forever squaring up with a grid but I seem to have trained my eye better more recently and I prefer now to block out the main tonal masses freehand. If the foundations are right the rest of the journey will work out. I'm not against squaring up at all, it can really help to avoid being overly gestural and emotive just for the sake of it, but I find I have a better grip on the painting if I don't, feels more liberated, more room for accidents and adventure.

A small painting could take a few hours, a large painting might take a total of several days, spread over intervals. Sometimes I'll divert from my original take on the source material. Part way through I might introduce another element, maybe a background or something, so that might extend the time it takes.

RP: What are your earliest memories of art and who would you describe as your biggest influences?

JB: Earliest memory is drawing battlefields full of stick figure soldiers and later attempting to copy pictures that my older siblings had done. My sister was often drawing and painting, mainly with pencil and watercolour. I would try to attempt to copy what she was doing, she's a brilliant draughtsperson.

I think technical skill figured a lot back then, wondering if I'd ever be able to draw realistically, but at the same time I can remember feeling a spark of excitement and fascination from a little book of de Chirico that had nothing much to do with technique. I still love his early works on an emotional level. It's an interior world, a world of the mind. They're very much of their time. Oddly the poor reproduction quality in that little book sort of added to the fascination, I still have it on my bookshelf.

As far as other influences, a painter I greatly admire is Eberhard Havekost. It's not a name that crops up that often, but for me his use of source material really works and it helped to give me some signposts as to a way forwards. He brings something to the source and moves subtly beyond it. I love especially where he's distorted elements to create impact, or to draw the eye to differences in a series of near identical paintings, almost a meditation on the notion of reproduction. There's also that uncomfortable relationship between painting and the mechanics of photography and the moving image that his work highlights. I mean, why do we even paint from reproductions rather than life? I do keep feeling an urge to paint from life these days. I do draw from life, just sketches.

As far as contemporary painters go, George Shaw, Michael Borremans and Justin Mortimer have certainly played a part, they're maybe less pronounced for me these days.

On a purely technical level my dream is to be able to paint like Alex Kavenevsky but I doubt I'll ever achieve it. If I could bring that economy to my subject matter I'd be very happy.

I would say my biggest influences in terms of ideas, mood and subject matter really come from TV as I mentioned earlier and film too, Kubrick, Roeg and Lynch especially. At one time I was drawn to film making but I always come back to painting, it's the meditative quality of the experience, over and above the end result. That and the fact you can do it all yourself with minimal materials.

RP: Do you have any ambitions as a painter? And I don't necessarily mean in terms of selling or commercial success, although that might be part of it. Is there anything you would like to achieve in your work in the future, or is it the process itself that motivates you?

JB: To be able to paint full-time, or at least, whenever I choose, which would be most of the time. I'm happiest when I'm in the studio, I'm at my most content, on a personal level, it's when everything's right with the World, no matter the stresses.

Gallery representation would provide me with a sense of structure and a career path. I had an agent when I was an illustrator so I'm comfortable with the sense that there's an expectation to produce. Realistically, for that representation to happen, I'd need to start showing again

and to also get out to more shows, to mingle a bit. That may well happen as I start to make more paintings again. I live outside London, in Oxfordshire, so it means putting in some extra time and effort.

Regards where the work itself is going, there's plenty to keep me busy, new adventures to go on, time is the key factor.

RP: That seems like an excellent place to conclude, Thank you so much for sharing some of your thoughts with us John.

Interview completed on 6 August 2024