

Robert Priseman

Interviews Nick Powell

RP: I wondered if we could begin by exploring your early encounters with art? What do you remember about first seeing and making paintings?

NP: Hello Robert. Firstly thank-you for inviting me I am looking forward to the interview! I wasn't particularly interested in making art specifically as a young child, but play was important, with whoever was about. We were lucky to live by a green space where we grew up in the Medway area. At school Monday mornings would be the news writing from the weekend and after our written report we would make a drawing of what we did to accompany it. This offered a chance to get across what I wanted to elaborate on, the drawing of people, usually family members eating dinner on a table or something. I also recall a large brass rubbing on the wall of a tall saint figure in my great aunt's house in her small spare room. When we stayed over it was the first thing you saw when you woke up, so was quite imposing and perhaps a bit unsettling. She also made a felt picture of a Batman figure too, which has lurked in the recesses. You couldn't see both the arms fully, as they were depicted as being in the shadow of the cloak. So this tactile piece was a slight visual puzzle without me really being too bothered to acknowledge it at the time. Later when I was a bit older, I enjoyed designing my own football kits with felt-tips and inventing football leagues and games. Later I had a Dali poster in my room, it was the fruit dish and dog head one. After that when a little more grown-up was a College coach trip to the RA to see American Art of the 20th Century in the early 90s. The painting *Excavation* by De Kooning, amongst the other works, made a big impression, the scale for an abstract painting was something I had never come across before.

RP: You have produced many very intricate and accomplished realist landscape paintings. Then a large body of bold gestural abstract paintings. What motivated you to take these two very different routes? And I'm especially keen to know, because I make realist paintings myself and have no idea where one would even begin with making an abstract.

NP: Yes. The landscape paintings are small scale works on board of places I've been to. They were worked from photographs I'd taken over a period of time and chosen for the quality of composition and memory of the moment it was from. I made abstract paintings before and after the landscape body of work. The glossy photo prints of standard size such as from *Boots* provided the challenge to translate the image into the painting which I felt I achieved; trying to work out how to do it as I went along. To begin with, I wasn't confident the scaling was accurate as the gloss surface pushes you back when your eyes want to get behind it for the visual information. The first painting in the series I did was called *Post Depot*, an aerial picture of a yard of parked up red Royal Mail vehicles in the rain. It is such a great picture. It was the view from my 6th floor studio window at Shaddongate by Dixons Chimney, itself a former Cotton Mill in Carlisle. At that moment I was getting ready for my degree

show and making abstract paintings. (As a student, abstract painting offered an exciting world of possibility that I am still drawn to), but *Post Depot* was painted 17 years later and the rest of the landscapes followed. So it was a reflective decision or a poetic observation outside of the moment of experience. It was great to catch some studio chats with David Sullivan around this time too, as we were working in the same studio block. I'm not sure I was abandoning making abstract paintings exactly, but the focus on painting the landscapes was tangible, a new kind of pictorial problem solving. The process as it unfolded opened up a way to improvise in areas and allow the painting to establish itself. So, in describing this, these paintings don't feel that far away from an abstract approach due to elaboration and embellishment perhaps, within the landscape framework; but the feeling I had captured something recognisable through the modelling such as lettering in shop facade, a car grille, or a mid-grey of a pavement, was new for me. I feel making realist paintings require a certain kind of temperament which I admire others having when I see these kind of paintings. They are slow cookers in production, with diligence being called for along the way. In contrast what I like about the approach of making an abstract painting is a sense of freedom and urgency to an extent, but you still have the same dimensions of the surface. Since last year I have been transcribing abstract collaged sketchbook compositions and get this information down in the beginning, in the same way main parts of a realist motif is put down. In light of experiencing these two routes I am enjoying figuring out my future steps and I think it is ok not to know. Being able to recognise elements of different approaches is helpful when you do it, however successful it feels, and I think the answer is to keep painting for oneself as way of finding out.

RP: What would you say is the hardest thing about being an artist?

NP: Rejection letters have not been easy to take but I have learned to be sanguine! I would say trying to make the most of studio time and not be distracted from what I need to do, with time and attention as most valuable assets. This has always been a constant. Particularly when I have chunks of time in the studio after fatigue from whatever precedes. However, I also need the distractions too and it can be helpful, when events or situations need to be processed in the mind. Trying to keep tabs on chaos or the factors that provide the fuel to make work. I say this, as it does not take much for the studio to get out of hand, but I try not to be too concerned if the outcomes are interesting and on a task. Negotiations with all of this can be tiring, but worth it overall. Balance and family life. If I have not been painting after a period getting back into it or starting over can be difficult, but quickly passes.

RP: Yes, I know what you mean about distractions. It can be very easy to have ones focus interfered with and put off starting the paintings that need to be made.

Can you tell us a little about your approach to making your paintings? What does your palette look like, how long might you typically spend on a work and do you work on several paintings simultaneously?

NP: I usually have a batch of 4- 6 prepped boards or canvases lined up at the studio. I have a range of source material; retrieved from a box, bag or sketchbooks. The surfaces are usually small in scale and often there are one or two larger ones in progress resting to the side. Sometimes another surface that has lost momentum will be retrieved during the session, according to events. In a longer period I will invest that in developing a bigger scale work where I can work deeply without looking at the clock. Some can become quite technical and tricky, figuring out how colour and marks can be applied methodically in certain ways with layers to achieve what I am looking for. Others are more open-ended, where more improvisation is allowed, which means the process of making the work takes longer, say six months or more. Occasionally the aim is to finish a painting in one session. Trying to be balanced and aware of what each work needs is better when groupings are worked simultaneously, together with choice of palette and intuitively. I think I work by putting down what I want to do first and then balance afterwards, but this sounds a bit generalised. There is an awareness of the cycle of making paintings as having different gears, regarding intensity of working throughout, in between looking and I am probably guilty of not stopping to look enough in the process and on occasion it is decided what will happen next before I have finished the stage I am on. One painting does lead and inform the next and can mean things can be altered in terms of colour or how something is applied. A visitor to the studio would see lots of coloured crusty oil paint blotches on plastic lids and recycled material which are used to mix the oil paint from tubes. Attention is paid to spilt or daubed marks on material that is not the focused painting. The fragments of rag interest me and make their case for future use in paintings. I also do a lot of mixing on the surface as part of the work.

RP: What most excites you about making your paintings?

NP: The prospect of a show in the calendar is something that oils the wheels of production! Getting work seen by other eyes outside the studio, but this is a whole separate thing. Aside from the this, being involved in the making of a painting itself is exciting. Overcoming difficult periods of painting when uncertainty reigns over everything else. When I am happy I have salvaged something to work with at the start, and later arrive at a point when a base or platform has been established in the making of the work. A coloured ground, shape or whatever that looks like, and then take the jump or the risk to carry out the act. The not knowing part, doing it and then stepping back. Perhaps it is known what will happen if I apply that loaded brush on the surface in a certain gesture. But I am playing with self-trickery, trying to catch myself unaware where there is a percentage of a drip or accident emerging that is disruptive. The alchemic side of things are exciting, such as working wet-in-wet is a way an unpredictability takes lead in the work in the latter stages. Painting about being in a moment of action and then reflection and looking slowly afterwards. This description is simplified and broken down, but is the best part for me. Going home late after a productive painting session and having heaved over a number of stones can be a high and a feeling to be savoured. But also knowing that leaving something was right and not changing it is great too. It is exciting making something that hasn't been seen before and it has just arrived in the world, however absurd and unlikely this sounds. At least until the following day when the properties of the paint changes, but then looking starts again and the process continues.

RP: That is such a nice description Nick – the “reflection and slowly looking afterwards” and then “making something that hasn’t been seen before.” This perfectly encapsulates the beauty and magic involved in being a painter. The reason we are drawn to it and the desire to return over and over again.

Thank you so much for sharing some of your thoughts with us Nick.

Interview completed on 16 August 2024