

Robert Priseman

Interviews Susan Gunn

RP: It is a real pleasure to be able to ask you about your work Susan. If I may, I would like to begin by asking you about your life before you became a painter. You worked as a wedding dress designer and maker. Can you tell us a little about that please and what appealed to you about it?

SG: After my 'A' Levels I took an Art Foundation year at Bolton Art School from 1983-84. It became increasingly difficult for me to visualise myself at University. I was dissuaded by my parents, whose working-class backgrounds made it difficult for them to understand the merits of studying for a Fine Art degree. My father John would say things like, "There's no bloody money in that caper" and "Especially for a girl..."

In my teens I had also been working as a photographic and fashion model and was on the books at the Model Bureau. I modelled regularly for a large bridal wear wholesalers in Manchester. During the buying season, clients would visit from all parts of the UK to order sample collections. It was my job to model the dresses to help them make their choices. Often I found myself perturbed by their selections, which seemed to me old fashioned and out of touch. Around this time, I received a small inheritance from my Godmother. I made a business plan. And after obtaining a loan from the bank, secured with the deeds of my parents terraced house in Westhoughton, Su Charles Bridal Designs was born. I was 19, blissfully naive, full of enthusiasm and had a youthful energy and drive that would serve me well.

I brought in a selection of wedding dress samples from a range of designers; and I also designed and made bespoke bridal gowns, bridesmaid dresses, and accessories. The process began with an appointment in my little salon which was a former coal board shop in Bolton. It was very small but had an upstairs area and a window fronted retail space downstairs. With the help of my family and friends we renovated the building, it was beautifully appointed. I would sit down with clients and sketch their ideas and offer advice on accessories, suitable fabric, and colour etc. It was a joy to create dream dresses for my clients, and rewarding to see the pleasure it brought them. I found I had quite a gift, with an eye for suggesting adaptations that would compliment their body shapes and personal style. I was excited by the whole process; the freedom to design, the act of making, and the technical and practical challenges, all of which satisfied my creative spirit.

I was self-taught and influenced by my mother, Ruth. She was a dressmaker, skilled in many forms of making and always a supportive force. She had always made clothes for herself and the family. After leaving school at 14, she worked in the cotton mills during the war, then in a

factory as a machinist when I was a child. She was eager that I should make a success of my own business in order to have a degree of self-sufficiency and autonomy.

I was a sole trader and performed all the roles from buying, designing, sewing, making, selling and fitting. As the business grew I employed seamstresses and retail assistants, which freed me up to concentrate on the personal design service and the more creative aspect of my craft. After a couple of years I moved into a larger workshop and retail space attached to a men's formal wear shop. I designed the interior and my older brother Allan, who was a skilled workman helped to make my vision a reality.

One day in 1987 Allan and his wife Kath, visited my shop. The hum of machines in the workshop was interrupted by a knock on the back door. When I opened it, I knew instantly, from the look on their faces, that something terrible had happened. My dear Mother, Ruth, who I'd dropped at the airport for a weeks holiday in Tenerife with my Father only the previous day, had passed away following a sudden heart attack. She was 63, I was 22, and I was devastated.

In the wake of our loss, I focused all my energy into working hard to make Su Charles Bridal Designs the success she had hoped for.

The following year I received a last-minute invite to join one of my brides in Spain for a break before her wedding. We had become friends during the process of designing her bridesmaid dresses and accessories. She had selected one of my top of the range, pure silk Fiorito bridal gowns. It was against my better judgment to accept the invite as it was wedding season and we were so busy in the shop and workshop, but I accepted. I was in Puerto Banús, with my friend Karen when I met my future husband, Bryan.

Four days later, we had fallen in love and had agreed to marry.

Bryan lived in Norfolk, and following a long-distance romance I made the decision to hand over Su Charles Design to my sister-in-law Kath, she knew the business well and it went onto flourish.

I moved to Norfolk a year later to live with Bryan after our wedding in 1989.

RP: It is fascinating to think of you having this whole life before you became an artist, which in many ways seems a world apart. Yet at it's heart there is a lot of cross-over in terms of creativity, craft and thinking about your audience.

I know Bryan, your husband, was a very famous goal keeper and played for Norwich City Football Club and Scotland. And you told me many years ago of your profound tragedy in how your first-born daughter passed away very young.

SG: Francesca was the most beautiful baby, she arrived barely a year after I was married and moved from the North West of England to East Anglia. It was just after her 1st birthday that we learned the devastating news she was suffering from Acute Lymphoblastic Leukaemia. I was 25 and pregnant with a second child. She received treatment at Addenbrooke's hospital in Cambridge and intermittently at the Norfolk and Norwich hospital. For a period of 18 months, our family life was determined by hospital stays and visits, during which time our second child Melissa was born.

Around 18 months in, towards the end of Francesca's treatment, we arrived at Addenbrooke's for what was meant to be a routine stint of two weeks chemotherapy. We were ushered into a side room to speak to the Doctor in charge. -From blood test results earlier in the week, we were told the devastating news that our darling daughter was no longer in remission and the treatment had not been successful.

The medication was stopped and we returned home to Norfolk. After a couple of weeks of no treatment, Francesca actually became relatively well and had quite a good couple of weeks. For a time she was no longer suffering from the side effects of the Chemo drugs and we were able to go for days out at the zoo and the seaside before she inevitably became very poorly. I had been so focused on nursing her through the treatment and remaining as positive as possible that I hadn't actually thought of what death looked like. It was very difficult to watch our beautiful 2 year old bleeding from the inside, she became quite bruised towards the end.

During her last weeks she slept in our bed in between me and Bryan. I found myself laying awake, night after night watching her breathe, wondering if each inhalation was her last breath.

Although we knew our dear daughter was dying it was still a shock when she passed. Our local vicar, the Reverend Hemms had christened Francesca as a baby in our village church with its Saxon tower, it stands beneath the shade of tall pine trees. It is a special place for us as this is where Francesca is buried. She had placed the 'baby Jesus' in the manger the previous Christmas service. Reverend Hemms visited our home in Framingham Pigot daily to check on us during the final 4 weeks of her life. When she passed away, Bryan called him and he was soon at our home to console and pray with us in the middle of the night. I remember his arrival and felt my legs disappear before I managed, unsteadily to sit. The shock was palpable. Even though we were anticipating her death for days, the bodily

experience was unexpected unlike the emotional response and I felt physically bereft of her spirit.

RP: It is very kind of you to share your story with us Susan, thank you.

I remember you telling me how you tended Francesca's grave and polished her head stone. And how the caressing process involved began to underpin your painting process. It is a deeply moving account and brings to mind two core elements of what I feel is the very heart of painting. Firstly, that painting is a sacred art form. And secondly, that each mark an artist makes is a caress. In this sense I feel what you offer as an artist is a very pure form of creative expression. How does this observation make you feel?

SG: I couldn't bear the idea of Francesca's body being taken away and prepared for burial by a stranger and decided, who better than me, her mother to attend her. I washed and cared for her intuitively during the days leading up to her burial; it was the most natural thing in the world. I had made her christening gown two years earlier from silk and lace but it was too small now so I made another silk dress just the same for her burial with pure silk and Nottingham lace from my wedding gown.

She was dressed for the funeral and looked like the most beautiful angel, she had ruby red lips, I think from the internal bleeding. The beauty and softness of her cold porcelain skin is an inherent physical recollection and an innate memory. The act of love passed through a caress, is something I treasure, I understand your observation.

I think that when one experiences a loss or trauma such as that of losing a child, the grieving process often leads to a period of self-reflection. This is a very simplistic way to say it. But I think this was pivotal in my returning to follow my own heart and a desire to study Fine Art.

Caring for Melissa, and a period of simply existing and adjusting was inevitable to begin with after Francesca's death.

I took up golf which became an obsession. Grief facilitates so much energy and golf absorbed that for me. After spending endless days and nights in hospitals with Francesca it was a release to spend time outdoors and that became a point of focus for a while.

Sometime later our son Angus was born and it was when he started school that I began to seek a more personal fulfilment. I was ready to commit to an Art Foundation year at Norwich University of the Arts as I never finished the year at Bolton Art School. I then went straight on to study for a degree in Fine Art Painting between 2000 and 2004 and was thrilled to gain a First.

For my application I prepared a portfolio with my artwork and I included some of my earlier work from A level and more recent drawings I had made of Francesca. I undertook some pre-term projects set by the Art School which included the documentation of a familiar Journey.

For the *Journey* project I chose to document my walk from home to visit the gravestone at St. Andrew's Church. During the journey I would collect flowers from a honesty barrow, take notes and photographs along the way before taking a short footpath through a wood and around some fields; arriving at the church around a mile and half later. I would clean the stone, arrange the flowers, and sit beneath the pines and make drawings and notes before polishing the stone.

I had no idea at the time of its significance but looking back this was such an important process and formed the foundation to the future outcomes of my studies and my painting practice. The act of repetition, an intimate caress and the motion of polishing the gravestone is echoed throughout my paintings.

It was a challenge to negotiate family life and student commitments but I actually thrived as I was so hungry to learn and express this aspect of myself which I felt had been on hold. I had the desire to fulfil my potential as an artist and follow my heart and a dream of studying Fine Art that had eluded me years before.

RP: I believe that art offers us a "safe space" where we can slowly consider complex emotions. That our feelings are internal and invisible, awakened by external events which happen to us. We have no real power over them. Our only control is in how we respond. Exploring emotions through creativity, allows us in some small way to grasp how we might approach feelings which can threaten to overwhelm us. Do you feel painting offer this benefit to you?

SG: Absolutely, I believe I channel my life experience and personal history through the processes that pre-occupy me in a way that would not have been possible if I had studied at a younger age.

I became obsessed with *gesso* and earth pigment whilst studying at Norwich University of the Arts and I have continued to explore the material ever since. I think this stemmed in part from my love of natural fabrics such as silk and cotton. I swayed towards the use of these as they breathe with the skin and often retain minute imperfections arising from a silk worm or pluck from the weaving loom. I experimented with various raw paint recipes from the Ralph Mayer book of Artists materials. Initially I intended to create a gesso ground to paint on, but the feel and touch of the marble surface towards the completion of the making process became a fascination. The natural earth and materials is significant as I feel the substance of it holds a visceral connection to the earth and time, and life and death. Sedimentary rock

formed over millions of years, chalk, and fossil fuels, a lamp black ground coal, are two of the basic earths that I use.

The repetition of layering the mixture and the compulsion to repeat became a kind of sublimating act that satisfied an intrinsic need to expel an energy. The cracks and fissures in my work are ultimately beyond my control and are a constant source of surprise. Historically they are considered to be an imperfection. Historians I discovered, such as Ralph Mayer stated, “Cracks appearing on newly made gesso are highly undesirable...” Each broken ground is unique and I consider the *flaws* to be mark of beauty.

RP: That is so fascinating Susan. I know the materials you use are generally very ancient. With gesso having been employed by medieval and renaissance artists as a ground. And lamp black which was used by the Egyptians to write hieroglyphics in their tombs. You somehow manage to utilise these ingredients in a very contemporary manner.

What is so interesting to me is that your practice employs these ancient techniques. And is also rooted in deeply emotional and personal subject matter. Yet it also seems very intelligent without being overly intellectual. I wonder if you can walk us through that a little?

SG: During the rigorous critical studies element of the degree course, I studied literature, phenomenology, aspects of psychology and philosophy. I absorbed texts and knowledge; I was hungry to learn. I looked at the *essence* of things the anima and animus, the breath, and the semiotic language and preverbal language intrinsic in the human body that is somehow non-verbal and somewhat unworded.

All the subjects within my research I related to in a very personal way.

During my degree studies, we were fortunate to have the poet George Szirtes teaching on the Cultural Studies Course; he ran a Poetry Club for all students and Alumni at Norwich University of the Arts. We were encouraged to read and write poetry and critique each other's in turn. I wrote a poem with many personal references titled, *Angel in the House* which tells of a visceral, liquid, experience of childbirth, love and loss. It was inspired by the swallows that migrated yearly and nested in the guttering outside Francescas bedroom window and thoughts drawn from the *Journey* project.

It ends highlighting the cleaning and polishing of the stone. And how the polishing and cleansing act are a desire to nurture and repair an essence of dignity onto the *objet petit* or painting plane.

In *The Poetics of Space*, by the French philosopher Gaston Bachelard, he speaks about the “wax” civilisation and of the phenomenology of cleaning and polishing in abstract terms as a

creative activity, igniting memory. Bachelard believed, “When a poet rubs a little fragrant wax with the cloth that lends warmth to everything it touches, he creates a new object; he increases the objects human dignity.”

In the ‘house and universe’ chapter he cites writer Henri Bosco, in his description of the old faithful servant Sidione...

“This vocation for happiness, so far from prejudicing her practical life, nurtured its action. When she washed a sheet or a tablecloth, when she polished a brass candlestick, little movements of joy mounted from the depths of her heart, enlivening her household tasks. She did not wait to finish these tasks before withdrawing into herself, where she could contemplate to her heart’s content the supernatural images that dwelt there. Indeed figures from this land appeared to her familiarly, however commonplace the work she was doing, and without in the least seeming to dream, she washed, dusted and swept in the company of angels.”

Le jardiniere d’Hyacinthe 1945

A couple of years ago, I received a message from our mutual friend and painter Matthew Krishanu; he told me that he had thought about my work a number of times when visiting the cemetery where his wife Uschi is buried. He said it was a recollection of seeing two parents polish the black marble stone of their son’s grave on his 12th birthday. I cannot tell you how much this meant, to have someone who one admires and respects, empathise and be reminded of one’s work in this context touches me greatly.

RP: That’s very beautiful Susan.

Delving a little more into your creative process, you once told me that you do not see yourself as an abstract painter, because you do not abstract anything. Can you explain please?

SG: During my studies and looking at the actual definition of abstract I became convinced that although it may be perceived by the viewer as abstract, and that is entirely ok, for me it is not. The painting, my gesso grounds are an act firstly, I think, of creation and then the subject of the process of caring for the object and surface and material. They are not abstracted from anything and do not pertain to a form or a tangible thing, but a feeling. Maybe an *abstract* feeling of being broken but still holding together but that is not the same as an abstract artwork. The surface is nothing other than itself and therefore not taken or abstracted from a thing or image. The word “ground”, for instance has multifarious meaning, each of them are relevant and real.

RP: I have visited Jane Austen’s cottage at Chawton, it’s wonderful. And what is so

interesting is there is a large ‘coverlet’ there – a kind of patch work quilt. It is comprised of over 9,000 small pieces of fabric. Jane made it with her sister Cassandra. What strikes me is she must have spent almost as much time working on this as she did on her novels. When reflecting on this we can begin to sense how some people have creative energy which can flow in different directions – in Jane Austen’s sense, it emerged in novels which feed the imagination, and as quilts which warm the body. One is a fine art and the other a practical craft.

I am stuck by something similar in you. That your time as a dress maker saw a practical expression of your creativity, where your paintings offer a more metaphorical one. What do you think of this?

SG: In many ways yes, the energy expended when making something practical is, I find, rewarding. Sometimes in the monotony of carrying out a practical action, by going through the motion of it, the body has a physical memory which can ignite, insight and provoke metaphorical or abstract aspects of one’s creativity.

I am reminded of Joseph Beuys’ use of felt and lard from memories of a near death experience, demonstrating how conceptual ideas can be inspired by the practical application of care. I am also a huge fan of Alberto Burri, whose training as a surgeon in the Italian army and time endured in a prisoner of war camp influenced his art and fueled his work to the point that he literally torched his paintings.

Although I can often be impatient, when I am focused on a practical task, I become engrossed and lost, sometimes for hours. I find that my creativity manifests itself in the simplest aspects of daily life; from cooking nourishing meals, to darning holes in a jumper, or the up-keep of a home. Creativity whether the outcome is practical or metaphorical, is a manifestation of the authentic self.

As time goes by, I realise more how it is sometimes difficult to separate life from art.

RP: That seems like a perfect place to end. Thank you so much Susan.

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