

# Robert Priseman

## Interviews Katherine Russell

RP: Hello Katherine, it's a delight to be able to ask you some questions about your practice. If I may I would like to begin by asking about your subject matter? You appear to work in themes and some of those have been quite challenging, victims of war, Guantanamo and migrants. Then you have series which look at holiday photos and friends relaxing on beaches together. What drives you to make each series and how do you decide on each?

KR: Ultimately I think the subject of my work is the paint itself. It's a way of me being able to try and make sense of the world around me. Subject matter can be themes that I return to again and again or one-off short assignments so to speak. Nostalgia and the capturing of a moment and the feeling from an era passed is also a recurring topic for me. I found some old Polaroids of my mother travelling across USA with her friend in the 60's. I used these sun-bleached shots as a springboard for my solo show: *It's a wonderful life* in 2011.

Most recently I have been using some family imagery from the 1980's as source material. I'm interested in the idea of painting people we know in the present at a different stage in their lives - an unknown, a familiarity yet alien nature to imagery.

RP: One might observe that two hundred years ago painters like Turner and Constable might choose to paint the physical landscape. Now, artists like your self are seeing the mass media as a landscape to be painted and reflect upon. What are your thoughts on this?

KR: The bombardment of mass media imagery and the way we witness the world through our phones in a sort of constant state of alert yet increasingly dissociated way is something that interests me. In particular our instant access to images of conflict and war on the other side of the world geographically is something I return to repeatedly.

I guess in a lot of ways this slightly removed sense of reality/landscape of the mass media/virtual world is our new reality in a lot of ways. As much as I like to observe nature and the natural world/this feels like quite a romanticised idyll.

RP: Are there any artists who inspire you, past or present? And what do you consider to be the core value and message of your own work?

KR: There are many artists that I look to for inspiration. Luv Tuymans & Michael Borremans for how they use the material like a conjurer & almost make it look effortless. German romanticism & Francis

Bacon as well as the Glasgow boys. I saw the Kandinsky show at Tate recently and I've always been drawn to the Fauvists use of colour. I was also intrigued by their very bulbous dark brown frames. Contemporary artists such as Caroline Walker and Chantal Joffe for their sumptuous use of paint. The list in endless.

RP: Your work is produced in a very loose painterly style. Can you tell us a little about your painting technique? How do you approach the canvas, what does your palette look like and do you have a routine?

KR: Certainly, I always use oil paint. I find its tactile qualities suit perfectly with my way of working. I tend to work wet on wet. I like scraping and piling and scrubbing, using small brushes, large, a palette & my fingers, whatever feels right in the moment. I have a lot of tear palettes on the go at the same time and a lot of squidges of paint. I like to have canvases in different sizes stacked up in the studio so I can select as I go. I work on a lot of different pieces concurrently. I typically start with looking at photographs or source material that's inspiring me. Sometimes reacting from these straight onto canvases with loose watercolour style 'drawings.'

Also, I work in sketchbooks that I like to use inks/black pen to explore what's captured my interest in the first place. I find once I'm able to have worked through these routines, I can then begin to let go. That's when the real painting begins.

RP: Did you always wish to be an artist?

KR: Yes, I think so. Even if I didn't know what that was. I've always been someone who observes. My great-great grandfather was a painter and I grew up around his work. I've always used painting as a way of figuring out things.

RP: By engaging in painting are you making a political statement on society or a kind of non-judgmental poetic reflection?

KR: I think ultimately artistically I'm more interested in my own poetic reflection on the world around me. But I do think as an artist you have to be aware of the arena you're working within. So if I'm choosing to use mass media imagery whose subject is war and conflict then I need to be conscious of this and it's inherent implications. The risk of glorification/beautification of war being one of them. Indeed, acknowledging that the source material itself has been chosen for its 'beauty' or shock element. It formed a body of work for a solo show entitled *The Girl Who Wasn't There* that took place in Marylebone, London in 2014. Using these snap shots of images of places and people that I have no direct experience of as starting point - I wanted to explore this notion of 'bearing witness' & its inherent issues as well as the beautification of war imagery generally.

RP: Over the course of the past decade or so there has been an increasing focus on women only exhibitions and the centering of women in the arts. What are your thoughts on this phenomenon?

KR: I feel like this increase in shows dedicated to women artists is long over due, to redress the balance. However this does not mean I am completely comfortable with it. I think like with most things that a diverse grouping/with different backgrounds, opinions, affiliations is always more interesting. But as I say women artists have been overlooked for a long time & I do think there are specific hindrances to women pursuing careers as artists/painters that are just now beginning to be challenged or at least acknowledged. There is a long way to go still.

RP: Thank you so much for sharing some of your thoughts with us Katherine.

**Interview completed on 10 October 2024**