

Robert Priseman

Interviews Linda Ingham

RP: You have worked on many projects over the years, both as a curator and an artist. If I may, I would like to concentrate on your practice as a painter. Beginning with a stunning series of self-portraits you have made. I think they are central to your practice and demonstrate a remarkable humanity. Can you tell us a little about them please? When did you start doing self-portraits, what inspired you and are they on-going?

LI: Thanks, Robert. I am at a stage now where I have, over the past seven or eight months, completely retired from project/teaching/curating, and am finally able to concentrate on my own practice. So yes, painting, some drawing, sometimes other disciplines as I find process so alluring; but PAINT – yes! And as I think over the self-portraits I realise that, in terms of decent resolved paintings, there are probably only ten or eleven, maybe with a similar number of self-portrait drawings, which I have done on and off since I was in my twenties; I expect they'll continue to be part of my practice sporadically.

The self-portrait for me became necessary for two main reasons: first, the lack of human subjects for me to access, along with the anxiety of liaising with someone during the painting process – though at one point I went on to create a series entitled *Pore*, working with around 80 sitters to make 200 paintings (within a strict framework of sitting times and managed expectation within a project).

The *whys* of the urge to depict human form are complex and many from the earliest of times. Which I also felt a bit intimidating, and, early on, not equipped to begin to answer. So this fed into the anxiety of expectation, negotiation, and requirement for a kind of working 'solace', leading me to consider the 'self'.

Later on, the second reason to create self-portraits arose during quite a long period of time whilst studying for my MA Fine Art. That time of study, along with a discovery of infertility and a continuation of parental illness, culminating in my mother's eventual death, seems to have necessitated self-exploration in many ways. Ultimately feeding into my practice via self-portraiture, materials, process and composition.

RP: That is so fascinating Linda. I have heard many artists cite lack of sitters for a reason to engage in self-portraits. But I think what you say about self-exploration is really at the heart of it – a desire to understand humanity and more specifically one's own.

Can we focus specifically on your series of Easter self-portraits? Each Easter you have been in the ritual of painting a self-portrait with a crown or head dress of some sort. We are lucky enough to own

one in the Priseman Seabrook Collection. And there is a second in the Rugby Museum and Art Gallery Collection. They are beautiful in their technique, colour and composition, yet also quite uncompromising in the way you portray yourself, especially in an acknowledgement of your infertility. Almost brutal one might say. I wonder if you can explain the thinking behind the series for us?

LI: It's interesting, isn't it, when you look back on things with a bit of distance? And by the time I arrived at making these pieces, I feel that I'd settled into ways of finding a more quiet power of visual communication through self-portraiture than in the early 2000's. The Easter Self Portraits are my way of expressing grief and loss, whilst using some of the props associated with a spring festival of hope, rebirth, youth and beauty.

For the first two of these pieces I'm thinking of my mother who died of cancer and am wearing a McMillan charity flower or a withered narcissi in a headband – the first a simpler use of symbols than the second; I worked via photographic imagery and using my studio mirror, playing with the Narcissi story as well as Easter. The third piece, which you have in the collection, used only mirror and a sketched study which at the time I felt had some sort of power, and which still gives me a jolt when I reach that page in the sketchbook. The cocoon in the headband, taken from sea buckthorn on a path regularly walked, is spent, having incubated many white-tailed moths. There was discussion all over the country about these moths as their cocoons and caterpillars may provoke an allergic reaction through contact, and the bushes they house were being ripped out locally. There have been other, unsuccessful attempts at continuing the series, which currently stands at just three!

I like to think there's an acknowledgement of time threaded through my work – sometimes expressed through recording process, and here looking at spring and its associations. The door isn't closed to making more self-based work, and attempts have been many. Yes consistency seems elusive for me, with the most recent resolved piece, *October Crown*, 2018, is probably the single, successful self-portrait since the Easter pieces. It is in a private collection.

RP: Something your Easter self-portraits brought up for me was that in the 21st century, by and large, one no longer sees men painting pictures of women. This was quite a common practice until the end of the 20th century. Yet where men are now absent there is in their place a large number of women painting women. My guess is that the rise in women in the arts has highlighted issues such as the 'male gaze' which now renders the idea of a man painting a woman's portrait as problematic. Aside from this issue, I would say that, very broadly speaking, when men paint women they tended to idealise them. Whereas when women are painting women today, and I'm thinking of yourself, Wendy Elia, Jenny Saville, Chantal Joffe and Celia Paul to name but a few, they tend towards the unflinching and unidealised self. I wonder what your reflections are on this?

LI: Perhaps it's something to do with the difference between 'the object' and 'being objective...' I must admit that, during the *Pore* series of works, I much preferred painting males; partly, I think,

because of the weight of perceived expectations to make the female conform to an accepted idea of femininity and beauty (and what does the subject expect? The majority of the women felt compelled to pose and smile ...) If I paint myself I am free to go with a less-than-happy facial expression, include wrinkles and blemishes.

For me, no matter the subject, the making of the painting needs to be interesting to me, and I hope to arrive at something that has some kind of power and interest for the viewer. Which is something that sometimes just turns up, without my knowing how.

I find it inconceivable to consider trying to 'improve' and idealise – no value judgements here, I hope! I also hope that I'm becoming better at selecting subject-matter that leaves open the possibility of something interesting happening during the painting, rather than having a strong preconception of the outcome. Along with all of the complex elements that the male gaze holds when painting women, that also something I feel unattractive and inauthentic – that aim to present something wrapped up and impressive to the viewer ... a sort of '*Ta-Dah!*' ... maybe not the right words ...

RP: How fascinating Linda. I had never thought before about the difference between 'the object' and 'being objective.' I sense it points to a kind of desire to paint in honesty and reality. Do you think that could be a core difference between the male and female approach – that women when they paint themselves are fundamentally attempting to paint a core 'inner-reality' rather than the outer appearance over which one can project and ideal?

Also, I'm really interested in something you mentioned before – about your use of a sketched study which you describe as having "some sort of power." I often feel that really great art carries a kind of emotional power. It is something about manifesting the emotions we carry inside of ourselves, perhaps what you mention about feelings of grief and loss. What are your thoughts on these comments?

LI: I am not sure that women particularly paint more honestly ... it's only been just over a 100 years since women were accepted into some of the art schools and that 'being an artist', or a painter could be a real possibility for a woman, other than as a genteel hobby. There are some wonderful male artists who paint with utter integrity; and having been in the gallery sector, equally, there are females whom I may not consider painting with honesty. I feel we're all at a stage now where a person's individuality and who they are is much more accepted generally and that in the liberal UK at least, we're perhaps less expected to fit into an expectation, or 'a box' ...?

I guess we also have to consider what the purpose of a portrait could be; who is commissioning it, an organization or an individual; or is it instigated by the artist and if so, what are their motives ...? And perhaps this feeds into your second point of emotional power, which is more likely to come from a true collaboration between artist and sitter, or a self-portrait. Speaking for myself, tapping into an emotion in my work is no longer an aim. I would say that now it's more truthfully an attempt to create

a piece of work which some viewing it may feel a connection to, whether it's a portrait or a tree (or a tree portrait!) If I were to undertake a portrait now, I would need to feel a connection to the person I'd be portraying and feel that we have a connection person-to-person; I'd hope we could be gently collaborative about it and considerate of each other.

RP: I like your description of painting a portrait of a tree! Given this, I wonder if we can turn to some of your work as a landscape artist? You worked with the Land2 network, which focuses on looking at the landscape through a political lens. Can you break down some of your landscape work for us and tell us what motivations lie behind it?

LI: A reference of 'place' has run through many of my self-portraits and is part of your *Self Portrait with Cocoon*. Place, ecology and time have been a focus of my works since 2008 and although I'm not a landscape painter my current work is an attempt to acknowledge human-non-human relationships by working on subjects from nature reserves, town planning, etc. along with keeping the climate emergency in mind.

In the past, my practice has considered these relationships through noting the 'overlooked' plants present along paths meant for humans, which may historically have folk histories and stories as well as many being considered to be herbal medicines or have other effective properties (and imagined ones!)

Just now I am concerned with painting trees which have been placed in our environment; the townscape around them becomes reduced to line, almost hidden by the presence of sky – many of which are inspired by John Constable's sky studies and connect to his interest, and our necessity, to understand the weather in the light of climate change. The trees perhaps come to appear on a precipice (the title of the series), but I never know how they will turn out and try to let the paintings tell me where they need to go.

RP: I love the Constable sky studies. And it is so interesting what you are saying – and please correct me if I am wrong. But fundamentally, all your work appears to be about the human presence, either it's impact on the landscape or directly observed in portraits. Do you feel this is true? And why is it, do you think, that this fascinates you so much? Also, what might you be aiming to communicate to us about this?

LI: At the moment my work is about the relationships between human and more-than-human. I worked for a couple of years creating series through being on and in nature reserves, having previously not given much thought to how humans working in conservation work with a habitat to help nature be the absolute best that it can, and should be in that location. This might mean clearing areas of more invasive plants so that more delicate flora, or orchids for example, can thrive, or culling species not native and which therefore are tipping the delicate balances needed.

Given the mess humans have made of the environment, I'm trying to find ways to observe the partnership (if that is the case!) between us and 'nature'. John Constable was one of the first artists to have an interest in meteorology; so quite apart from the fact that his sky studies are completely stunning, he was often working to try to capture an impression of the weather and to read it. He was 'aware', and that's what we need to be if we're going to turn the climate emergency around.

RP: You hinted about on-going projects. I wonder what you are currently working on or what ideas you might have forming for future projects?

LI: Yes, I'm still on with the trees, as previously mentioned. There is so much to explore. At the moment, these are solitary trees, placed in a parkland or town. Perhaps the solitary nature of them suggests the potential for human absence, going back to one of your earlier questions – which hadn't been intentional, but could be the case. Since I exhibited a few of them together at my recent Open Studio event, I have been thinking of them as 'sentinels' or 'guardians'... but that's a bit romantic and may dissipate!

As we discover more about trees and know that they prefer being together and can communicate, I'm wondering at how this will inform approaches to planning, landscape, place etc., and there's so much more to know.

With regard to future projects, I have a couple of ideas, one going back to a series of portraits – probably of women, but I don't know for sure as yet – that in some way could represent place and my ecological interests. There might also be something coming up working with a contact who has discovered a lost walled garden and the histories connected to it ... but for now I'm concentrating on trees and our precipitous position.

RP: Thank you so much Linda.

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