

Robert Priseman Interviews Gordon Dalton

RP: Your art seems to cross a divide between abstract painting and narrative landscape painting. It appears to offer up fragmentary glimpses to a visual world which is perhaps typically locked in your mind, yet somehow manages to escape onto the canvas in the painting process. How does that description resonate with you?

GD: That's a good way of putting it, like a bridge between the two, which I'm crossing back and forth continually, or stood in the middle, just pondering. I'm interested in the gap between things, that place where doubt exists – is it this, is it that, but using that doubt as a positive. That gap contains all the contradictions, spontaneity, happy accidents and interpretations.

I love a lot of abstract painting, but for me it needs to be grounded in reality, to have some kind of entry point, either visual or anecdotal. I'm just trying to make some kind of sense of things for me, and if I'm lucky, that connects to the viewer.

RP: You grew up in the North East and moved away for a while. And you now live in Saltburn by the Sea. Can you tell us a little about your childhood and what inspired you to become a painter?

GD: Yes I was born in Middlesbrough and then grew up in a very small village high up on the cliffs. I was doing an engineering apprenticeship but it really wasn't for me. I preferred music and movies and doodling away in sketchbooks, but had no real understanding of art as such. The Foundation at Boro was an eyeopener.

I eventually moved away to art college in Cardiff. South Wales has lots of connections to the North East, and the coastline was very similar. You've got the vastness of the Bristol Channel and all the industry, but then a very beautiful coastline and surrounding hills and countryside. Alfred Sisley painted the coast down at Penarth, as do Terry Setch and Merlin James now. He was one of my tutors at Cardiff. I'm still very connected to Wales.

RP: I like your connection of the two coastlines, that's really interesting. I understand from having read previous articles on your work that you admire Chinese painting, the way it offers up multiple layers of a landscape. That it doesn't so much recede back using perspective, but instead treats each part equally. I wonder if you can expand on this idea and how it relates to your own work?

GD: Yes, very much so. There is so much information going on, huge, evocative landscapes with multiple points of view, but with tiny, individual stories. The flattened perspective and often portrait format gives them a tension. It's like a form of peripheral vision, where you are seeing the whole narrative at the same time, but see various places to start. You see it in Gauguin, Vuillard, Bonnard, etc

That's something I attempt to play with, multiple perspectives, horizons, pushing things backwards or bringing tiny details forwards. I use Rückenfigur and Staffage quite a lot, maybe too much, but nobody has ever really referred to it. I deploy it either really overtly, or contradict it, reverse the effect or use it multiple times within the same painting to give various entry points or hint at some kind of narrative.

RP: Do you have a core message or idea that you are trying to transmit to your audience? And is there a philosophy which underpins your approach to painting? If so, what might that be?

GD: My paintings were until recently mainly fabrications or imaginaries of places I'd lived, visited or dreamed of visiting. However, more recently they are based on very specific places on the North East coast. I grew up here, in a post-industrial landscape surrounded by places of natural beauty. They are one and the same to me, linked by the looming horizon across the North Sea.

Having moved back here 5 years ago, I'm trying to capture the essence of my experiences of these places. My PhD research looks at Solastalgia, which is the homesickness we feel for the place we live now as it changes, but using that as way of effecting positive change. A bit of hope amongst the cynicism. It's melancholy of longing and wanting to belong, an unfashionable romanticism ground in the act of painting.

The new work feels very personal to me, but I hope it connects to the viewer.

RP: I think the best paintings are usually emotive as they connect to something deep inside ourselves which we cannot fully articulate. It makes a term like "solastalgia" very interesting. I'm curious, what precipitated you move back to the North East? And would you say that this move has been instrumental in your shift from imaginary landscapes to ones based on specific places? Or is it something else which has caused the shift?

GD: There were some personal issues I was dealing with, or wasn't. I'd been in the 2016 CBP Prize, which then toured and one of my old Foundation tutors saw the work, then invited me to be in a show, which led to one of the other exhibitors, the painter Deb Covell, sending me a job description for an Arts Development role in Middlesbrough which I got. It was a bit of a leap of faith but it worked out really well in the end.

RP: Over the course of the 20th century art went through many different ‘isms.’ By the time we arrive at the 21st century all the isms seem to have died out. Essentially, we are now left with the one great ism, ‘individualism.’ Where individual artists borrow parts from the past to create their own individual visions. I would say this is especially true of your work. You mentioned Gauguin, Vuillard and Bonnard earlier, I wonder if you can you tell us which artists inspire your practice? And how much more complex do you think it is today to find an individual voice?

GD: All painters dip into the past at some point, it’s inevitable and you’d be a fool to ignore such a rich library of images. You’re still trying to find your own style, your own accent, something that makes it look your painting. Mine just happens to have a lot of bad grammar! You try and brush off all of the baggage and just find a space to paint. That’s the sweet spot.

The artist list is endless but I have my comfort blankets. Merlin James would be the one artist I’d highlight who seems to understand painting, its history, what it can and can’t do, but also has a very particular approach.

RP: Can you describe your palette and the process of how you make a painting? Also, do you tend to work on one painting at a time or several over a period?

GD: Hands up, I’m not a very technical painter. You can probably tell. There’s a day-to-day approach, being in the studio as much as possible on a regular basis. Some works hang about the studio for years, some are resolved quickly.

There are extended periods of working at the same size repetitively, building up a form of visual muscle memory that hopefully makes it from brain to wrists to canvas. I’ve started working in a grid format again recently, where things are moved up and down the wall depending on what stage they are at. They’ve got to demand attention to stay on the wall. Paintings are sanded over, gessoed, varnished, scratched back. Some sit quietly on the wall, I almost get bored of them or forget them. Sometimes they turn out to be the ones I like best.

RP: How many paintings would you say you manage to complete in a year?

GD: I’m painting everyday but I’m not so focused on them being finished. Last year maybe about ten, year before maybe 6, but looking back at them, probably only 2 or 3 I’m still happy with. The bigger ones sometimes completed quicker. I used to clock how long it takes for a large 170 x 240 cm painting - sometimes they would be approaching 150 hours before getting anywhere close. Of course those hours could be spread out over months, or years. There can be very sustained periods of activity or I just sit there looking. Or I go fishing, that helps!

RP: What do you feel are the hardest challenges facing you as a painter today?

GD: Well, other than paying the bills and getting by, there are so many artists, millions of painters. It's hard enough to be heard, never mind seen. There's a perceived idea of success that, if you let it, will eat you up. You've got to put that aside in the studio. It's a distraction.

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