

Robert Priseman

Interviews Luke Caulfield

RP: Can you tell us a little about your childhood and early encounters with art? And do you remember the first painting you made?

LC: From my earliest memories, I was often exposed to contemporary art and was quite puzzled by it. Most of the work was, to some extent, abstract and got me questioning what was going on. It wasn't until, at 14 years old, when I saw the *Seagram Murals* that I got it. My conscious questioning shifted into a boundless experience that I found overwhelming. Nevertheless, I avoided making art, since I wanted to find an identity outside of my arty familial experience. It took until I was around 17 to start making art and I took to oil painting with relish. The thrill of being able to manifest thoughts in this buttery medium took hold of me. I was always a very quiet child so it was at least a chance to come out of the shadows and manifest something of my interior.

RP: I share your love of the *Seagram Murals*. I was fascinated by them for many years, but could never understand what it was about them that was so powerful. Then it was only about 15 years ago that I began to think of them as a kind of painted version of Stone Henge. And that they appear to act as some kind of gateway to the eternal and unknown void that lies beyond death. And it's only a feeling, but the images that appear in the imagination seem to occupy that same kind of place. I wonder what your thoughts are on this idea?

LC: I hadn't thought of the Stonehenge comparison before but it makes a lot of sense. Ironically, I find "sculptural" forms can often more directly affect me than painting and maybe it is that suggestion of sculptural monumentality, combined with the pictorial, imaginative space that makes the Murals so potent.

RP: Your paintings are made in series, with each appearing as a fusion of different themes and ideas. What do you feel are the core values of your practice and what are you seeking to communicate through your work?

LC: I'm drawn to temporal complexity. Time and space have always felt so out of my control that memories are scrambled or lost. My reaction to this is an obsession with history and maps; a need to have a bird's eye view of our condition. Since art is primarily my field then this is the lens with which I test the fallibility of our documented art history and with which to realize the glitching perception that we have on reality. My fear is that we are too confident in our ability to understand, analyse and document experience. Our tribal affiliations give us the comfort of being in a group that mirrors our certainty and gives us a false sense of security in our perception of truth.

RP: One of the great things about the arts is the creative individual can imagine something which doesn't yet exist. Then, as you so eloquently say, to "manifest thoughts," to realise into the world that which hasn't yet existed. Your work seems deeply imaginative so I'm really fascinated to know more about your working process. How do you plan and begin a painting and how long might it take to make? And, do you tend to work on one piece at a time, or on multiple works?

LC: My initial actions would be in filling my head with mythic narratives, fractious events and art from various time periods. I let them simmer until connections are made and a gloop of images emerge. Then I decide which series they can be transmitted through. Each series has its own structure, which is the scaffolding into which I squeeze the images. The mechanism of each series has a different margin of slippage, where other phenomena such as light effects or spontaneous action can contribute.

RP: Which artists most inspire you?

LC: Artists who see the invisible as a material, interest me. Early works by Robert Barry were heroic in this regard. *Las Meninas* is a pivotal work in representing the unseen. Time as an invisible material is hard to deal with in a painting and therefore a challenge that can bring up unforeseen results. There have been curious attempts by Poussin and On Kawara amongst many.

RP: How fascinating. I think with Poussin you might be talking about one of my favorite paintings – *Landscape with a Man Killed by a Snake* which hangs in the National Gallery, London? It's core idea being a chain reaction of observations from the directly viewed death of a man, down to those who only see those who have seen. You bring up something really important in painting, that it is a slow, meditative medium. And where photography captures a moment, painting encompasses a period. Because of this I've always had a sneaking suspicion that photography is not really an art form, but more of a type of reportage. And yes, I admire many photographers and one can point to people like Man Ray, but fundamentally I think the two mediums are quite different. What are your thoughts on this?

LC: I also love that painting; it feels like a Hitchcockian explosive moment that is extended into other moments that will trigger other yet more moments. However, of course there are many other Poussin paintings that explore time in a particular way.

As far as photography goes, it has some disadvantages in the light of painting, but I do think that it can play with duration, narrative and form. I like the way Jeff Wall, John Hilliard and Thomas Demand deal with time and history.

RP: Over the course of the 20th century we have witnessed many 'isms' which largely explored the language of painting itself. Now, one might argue, that this has been largely replaced by the individual experience and identity of each artist. With artists borrowing artistic modes of the past to help

articulate what they wish to express. Do you have a sense of how art might be evolving in the future? And how do you think AI may figure in this?

LC: Firstly it seems to me that nothing borrows more from the past than AI, since it uses a pool of visual history to reconstitute into whatever is asked of it. Perhaps AI would choke on its own digital vomit if it isn't replenished by original visual human input?

I sense that art will not necessarily evolve but people will hunger for art that makes the leap from the material world to an immaterial world, without digital intervention or at least where digital intervention is subjugated to a process in which the non-digital world has primacy.

RP: I love your description of "digital vomit." And I think you are likely right, that art will not evolve any further. But begin to seek a place where the non-digital is central and enable some kind of reflection on what it is to be human.

You used a term for paint as a "buttery medium" which I really like. And I suspect this is at the heart of why painting has value. It's something I've been talking with Alex Hanna about. He paints still-life pictures with a plein-air pallet, but the real nature of his work is an analysis of looking, the visual psychology of observation. And he also often paints in an impasto way. And it is this that is so interesting, because there is no need to paint that way, once can just paint flat. So what is it about this "buttery medium" that adds value? Is there an emotive quality to the plasticity of paint for you which connects to something deeper?

LC: Well obviously paint can transmute from being buttery to being a mist (airbrushing). I'm invested in both these states of painting. The buttery is more "here" and sculptural and the mist is more "there" and pictorial. Perhaps the buttery is more vulnerable and "honest" so may be more emotive.

RP: How fascinating, I've never thought of different applications of paint representing "here" and "there" before. It makes a lot of sense. Thank you for that beautiful observation!

I've noticed that until quite recently artists primarily work in groups and movements. It enabled an exchange of ideas, the evolution of thought and radical departures from ideas that had gone before. And I wonder if artists will continue to work in groups as before, or if they will become much more fractured. As we know, in the past, only "outsider artists" worked in isolation or separate from the mainstream of art. So I wonder now if all artists will essentially become outsider artists? Or will they find new ways to group together? What do you think Luke?

LC: It is strategically successful for humans to work in groups and to form tribes. This can push an art idea into a wider consciousness and have a historic momentum. However, I think to become an artist you need to be able to formulate what you are doing from the point of view of a lone wolf and art naturally attracts these types. So there's always been a contradiction here. As the digital life allows us

to be more and more isolated, then I think the natural outsider tendency of the artist could be on the ascendency. As a counter argument to that, the digital life seems to create bland, repetition on social media so may be creating a tribe of homogenous loners. I value originality over everything and the group dynamic is about creating consensus and a familiar repetition, evidently there are eternal conflicts at play and I don't know where we are heading.

RP: Thank you so much for sharing your thoughts with us Luke, I've really enjoyed it.

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