Robert Priseman
Interviews Sarah Longworth-West

RP: Hello Sarah. Thank you so much for agreeing to this interview. I wonder if we can begin by exploring your working process? Where do you start in making one of your pieces?

SL-W: I start with potentially quite a lengthy process. I have an archive of photographs and source material that I have been collating throughout recent years; perhaps an image that I decide to use has been taken, last month or maybe waited for a combination of things to come together, and is a few years in this archive before being used, as a prompt.

I used to work a lot more with found source material. But that has really decreased and been replaced with my own low-fi photography. What I like about the source material was that I wasn't necessarily in charge of it and it was unpredictable and exciting, for image-making, and also reacting to something contemporary/printed now. However, more unusual imagery was getting harder and harder to come by and this shift, which I didn't necessarily notice so dramatically at the time, naturally mutated into finding 'imagery' during my regular life that I felt enthused to use from a visual and conceptual standpoint.

With both ways of finding source material, crucially to note, it is never the obvious 'thing,' the supposed protagonist, or even a recognisable thing that catches my attention or becomes the catalyst for a work; it is actually the overlooked or simply a shape or colour or combination of these.

There are several other elements within the working process which are equally weighted. The next being drawing. I draw only the main element or my 'pull' section or fragment from these photographs which I am enthused about and edit the rest of the content - by not drawing the rest. And I look at these drawings singly or start building relationships between them, which aren't necessarily clear at first, but I try to let the process direct me and reflect later.

The next major element of my process is my key handmade pigmented gesso practice which I have been developing for well over a decade now. Roughly 48 hours after I've have gessoed, depending upon the time of year, the surface will be dry enough for me to wet & dry sand it; through this process I will reveal the multiple colours I have used and these will fuse for an unpredicted patina.
So it is a combination of finding stimulus, the drawings and the gesso surfaces that start building potential paintings.

RP: You create a lovely image of a practice which enjoys making use of traditional processes and techniques. And I remember you saying that your Dad makes your wooden supports for you. How important is this element of craft to you in the making of an artwork? And is it in some way reassuring

to have traditional techniques to draw upon? That there is perhaps a tradition you anchor yourself to which you can then build upon?

SL-W: Yes I do like tradition, to a certain extent, yet I use it also as a force to push against, how I see it, too. Using essentially a take on an ancient method alongside images of contemporary detritus - as a contrast, but being empathetic to the materials also. I have always been interested in artefacts, through my parents taking me to museums as a child, I think. Dad originally trained as a structural engineer but took another route a few years later. He's always made items to build and improve our home, there was always keen design in his functional work; and he's offered since the early days to make my plywood panels. I think you could say it is reassuring and it is yes, definitely an anchor in the practice, for sure - but I use the gesso as described for a few reasons; the positive side to the unpredictability; the chalkiness it has in person and the contrast between chalky gesso and oily oil paint; how it softens colours; using a panel is a hard surface which I prefer as I can push against the surface which can be smooth like marble and has no fabric weave to it; and especially how it gives me an anti-white paper starting point - something core to react to.

RP: That's really interesting. The push and pull element you describe seems to hint at an emotive component to your work. Can you tell us a little about this please, do you feel there is an emotional component to your work? And also, you have talked around the idea of 'flat volume' in your work, can you explain a little about this idea?

SL-W: So intriguing to hear others takes on your work or what you've said; however no, the work and I am not emotionally driven. I'm more planning and process and that is why I have to be careful and have embedded chance within the process too - which is important to avoid things becoming too tidy or tight. The images I choose to work with are 'charged', for me at least to be motivated to work with them - this perhaps, or hopefully does resonate with others. Maybe something of my excitement of finding something that fits with my visual enquiry comes through, and it is the fleetingness of the images and objects that is important too. Recent works have been focused upon non-object and/or non-spaces that are hard to locate but overall give an atmosphere of a place in which people or hints of them occasionally inhabit or hold.

Flat Volume is a research project that I have been working on alongside my practice, and born out of it, for about 2 years now. It is and will be a contemporary painting survey exhibition of 38 artists which is stemmed from Paul Nash's *Equivalents for the Megaliths* 1935 and further highlighted by Phyllida Barlow's wealth of painted drawings. In a time where we can be increasingly consumed by screens, the remit of the survey is to highlight and absorb the physical forms and objects we are surrounded by and therefore also highlighting our own relationships to our physical haptic environments; how we deal with the importance of 'object-ness' and questioning the values of form within paintings. I have delineated four sub-sections to *Flat Volume* - which also reoccur in my practice; these include spatial strategies to execute compositional disquiet; absolute (idiosyncratic) specificity of placement; a pull to unusual structures; desire for 'solid' forms within the picture plane.

RP: I wonder, can you tell us about the colours and materials you use? And how long would you say each work takes you to produce?

SL-W: Colour is clearly important in my work and it is easy to see more in retrospect, time periods where I've been focused on using certain colour combinations. I actually have little paint charts, I've made with all the colours I own, at the side of my working table as it's a bit of a visual remembrance for not forgetting about what paint colours I could use and also a reminder to self to think about additions and subtractions in the palette. I do consider what colours I'm going to use, what will work well together for a gesso base, for example, if I'm layering colours or working with an overlapping grid formation or stripes etc. The starting point of already having a colour base essentially is then the starting position for what might come next i.e. what I think might work for the next stage of the painting.

I tend to use a combination of materials so mainly oil paints but on occasion and when I find it either conceptually or visually appropriate, there might be silver leaf, oil pastel, spray paint. And occasionally more sculptural elements.

The length of time to produce a work actually varies due to the process I've described but as I do like to stay on track with making sure that I'm making best use of my time throughout the year alongside my lecturing post and being a parent; I aim for six works per annum. This could potentially increase when my circumstances shift in the future…or perhaps not - we'll see.

RP: Do you remember the first painting you ever made? And do you still have it?

SL-W: The first work that my family decided to frame was a drawing I did of my dad when I was five at school on mint coloured paper, which is still hanging in our family bathroom. It's not accurate - that has never been an interest of mine - it's pretty much his face made out of geometric forms; funnily enough it still looks like him - it is the eternal face. Then the first painting was most likely, to my memory, a Howard Hodgkin-like copy due to our GCSE syllabus being based around frames, I think or that was my take anyhow. I really liked his work. I luckily went to a sixth form that specialised in the Arts. I was really encouraged by three teachers who were practising artists, looking back, I made a set of seriously ambitious work for my A-levels, supported by them. One was a floor to ceiling work so possibly 6 m tall by 4 m wide collage relief painting, cut out of Styrofoam packaging that the school had. The piece was based on photos I had taken at a local scrap and junkyard. It was focusing on the layers of car wreckage and off-key angles. I've never been into realism and luckily my school didn't pressurise that either . It is a hang up a lot of students come to HE with still, which is stifling to progress and individuality in my opinion. All that work stayed at the school, but I do have my BA work from Newcastle; one piece I do actually still like and can see a conceptual connection to what motivates me today.

During my final and fourth year at Newcastle on the BA course I was looking very deeply into English historical cloth and linking it to contemporary celebrity culture and the criticism of women from the rise of celebrity via Joshua Reynolds' painting. Through that I became interested in the format of an oval and started to use neon paint to cover the panel surface and where errors would occur. I would go back over these with white paint which made a vibrating optical effect. This is when I started to really appreciate errors and embrace the irregularity of surface and pattern.
I have always been interested in history, anthropology and textiles and the combination of these.

RP: I notice sometimes you have additions to your core works, like a piece of cloth or gesso-shapes balanced precariously on the top of a painting. Why is this and does it create practical problems for you?

SL-W: The 'Remnants' are essentially the dried left-over excess paint-mass from the hand-made pigmented gesso paint process which was originally made for the surfaces of the panel paintings. They have become an extension of my regular panel painting practice, becoming, when a natural relationship occurs, subtly integrated to the compositional whole.

I started letting the gesso excess dry out as a way to dispose of it sensibly, as it includes natural glue, so not something you'd want to put down a sink. However, I rapidly realised that they themselves were mini 3D or relief paintings; and importantly, are made of the same substance as the panel paintings themselves. And in turn I started to think about them as part of the paintings themselves; either adding them on occasion to the top of a painting to make a whole composition or previously I have scanned them to digitally print them and also made a bespoke display set-up for them. They don't necessarily cause problems but they are fragile.

It has been commented upon, by artist peers, that they are the 'archeology' of the paintings.
The fabric works are now from a while ago; the most successful of which, in my opinion, being *Ground on Ground* 2016. A digital print on silk draping upon the pigmented gesso panel. The digital print was made of scans of the individual remnants which I collaged in photoshop to create a merging mass of remnants or at least their top surface and shapes. Choosing silk for the way it drapes; one constructed ground onto a flatter more conventional ground.

RP: I love the idea of the "archeology" of the painting. That's really interesting. I wonder, is there a core philosophy that underpins your practice?

SL-W: I wouldn't name it as such.…however, I have some distinct beliefs but don't necessary theorise about them as they are I guess embedded in my personality. I suppose being a teacher in Higher Education you do want a wider range of people to be able to access your work and get some personal reward or understanding of it for themselves, whatever knowledge or level they are coming in at. I wouldn't be opposed to simply an enjoyment of the colours.

Contrary to that I enjoy using ambiguity within the work as I think if you can understand paintings immediately, that's incredibly boring. So I do like to play with what is and isn't recognisable to allow the viewer's mind to wonder and make connections. It's a visual language and to continue it, you have the responsibility to innovate and also be reflective of the times we live in.

The work itself also has societal meanings; more recently including the objects that might surround us in our suburban areas and therefore perhaps hoping that we might think about our objects and environments more considerately, but not in any explicit nor overtly moralistic point.

RP: That's really interesting Sarah. In the context of your practice, you mention your role as a teacher in Higher Education. I often wonder what the future will look like. And while we can never know, we sometimes see flickers of it. Given you are involved in nurturing a new generation of artists, what do you think the future of painting will look like? And do you think artists will find new ways to operate outside of our existing gallery system? Because from what I can see at the moment, the gallery, museum and funding system seems heavy with gatekeepers who are dictating much of what does and doesn't get seen. And I sense the next generation want to find ways around that. What are your thoughts on this?

SL-W: I think creative people will always find solutions arounds blocks. It is incredibly frustrating that this has to be done so tirelessly and the lack of support for the Arts in general at every juncture is SO felt by an extremely high percentage of artists, including myself. In terms of the upcoming generations of artists, unrelated to age, I retain faith and find it intriguing as to the cycles of interests that come through their works and discussions; a lot of which is about our layers of environmental problems.

When I was studying, especially on our MA at Slade, UCL, I think our tutors encouraged or perhaps we all just adopted, through osmosis, using a d.i.y approach as a practical method, for getting our work seen. So I can only see this continuing with exhibiting 'taste' being so narrow; I also worked at a lot of galleries as part-time jobs and gained insights. I think Zarina and Gabrielle from the White Pube do a great job of breaking down navigating making work whilst building communities; accessibility is key!

In terms of the future of Painting - that is a good question, that's hard to answer; all I can observe from my HE perspective and what I can see in the galleries at *all* levels - is an absolute thirst for painting - in all its forms. Personally, I can only see this maintaining or growing, almost as an antidote to the digital and sometimes working with the digital too.

Interview completed 25 November 2024