

# Robert Priseman Interviews

## Day Bowman

RP: Your paintings are reflective of movement, the coastal landscape and more broadly the environment in which you grew up. I wonder if you can tell us a little about your childhood and how it shaped you to become a painter?

DB: My earliest memories are of scribbling/doodling in a pink-paged, pink-covered baby book. My mother had used a different book to record my early progress: first tooth, lock of hair etc. and the pink one had been discarded and placed on the bottom shelf of the library at home. Aged two years, I espied it and thought I'd fill the pages with my drawings as at the top of each page, printed in grey, were cherubs; these I attempted to copy, page after page after page!

I grew up in Minehead in West Somerset located on the Bristol Channel coast which experiences one of the highest tidal ranges in the world. The tidal rise and fall in the Bristol Channel can be as great as 48 feet. The town is overlooked by North Hill, which rises steeply from the harbour shoreline thus both the shoreline and North Hill became places to explore and play both in the summer and the winter months.

It was town of two worlds: that of the busy summer with the arrival of tourists and then the winter with boarded-up amusement arcades and wind-swept beaches where my brother and I would draw great shapes and messages to the Gods in the sand when the tide had gone out. Growing up in a holiday destination, seaside town it is not surprising that much of my work has referenced the sea, the beach and littoral. It is as though the canvas in the studio becomes the beach that acted as the canvas of my childhood.

RP: You create a very strong mental image of the cherubs on the page and the power of nature you discovered in the Bristol Channel. They make it easy to connect to an idea of how your work would have evolved a foundational interest in both movement and nature. Alongside the cherubs, you mention also writing messages to the Gods in the sand. So I'm curious about two things: Firstly, do you have any religious or spiritual life that informs you? And secondly, were your family artistic in any way and did they encourage you to paint?

DB: I use the term Gods very loosely here. 'They' could be a passing aircraft, a large bird, or just the heavens that we were learning about at school, which was a convent just across the road from our house. And whilst we observed Sundays and went regularly to the services and Sunday School, I cannot say that I was in any way religious as a child. In my teens I attended a school where services and saints' days were strictly observed. After the death of my

husband, I tried rejoining the church but found it difficult on so many levels. Today, I find that whilst I have a spiritual side that guides me through the good and the difficult times, I am content being in a sacred space, and especially listening to choral music, rather than practising as a Christian.

I should add here that I had a pretty odd upbringing as my parents - both from humble origins - were highly aspirational, to the point that they had a live-in nanny. This meant that I only saw my father and mother once a week for Sunday lunch; the rest of the week we were under the guidance of Judy, our nanny, who I later discovered was the calming influence in the household. My mother wished that I play the piano, and have ballet lessons,; art or should I say painting and the creative arts weren't really considered. I think the first time I went to a gallery was aged thirteen.

RP: I can see from your descriptions that creating an imaginary world in childhood could have been very soothing for you.

In your work today, you draw on a tradition of gestural abstraction to capture the messages you wish to convey to your audience. Can you tell us who your influences are, who initially inspired you and who you find fascinating today?

DB: Like many artists I spent much of my early study at art school following figuration, albeit loosely. I think it was returning from a trip to visit my brother in South America that led me to explore the use of larger canvases that in turn led to larger more gestural shapes and that in turn led me into abstraction. I felt then, and still do, that through abstraction I am able to achieve an essence; much like poetry which, for me, through its brevity achieves a similar essence.

Influences...well, the greats, of course, JMW Turner being up there along with Rembrandt. And then at school, being introduced to the Impressionists was a wonderful light-bulb moment. Of course, the post-war Cornish School along with American Abstract Expressionists have all played their part. And most recently I have been following Oscar Murillo: I just love his work and the fact that, true to his Colombian roots, he is very inclusive.

RP: How fascinating. I'm curious, what exactly was it about your trip to see your brother in South America that led to you exploring working on large scale canvases and abstraction? It must have been quite a profound moment of revelation which led to such a fundamental shift. Also, you mention Oscar Murillo and his being inclusive. This is an interesting observation as, in the past, many would have described the arts as both elitist and exclusive. What does this mean to you, and would you describe your own work as inclusive? And if so, how does that manifest itself for you?

DB: During the university vacations of 1979 and 1980 I visited my brother in Venezuela. He had landed up there by travelling across pretty much most of the USA, from north to south and then taken a flight to Caracas and slowly found himself in Cabimas, an oil rich area of the country, where he found employment with an Italian construction company. He left me to my own devices saying that I must travel to experience the continent. Guided by my South American handbook I travelled through Venezuela, Colombia and Ecuador by land. The trains and buses providing colour and music along the way. In 1980 I returned to Venezuela with a painting commission from the Hilton Hotel and with the proceeds I travelled down to Peru, solo. What this travel showed me was the immensity of the landscape and travelling through it day after day I felt completely immersed and part of it. This is what I wanted to translate on my return to the UK.

Music is such a strong force in South American culture but alongside this is their use of colour: in their clothes, in their street art and in their weavings. Not only are they proud of their designs and weaving but happy to share with others. I think the experience of travelling through South America taught me to open-up about life and become independent. I learnt to dance, to speak a rough street Spanish and be less inhibited.

Is my work inclusive? That's a tricky one to answer as the life of a painter is solitary, and needs to be, so I am not sure where inclusivity come into it. In the past I have collaborated with composers, dancers, choreographers and poets in live performance so, in a sense that aspect of my work is inclusive.

RP: I can certainly see now how that trip widened your world view, it sounds fascinating. I really love the colours you use in your work. And whilst influenced by South America they seem very evocative of a certain English sensibility. How would you describe your relationship to colour? Do you have a fixed set of colours you engage with or do they change and evolve over time?

DB: Firstly, thank you. Colour is something I love but don't really think about too much. Much of the mark making in my work is intuitive and so is the palette I employ. I guess each series, and I do tend to work in series, has a base number of colours which I amplify and/or reduce, depending on my mood.

The palette certainly changes over time. Thinking back to the *Plashy Place* Series, there was much use of Phthalo blue, whites, greys and ochres. In contrast, the current body of work, *Marking Out the Boundaries*, is employing more earth tones.

RP: It is interesting that you mention Turner as an influence and then how your use of colour is dependent on your mood. Would you describe yourself as or aligned to the Romantic

movement in any way? I often wonder why Romanticism hasn't resurfaced as it is very in tune with both the anti-capitalist and environmental movements today. What are your thoughts on this?

DB: Well, to quote Baudelaire: 'Romanticism is precisely situated neither in choice of subject nor in exact truth, but in a way of feeling.' I think my work is very much of that tradition. And certainly, my latest body of work has been exploring how and why the rural landscape is parcelled up the way it is. After some research and reading I discovered that this patchwork quilt of shape and colour is very much a making of man since the Enclosure Acts of 200 years ago. John Clare, the celebrated English peasant poet wrote achingly of the lost landscape of the commons in his poem *Remembrance*. My own *Marking Out the Boundaries* sets out to challenge current thinking on landscape, property, borders and common rights.

RP: I'm curious to know if you tend to work on one painting at a time or on series of paintings simultaneously. How many paintings would you say you produce in a year? And how do they manifest from idea to reality? Do you work out ideas in sketchbooks or do the paintings take shape on the canvas?

DB: I work on multiple paintings at any given time. Also scale, as I often have three or four small works (30 x 25 cm) running alongside larger canvases (140 x 150 cm). Why? Well, I find that using oils, the drying time in winter takes upwards of a week so moving from one canvas to another helps allow the flow of mark making.

I suppose you could say that the small works are like sketches for the larger works on canvas. Along with oil paint, I use liberal amounts of charcoal and conte sticks when working ideas into the canvas. I am often asked how long it takes to paint a large canvas; the answer is somewhere between two and three months although there are canvases that just don't get resolved and sit around the studio for a year or two! I don't produce a large number of works that I feel good about; it depends whether I'm on a roll or not - life can get in the way.

RP: Many people describe having strong emotions in front of your works, that they are reminded of their own mortality or the power of nature. In this sense there is a strong connection to poetry in your paintings. Yet over the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century art went further and further away from the emotional and more and more towards the academic and intellectual. I have always felt that artists should forge their own path regardless of fashion and see this in many artists I admire from the past. What are your reflections on this?

DB: I am quite moved by this statement; I had no idea that my work produces such strong emotions in others and am proud that the work does speak to something deep within us. As I mentioned earlier, poetry is important to me and very much part of the fabric of my work and my thinking. The title for the series *Plashy Places* came about as a result of discovering a

wonderful poem by W. B. Yeats *The Man who Dreamed of Faeryland* (sic). In this he writes about a careworn, young man who comes upon a lugworm on a walk on the beach who sings to him of happier times. Memories of my childhood came flooding back when reading this. Some years back, I was invited to talk about a series of works entitled *The Urban Wastelands* at Quay Arts on the Isle of Wight and a local poet, John Trotman, was inspired to write a poem about my work. Later, I was able to invite him an exhibition of mine where he gave a reading of the poem *Both Brittle and Beautiful*. So curiously, the inspiration can work both ways!

With regards to fashion, I am reminded of a quote by Picasso who stated that: 'Fashion is always out of fashion', and he's right and certainly followed this thinking throughout his life. Of course, there is always room for a more cerebral approach to painting but for me it is all about playing with the materials to describe my thoughts which cannot be conveyed through words alone.

RP: I love your description here of being able to describe your thoughts which cannot be conveyed through words alone. I feel this is the very heart of being an artist. Thank you Day.

**Interview completed 11 December 2024**