

Robert Priseman Interviews

Gideon Pain

RP: I wanted to start by asking you about where you grew up and what you remember about your early childhood encounters with art? Did you live in an artistic household and was painting something you were encouraged to do?

GP: Hi Robert. I grew up all over the place. My dad used to work for the Met Office as a meteorologist. This meant that we were sent on 'postings' to different parts of Europe and the UK every three years. This was very exciting as a kid, although it did play havoc with education and friendships. Constant change helped fuel my interest in art. Having a lot of time on my own and continually being exposed to new people and places makes you curious about the world and where you stand in it. Art is also something to carry with you regardless of where you land. Being able to draw micky mouse or metal album covers is also good currency as a kid, if you want to be quickly liked or not beaten up.

My dad also occasionally drew and painted so there were always materials and a role model to hand. We also went to a lot of museums and galleries as a family, so I was conditioned young.

RP: Your paintings are often very colourful, in what appears quite a chaotic and frenetic way. They have a kind of hallucinogenic quality to them. Have you always worked this way or is it something that evolved? Also, has taking hallucinogenic drugs or mushrooms informed your work?

GP: The colour is a relatively 'new' thing. When I say new its subjective, I'm relatively old now so it's probably been brewing for the last twenty years or so. I started out mainly using a limited pallet of Indian red, titanium white, yellow ochre, lamp black and ultramarine blue. Gradually Alizarine crimson and veridian green crept in but it was still a nuanced and confined range. The 'chaos and freneticism' was just a counter to this. I'd started a family, which throws you into a psyched up, technicolour alternate reality and I wanted to bring those elements into my work. Time also became the pressing factor. I didn't want to stop producing, as many of my friends had, so I needed a direct and 'simpler' way of working to fit with this new space. It would be easy to come across as slack here, but I think that you work with what you have or not at all and I was happy to take that compromise.

As for drugs, in my teens and early 20's I did experiment, although to be truthful I always found the experience more counterproductive than positive. Acute anxiety, nausea and sedatives rather than transcendental revelation were sadly the grubby outcomes. I've had a

similar, although much more persistent, relationship with alcohol. It's taken me much longer to realise that I operate better with a clearer head though.

RP: That's so interesting. I know quite a few American artists were informed by drugs in the 60's and 70's, but I never felt the outcomes were that interesting. Like you, I've always felt that a clear head produces the best work. Can you tell us who inspires your output? Which artists did you admire growing up and who do you enjoy looking at today?

GP: Growing up I loved Jim Henson, Rodger Dean, Ralph Steadman, Hieronymus Bosch, Pieter Bruegel the Elder, and Charles Samuel Addams. I loved comics as a kid. I have dyslexia so I was much happier with a Gary Larson book than Tolken. From there I moved onto Philip Guston, Cezanne, Van Gough, Michael Angelo, Graham Crowley, Terry Winters, Ansel Kiefer, Gerhard Richter and Casper David Friedrick. Lately I've been looking at a lot of sculptural work. I really enjoy Erwin Wurm, Paul McCarthy, Phyllida Barlow, Hew Loche and Mike Nelson. If I had to pick out a single sole though it would still be Bruegel.

I'm lucky enough to have a day job working for the exhibitions department of a museum. This puts me in contact with a lot of stuff I wouldn't normally see, Recently I've been spending time with some 7th century Uzbek wall paintings as part of a Silk Roads show. Their linework and colour are breathtaking and to witness the touch of another's hand form back in the 7th century, is humbling yet also affirming.

RP: That's so interesting. I had much the same feelings looking at Holbein's drawings of the court of Henry VIII.

Over the course of the past four or five years you have moved away from painting and towards sculptural works. What inspired this move? And would you say there is a philosophical underpinning which unites them all?

GP: Grief and a pandemic would be the primary causes. My wife was diagnosed with cancer 6 years ago. During treatment, palliative care and after her death my home and working life where fundamentally changed. The pandemic meant I was spending long periods in relative isolation whilst dealing with the stress and emotional upheaval. As an escape, or distraction, I started making small maquettes. Painting by its nature is a very cerebral process and I didn't have the will or emotional means to pull any further inside than I was already forced to go. Making stuff I could hold and manipulate brought me back into a present and offered a conduit for the sadness and uncertainty that threatened to envelope. It was also a way of marking time, with more stuff made signifying more time passed and the notion that I /we were getting through. The physicality of these objects also became a focus for the family. They were easy to talk about and even help with. I was working on the kitchen table which

meant that the home was still alive and changing. Stuff stops when people are terminally ill and after they die, and one of the hardest tasks is knowing how to get started again.

As part of this rebuilding process, I brought the constructed works with me. They offer immersive goals to aim towards. They are also good therapy because nothing is fully fixed or set, until the point of showing. A work can literally grow or disappear around you as the idea evolves. I like this uncertainty. I've worked in the exhibition construction industry for the past 30 years so can draw on a skill set that feels instinctive and natural to do this.

Recently I've started to feel ready to go back to painting, I'm not sure how it will look, but I know that the ideas in my recent work can be pushed further, and a different medium might be a way of doing this.

RP: Thank you so much for sharing your experiences with us Gideon. I'm really looking forward to seeing your new paintings when they emerge.

Interview completed 29 December 2024