

# Robert Priseman Interviews

## Paul Newman

RP: I wonder if you can describe your practice to us in your own words Paul? From the outside it seems very dense and multi-layered. You work in a variety of media, from painting to photocollage and installation. What is it that underpins all of your output? What is the core message you hope to convey to your audience?

PN: My core practice is painting, which extends into objects, installation and performance. I play with my aesthetic interests from art and cinematic histories, drawing on personal mannerisms in style and execution.

When I had a solo exhibition; *English Gothic* in 2018, I had a visit from the director of the Ikon Gallery in Birmingham. He asked me about my work and I started to talk about the painting like an artist statement, as a tableau of references from 18<sup>th</sup> c Romantic landscape painting to 20<sup>th</sup> c urban infrastructure, populated by figures such as classic monsters of the movies like Frankenstein's. He cut me off saying 'you're describing the work and what's in there, but what's it about?' I admitted it's about me, a version of a self-portrait, (whether a figure, a rusty van, or giant beetle) stranded or looking for a resting place in an uncertain landscape. This relates to personal relationships, a fear of hostile urban regeneration and the wearing challenge of constantly trying to establish yourself as an artist.

I don't know if I've ever thought sharply about a core message for my audience. I paint what I like in the way I like and makes sense to my sensibilities. I've fallen into themes of ruin and uncertainty in our environment, and increasingly I've become more aware of my anti-capitalist feelings. At the centre I'd like to feel that's its it still ok to express myself, what's personal to me and struggles specific to my age and gender that are also universal.

RP: Can you recall your earliest encounters with art and tell us what drew you to become an artist? And what is it about art that compels you to continue making work?

PN: I have potent early memories of looking at historical landscape paintings in their low-lit museum environments and being transfixed, going on a journey into the landscape, following, for example, the woodcutter down the path in the forest. When I was in my early 20's in 1997 I remember buying tickets for a snooker final in Birmingham, Ronnie O Sullivan v Stephen Hendry. Ronnie came back from many frames down and forced a decider. Hendry won it in final frame with a 147, true story, I was there. In the interval and gloom and the rain of early January I ducked into the museum and art gallery on a Sunday. It was nearly empty, and I felt I had the place to myself with the paintings. It's still such I potent memory, that I

thought this is where I want to be and this essence has filtered into my art practice in later years.

My parents encouraged me to follow art. The story is, I wouldn't doodle or scribble like most toddlers, so my dad made a black board on an easel at the end of my bed. I wouldn't touch it, but one day my mother found a drawing of Big Ben on it; based on an early computer graphic from the late 1970's for ITN News at 1 after children's tv programs. In frustration I rubbed it out, though the encouragement was there. And there is family connection with art, I have a talented brother and late Uncle, and my Dad who isn't an artist but very inventive and improvisational with carpentry, has rubbed off on me on the experimental side of my work.

I have an artist friend, another Paul, who is 70 and still makes a living teaching private classes in his studio, increasingly finds it hard to make time to paint for himself. 'I feel just out or sorts after a while if I don't paint.' And that's basically the same for me and many artists. It gives me energy and centeredness.

RP: You cite figures such as Edgar Allen Poe and Mary Shelley and the English Gothic movement in general as having a strong influence on your work. What is it about this which draws you so strongly? And are there any visual artists who inform what you do?

PN: Melancholy is key to tapping into my inspirations, essences of experienced in Romantic era landscape painting and in particular their museum setting along with Shelly's *Frankenstein* and its monster depicted in cinema. I read a book recently, *In Ruins* by Christopher Woodward which explores our centuries old fascination with ruins and the psychology of it, and Melancholia is discussed a fair bit. I had a solo exhibition, *In Ruin* in 2023, which featured some of my English Gothic paintings as well as a live performance with a character with a smashed mirror face. He was performing a HIIT exercise routine on You Tube and the tone was incongruous to the paintings, but I liked that. It very much explored the psychosociological side of ruin, of mind, body and soul, and notions of being entrapped or enslaved.

In terms of painters, I always love to see Gainsborough's up close, the feathery translucency of brushwork of the later works. I always go to look at *Morning Walk* in the National Gallery if I'm around. The brooding tone of Constable, the melancholia (again) of Paul Nash, De Chirico and other surrealists, including Emily Bridgewater, a Birmingham Surrealist whose 1943 painting *Nightwork Commences*, has always captivated me in the museum & art gallery there. None of these painters I borrow closely from in terms of style, which would be difficult to do, but it's the essence of the tonality of their work that captivates me. I have however borrowed imagery directly from paintings, for example Constable, as a form of appropriation, which is another aspect of my work that I can discuss.

RP: I'm curious, when you engage in a particular project, what leads you to decide whether or not it will be manifest in collage, installation, painting or some other form of creative output? And how long does a particular project take you to realise, if indeed there even is a set amount of time?

PN: Painting is the core of my practice, as I mentioned at the beginning, though I get restless and elements like the objects and collage fits with improvisational nature of my sensibility. I go through cyclic phases of being more figurative in my painting, to more semi abstract. I produced, (still ongoing, I think) a body of work irregularly cut shelf frames which a painting on paper had an abstract object placed in front of it. They are called 'Interior Studies' and were like maquettes or proposals for large semi abstract stage sets. I had a solo exhibition at mac Birmingham in 2015 called Stage, which explored a ranging notion of staging. This includes staging in my painting, in my live performances and their documentation and in the staging of the studio environment and the debris and detritus on the periphery of making work, and how this can be exhibited.

The performances feel essential to do from time to time and their staccato awkwardness reflects something of the characters in my paintings, though I've yet to reconcile them fully with my painting and how the two communicate with each other. I don't do them very often and they come about through opportunity with a solo exhibition in which I like to present the range of my practice, or through invitations to take part in projects.

RP: In many aspects your practice appears very post-modern. It ignores the power structures of the past and adopts a variety of styles and techniques to convey a message unique to yourself. How does that description seem to you? Would you describe yourself as a post-modernist?

PN: I mentioned earlier that I 'appropriated' imagery for my paintings, for example *The Visitation* which was exhibited last year at a group show at The Midlands Art Centre (mac Birmingham) *Worlds Away, Away Nature and Wellbeing* This work featured a version of Constables' *Hadleigh Castle* set upon to old cable drums that resemble old cart wheels (an example of my improvised object elements) The title *Visitation* referred to the strange alien like abstract form that is landed in the paintings foreground. I paint things I like. I take elements from paintings in books and artists postcards to film stills of monsters of the movies with the aforementioned Frankenstein's and the human fly, as well as the Ford Escort van, which my Dad used to drive. So, these are personal, and painting for pleasure reasons. You say, I ignore the power struggles of the past. Maybe I'm sampling the imagery for aesthetic reasons and arranging them in my own tableaux, though these subjects and arrangements along with the activity of painting are very personal to me.

However, I became aware of the more politicised significance of presenting imagery of historical and modernist urban architectural ruins depicted along with the solitary characters like Frankenstein's Monster. To return to the start of the interview, the work is very much a type of self-portrait and self-reflection with the anxieties of instability, nostalgia, a solitary nature and anti-capitalist feeling. As for an answer to the whether I am a post-modernist, I suppose my use of borrowed imagery could fit me in that arena, but I don't feel like one, or make work with that specific intention.

**Interview completed 16 December 2024**