

# Marius von Brasch

## Interviews Freya Purdue

MvB: What set you on a path to become a painter?

FP: When I decided to go to art school it was because of my ambition to work creatively. I felt a strong conviction to become a painter so I took up the opportunity of going to Saint Martin's School of Art where there was a strong focus on painting which was mainly abstract and modernist in general; however, it felt that one could take a very speculative approach in painting and follow one's passion wherever it might take, and I needed that freedom. The atmosphere was stimulating and exciting and there was lots of encouragement. I read a great deal at the time, exploring many ideas about painting and ancient texts which, for me, revealed the heart of different cultures and had given rise to a complexity of cultural expressions and ways of living. They fuelled my ideas in relation to painting, and they still do. During my painting fellowship at Cardiff, for example, I started working with ideas which I found expressed in the expressions of Celtic and Welsh culture. There were only a few access points to the ancient texts because so much has been lost in the mists of time, and I find it difficult to explain the fascination and importance this culture held for me at this point, and I am sure, it had very much to do with location. Research was made difficult because there were virtually no publications on the Druidic Triads. I read what I could find as I worked on exploring the history of the ancient ceremonies as well as the Celtic examples of painted manuscripts. It became a powerful inspiration for some large paintings, *Cavern of Stones* and *Nos Gallen Gaef* (Ceremony of Light). My research led me to accepting a kind of intuitive attraction to ancient ideas, the expression of which demonstrates the approach that I would go on to take with making work. I always follow the spirit of each painting as it develops as a voyage into the unknown following whatever inspires it, whether ancient, cultural or contemporary ideas.

MvB: In your statements and many of our conversations, you discuss the importance of philosophy and mystical thought for you and your work. Is there a particular strand of philosophy that you have in mind and when did it become such a potent influence in your life?

FP: Painting itself is a mystery, it inspires with so many challenges and culminates in the magic of bringing ideas and colour into a new relationship and trying to achieve a tangible synthesis which is truly wonderful and very addictive because it is so difficult. Philosophy does have a certain influence on my thought processes. I've read quite widely, and many different ideas inspire me. I encountered Zen philosophy when I first started painting, a set of ideas influential still in the 70's that related particularly to abstract painting at the time. It

seemed to offer me a new freedom in approaching Western art making. It suited my desire to make experiential, sensual work outside of more academic approaches. I encountered Indian philosophy and Egyptian thought in texts such as *The Upanishads* and *The Egyptian Book of the Dead* and visited both countries on my journeys, which I found truly inspirational. Both traditions centre around the nature of life itself and the questions about life after death anchored deeply in the intimacy of human nature. These subjects are at the heart of my approach to painting intuitively, empathetically and poetically. What interests me mostly in philosophical ideas are those which give hope in a very confusing and conflicted world. I am interested in how ideas are constantly mutating and changing and are reflected in developments in culture and how human thought can be found like traces of colour throughout history.

I'm not focused really on any particular philosophy, but I look out, like an eclectic reader, for those ideas that inspire and enrich my approach to life and making. In terms of painting, my insights and reflections culminate in the way I approach new works and strongly influence my choice of colours. Colour in painting is both the most difficult to achieve well and the most crucial aspect of conveying emotion and feeling in others. Finding a new vision that holds a strong and relatable feeling leads to the creation of each painting with its particular colour and formal choices. Of course, it might sometimes relate to and continue from past work, but I aim for the new as I do not really seek to repeat images. Painting is an amazing process of discovery! Painting always comes with new insights, building upon the initial feelings or thoughts which I have considered or discovered while starting a painting. It is a process of adjusting ideas with new experiences via painting. That is particularly true when dealing with colours. The intuitive knowing of which colour to apply to a specific painting in progress is challenged by the difficulty to predict in what way the colour will respond in its environment. Colours respond, act, subvert, and amplify differently each time, and this is truly an amazing phenomenon. I suppose exploring painting in this way - from my fascination with ancient as well as contemporary contexts - expands my ideas from the initial departure point.

MvB: I remember you talking about exploring life energy, both its vital and fragile quality and associating this with a form of shamanic retrieval. In what way does your art practice integrate this aspect?

FP: I am interested in the shamanic journey as an experience and an idea. It is much like the process of painting which is closely linked to a journey of retrieving things from one's hidden depths, and trying to find something in the myriad of connections within the collective unconscious life. Walking a path towards a new painting is very much like a retrieval of all sorts of images and touches on the knowledge and experiences of past civilisations and human heritage that continues into the energetic present. Though I am not aiming for a shamanic journey as such, I would say that there are definitely parallels in the process of

retrieving something within, an image, a shape or a form, which is essential to a shamanic journey, where what is retrieved has been beyond the conscious mind. This unpredictable aspect enriches the making of an artwork with surprising, inspirational, and magical connections, and it becomes a deeply anchored exploration.

I think what painting can do for me is connecting with and making such hidden and elusive realms and experiences visible. I like to think visually about the life forces that surround and fill us with vitality. I have always felt that part of my consciousness resides in the invisible and is constantly feeding me with thoughts of the beautiful. It is from within this liminal space that my deep sense of connection with human culture from the beginning of time springs. It seems like the source of the desire to express and work creatively, an infinite quality I try to access when I'm painting. It makes sense from all of this that the unknown is an intricate element in my work, something deep and speculative and yet somehow very familiar to me.

Starting new work means being ready again and again for another journey into the unknown that allows me to explore new fusions of energies and ideas. Sometimes in the process, the formal aspects of an emerging painting or series of paintings become clear and seem to come towards me, giving me an intuitive knowing of how the painting can develop without knowing how it will finally look. That, of course, is for me the process of manifesting, negotiating and making decisions until it is finished. This allows facets of what I have experienced and seen to gather and be absorbed into the painting. Painting in this way is a powerfully felt and visceral experience, and I think the benefit to others is to pass it on, to bring a gift to the heart.

MvB: How does this affect your understanding of space in a painting? I remember we discussed offering the viewer with the painting the experience of a dimensional space or not and you were very clear your aim for flat surfaces, can you elaborate on this.?

FP: The great thing about painting is that it happens on a flat surface, and to me, the surface of a painting must provide either a well-managed and satisfying experience or one that is disconcerting and dynamic or both. I don't want to create the illusion of three dimensional space. My main concerns with space involve negotiating how the colour/form moves across the canvas and allowing a physical perception via the visual senses, to link with emotional sensitivity and expression. Therefore, creating an illusion of space as such is not a subject for me, although there's probably always a potential for a viewer to discover some spatial allusion.

MvB: Why is it important to you to work with patterns from various ethnic backgrounds, both contemporary and historic?

FP: Pattern, for me, has to do with ritual and connections with the past and present, such as weaving, craft, knowledge and the presence of traditions through time. In various cultures, handmade artefacts connect to the invisible, anchoring or expressing magic and continuity. It is often women who create and use these patterns, woven and drawn by hand they often refer to rituals with their characteristic vocabulary of repetitions and cultural heritage. Through repetition and ritual the woven patterns, sacred movements and dance are preserved down the ages. There are parallels to, in the repeating flows of chants and working songs passed on through tradition, the voices intoning melodically and renewing the inner poetry of sacred space, and its emotional atmosphere passed down to the following generations. These elements, when found together, provide a profoundly sacred experience and an endless source of image making.

MvB: You often work in a serial fashion. Do you plan such a series, does it develop during the process, and do you work simultaneously on the work involved? Is there a theme from the beginning?

FP: Sometimes, an idea or form is too big for just one painting, and I need to unfold its aspects further through a series. There are some sets of paintings, which I have made because I want to see the extension of an idea from many different points of view. The series *Red Botanicals* I worked on in 2020/21 ended up as a body of 60 small paintings. It was only by working on 60 in the end that the idea was fully realised. But the process of extending the series came about spontaneously as I had started with 20 thinking that would be adequate, then another 20, and as that wasn't enough, another 20. It took me a long time to complete these paintings, but I felt satisfied when I finished them because I had managed to unfold the idea as fully as possible. I often work on a number of paintings at one time and discovering the dialogue between them can sometimes help me find the visual solutions I'm looking for to resolve a painting. It's a long process and can sometimes even take years.

MvB: Your series *Lament* left an indelible impression upon me of deep emotion and perfection in terms of structure and dialogue of colours. Can you share the background of this work in terms of how you got there and what it holds for you?

FP: This work consists of five canvases and was inspired by traditional Chinese painting and its demise. The expanse of Chinese ideas about painting and living is transitioning through an uncertain phase to some extent, rejecting the past and keeping only some of the spirit associated to the tradition. In 2017 I went to China where I was invited to take part in the exhibition *Contemporary Masters of Britian*, a travelling exhibition. I felt a general approach of the museums and sites I visited, was based on the aspiration to present themselves as wonderfully modern and bring in all new things instead of holding onto things of the past. The past was allowed to morph into a relic, and the hands-on tradition seemed to also to be slipping away. I felt really sad about this. Going to see *Masterpieces of Chinese Painting* at

the V&A gave me the opportunity to be with beautiful paintings and artwork from ancient China and inspired me to create new work. I incorporated some of the colours and ideas of breathing and space, which are at the core of classical Chinese painting. It's difficult to say how *Lament* was made because the work depends on such a wide range of my experiences, which I haven't mentioned here. So, generally I can say that the whole sensual Chinese experience provided the basis of the work.

MvB: Is there anything outside painting that feeds into your practice?

FP: I could say everything outside my practice influences my work. I'm very keen on thinking about all aspects of art making as well as new scientific discoveries, approaches to the human body, the exploration of space and the miracles of invention that both enhance human development and the environment.

MvB: You were a member of Contemporary British Painting from the beginning, and the Priseman Seabrook Collections hold a considerable amount of your works. How has this association influenced your work as a painter?

FP: Robert Priseman established Contemporary British Painting with the help of Simon Carter and tangentially Judith Tucker, and myself in 2013. The initial idea was to draw together a group of talented painters who were making work but not showing and to give them the opportunity to exhibit and get together. I have enjoyed the process of working with other artists and developing this idea, and I'm very glad to see that it is still in the process of expanding and developing. The Contemporary British Painting prize was in a seed form that has slowly been developed by members and become widely advertised and supported. I think the process of working on this with others was a great reassurance to me, as painting can be quite an isolating thing which many others also feel. For me, who had been working very much alone in my studio for years and creating a body of work, it was nice to get some works on show and meet other painters. I think it's difficult both to self-promote and maintain a consistent painting practice, but it has changed now with social media. When you share aspirations with others, it all becomes much easier, and more enjoyable and encouraging.

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