

# Robert Priseman

## Interviews Monica Metsers

RP: I think we first met sometime around 2010 when I visited your studio with Helen Watson. It is when we were considering you for the *Francis Bacon to Paula Rego* exhibition of 2012. And we found you working in your large bedroom with an easel in the corner and a painting on the go. We had a really interesting talk about your work and then went through to the kitchen where your Mum was feeding your baby daughter in her high chair. I loved the visit for so many reasons. It was like witnessing the height of creativity on display. You didn't let the lack of a studio stop you from painting and the help and support from your family was really wonderful to see. Then there were the paintings themselves – a kind of surreal still-life series you were producing at the time which looked like they'd come from another planet. Can you reflect a little on this for us please?

MM: I loved meeting you, too! When we met, exciting things were really starting to happen for me with my work, and despite being a new mother, I also had a lot of momentum. It felt very important for me not to lose my sense of self when I had a baby, as I had seen happen with so many incredible artists I know. We were in the unique position of staying with my parents while we were saving a deposit for our first home, so having family members around, including my beloved Gran to help with my baby daughter, certainly meant that I could keep a foot in the door with my work in a way that simply wouldn't have been possible otherwise. My family have always encouraged and believed in my work and I'm very fortunate in that sense.

RP: I have always been a big admirer of your fantasy still-life series which you call *Dreamscapes*. Can you tell us a little about what inspired you to create them and what process enables you to reach the final image? Do you make preliminary sketches or is it all out of your head?

MM: Thank you Robert. I'm a child of the eighties and grew up on Jim Henson movies like *Labyrinth* which left a lasting visual impact. I have always had a deep fascination with how our subconscious experience of the world can be manifested visually, and this body of work was very much my exploration of that. I began making small sculptures, which were adapted from found objects that I would the set up in compositions and photograph, almost like stage sets and then use the reference photo as a basis for the painting. I was aiming for a very tangible sculptural quality in these works. Many of the paintings in that series were very large as I wanted them to feel like alternate realities that the viewer could almost imagine walking into.

RP: The *Dreamscape* series appears to have ended around 2017 and a new series of landscape have emerged to take their place. They seem to be both rooted in the mountain scenery of the Lake District where you live, and the realm of fantasy. A kind of fusion of the two. Does that sound accurate to you and can you expand and tell us what inspired you to paint them please? I'm also keen to know what you feel initiated the change?

MM: I grew up in rural Cumbria in the middle of nowhere, surrounded by the Howgill Fells. Home life was often intense. I have a severely autistic younger brother, and as my parents were concentrating on caring for him, I would be out playing for hours in the countryside, often alone when I wasn't at school. These fells in the backgrounds felt almost like quiet guardians and I would often look to them and imagine other worlds up there. Prior to formal art education I would often paint and draw landscapes, but I turned away from these initially as I felt the pull towards my *Dreamscape* series. However, the drama, light and sculptural feel of rural Cumbria was always evident to me in that body of work, albeit in a much less obvious way.

A fusion of both literal depiction of landscape and the realm of fantasy and experience of place is exactly how I would describe my current landscape series. The change of direction was gradual, following the birth of my second child. The truth is, making the *Dreamscapes* (which was a very involved process) had stopped feeling either achievable or right for me at that point. We were in our first home and I was working from home in a smaller space, which meant the scale I was able to work at had dramatically reduced, along with the time I had available to paint.

We had started to walk the 214 Wainwright Fells in the Lake District in 2016 and I felt a pull to explore my experience of this scenery in paint. I did a couple of experimental landscapes which felt both achievable and joyful to me, and I've been following that feeling ever since. I'm also very inspired by the West Coast of Scotland which we visit every year, so this different but equally striking landscape also features heavily in my current work. Similar to my dreamscapes, my landscapes often feel to me like imaginary 'stage sets' or still lives, split second captures of light and moments in time. I'm trying to drive connection with others through the shared experience we have of these special places, the feeling of awe as we experience them.

RP: Looking at these more recent landscape series of yours I was very struck by the sense that they looked like the paintings an AI programme would attempt. But that it would fall short of what you are achieving as it would be missing the human element. What are your thoughts on this? Do you feel it might have something to do with the application of the physical nature of the paint itself? And can you ever imagine a time when AI might make artists redundant?

MM: For me, the magic of art is the human to human connection, the tangibility and materiality of the handmade thing. The visible quirks and the decisions made, the lived experience expressed through raw materials. The romantic in me likes to think that this is irreplaceable. As I work in fine layers of paint, often using glazes and mediums, I can see why you'd make this connection when looking at a digital image of the landscape paintings, however the materiality of the paint in the landscapes is much more evident when viewed in person. AI images tend to homogenise texture and intricacy, the very things that artists often notice and explore in their work. I enjoy clashing textures and methods of paint application in my own work, for example. I'm probably not alone in getting right up close to study the surface when I'm drawn to a painting in 'real life'! That's not to say that AI won't become more sophisticated in this regard over time.

I've personally never used AI in the creation of my work. My feeling is that real, heartfelt work, born out of the human experience and expressed through traditional materials and techniques will become more important than ever, the further we advance down this road. I can see us as a society turning even more towards the handmade, in-person connection that a captivating, original work of art can offer.

RP: I suspect you are right about that! Do you have a sense of where your work is leading you in the future? Is there something you have yet to say which you feel you haven't yet tackled?

MM: I'm really enjoying the journey I'm on, learning and adapting along the way and letting my paintings surprise me. Like most artists, I'm constantly looking around the corner to what's next and trying to produce something I haven't achieved yet. Connection with others is increasingly important to me, for all the aforementioned reasons, and if my work opens up those connections and conversations, that make me happy. I have a tendency to overwork my paintings so I'm constantly battling that and aiming for more instinct and spontaneity.

Alongside my oil paintings, I'm enjoying working in watercolour to help tap into that immediacy, and to trust the medium. I'd never say never to returning to some more *Dreamscapes* if and when the time is right, but for now I'll continue to follow what I feel a pull to paint, and what feels joyful, exciting and right.

**Interview completed 6 January 2025**