

# Robert Priseman Interviews

## Simon Burton

RP: Thank you so much for agreeing to this interview Simon. We first met in 2010 at Huddersfield Art Gallery and Museum at your solo exhibition *Black Swan, Blue Woman*. It was a compelling exhibition, full of brooding, powerful and quite mysterious paintings. Your work from that period has been described as being “figurative painting that treads a line between classical, abstraction and magic realism.” I would say that is quite an accurate description, yet I would add that they appear as fragments of dreams. I wonder if you can tell us a little bit about those paintings? What were they communicating for you? And what led you to produce them?

SB: That show seems such a long time ago. You are right, that although the paintings seemed to be a scene of something they were most definitely fragmentary like things being held in time. This fragmentation along with other devices in the paintings were concerned with hampering and complicating visibility in order to destabilise vision. The paintings were representational compositions that were all about leading the viewer to a zone where vision was paramount but somehow out of reach. The representational images existed like memories through shadowy, insubstantial isolated fragments. This makes it sound as though the paintings are a consequence of strategy, but this is not the case. I have always made paintings that seek rather than impose meaning. These paintings in *Black Swan, Blue Woman* (in reference to Nassim Nicholas Taleb’s ‘Black Swan theory’ (an unpredictable event)) were laden with image, they were also (and are probably much more) a consequence of a culmination of accident, uncertainty, frustration, chance and error. I guess the images that remained after the making of the paintings act like nodes of meaning, points where one can join things together. The image can act like an anchor and in this case in a field of uncertainty.

RP: In the past your paintings were often produced over the surfaces of older paintings. Works which had been discarded and then rescued in order to create grounds for new paintings. This created a sense of archaeology, a kind of layered history. For me they seemed to represent a layering of thought. Over the past few years your work has evolved away from figuration and your former working method, yet still seems to maintain this concept of a layered past. What prompted this change of direction? And do you feel your work still speaks to the same core message or has this evolved in a new direction?

SB: I have always and remain committed to the construction of paintings; the formal and material aspects of making being a primary principle. This ‘layered history’ and ‘layering of thought’ is probably at the centre of my practice. It is both a material activity, the layering of

paint on a surface and a type of consciousness where internal and external ideas collide, creating the self. I guess instability, nature of change and uncertainty is perhaps a principle subject. This fragility of the subject, is the subject. Nothing exists in my paintings without having been excavated. This could be quite literal, in the sense that layers of paint can be removed to create a form or image, often leading to a fragile surface or disrupted picture.

Often compositions are initiated by an excavated thought or idea, that I have held in my head for some time. In the past (and I am sure will return) this has manifested as a figurative painting. But currently, you are right, there has been a less narrative structure, the work has become much more emblematic. The last three series of painting *Monad heads*, *Stelae* and *Plumblines* have been more like motifs, or markers to pass by, or spaces to dwell.

I don't think the work has a change in direction, however, you are right to recognise that the manifestation is a bit different. The more recent paintings have emphasised the material aspect more, but they still remain as echoes of the human. For example the *monad heads*, have a coalescing of material to create a central consciousness or head form within a mass of the material and the *stelae* paintings have a literal uprightness suggesting the alert nature of being.

You ask if the paintings still have a core message? But I don't prescribe to painting as a form of messaging. At its best, it is probably an encounter.

RP: I like the idea of an "encounter" with art. If I may, I would like to ask you a little about your childhood and what inspired you to become an artist? You were born in 1973 in Yorkshire. Yet as I understand it you were not born into a family of artists or academics. What do you think stimulated your early interest in art? And what motivated you to take it up full-time?

SB: I don't think there was one particular moment of inspiration that pushed me to try to make art, but I am aware that I felt like it was both challenging and enlightening for me. I knew that it offered me a way to channel both emotional and intellectual curiosity. I didn't find it to be restrictive and the discipline seemed to have to be internally felt in order to progress.

I think there is no doubt that the time and place that you are born and the experiences that you have inform you and the work that you make. My first impulses for my early work I think came out of seeing the landscape, countryside, littered with careless deposits of waste. The area I grew up in had things dumped everywhere. Piles of old machinery even piles of TV's you name it, and if you dug under the surface, you would unearth a pile from the past, like bottles dumped in the Victorian times. As children were aware that this was a dire

relationship to the world but also this was a source for our imagination..... what could we do with it.

RP: The layered landscape of your childhood seems somehow evocative of your painting today.

I often think of you as being quite a reclusive artist, who keeps his own council and values his privacy. This is then somehow balanced with a need to show the work you produce. I sense it is a core dynamic that many genuine artists have. That they essentially wish to communicate with the world through their work, rather than alongside their work. Does this seem true to you? And how do you manage the desire to spend time quietly in the studio alongside promoting what you do?

SB: It certainly does! I don't manage this well ..... it seems to be one or the other! I haven't found a satisfactory ability to do both simultaneously.

RP: Thinking about the work itself, I wonder if you can talk us through how you typically produce a painting? Where would you say your ideas come from? Do they emerge in the mind's eye, or evolve through a series of real life studies for example? Do you then use a set range of paints for each work? And how long would you usually spend on making a painting?

SB: In the studio I work on many paintings all at once, I probably have thirty to fifty paintings hanging around, gestating, but only a small proportion of these would be completed in a year.

I work on various sizes from as small as 30cm to large works. I use a few different types of support but mainly Belgian linen or a panel if I fancy a harder surface (on smaller works). Mostly I work exclusively in oil paint, cherishing its mutability. I work on the paintings upright and get paint ready using turps and linseed oil. In the past I have used other additives but now I rely only on these, the rest is an unnecessary distraction. Having just said that; a contradiction is that, recently, I have made a number of works that have become slightly more constructed using waste studio material, like dust that is always available in a studio, mixed in the paint.

I tend to work right across the plane of the painting and work in layers and in any one painting many layers are accumulated. These may be a layer of depictions or a line of colour that can swell to create a whole plane. I think, this is, in a way a principle content of the work. The layers and their mutability through time, the cancelling and obscuring of the previous, creates a type of density of material and meaning. There are choices involved in covering (and sometimes complete obliteration); concealing and revealing must be central to

any possible meaning. Image is part of this, discovering, the recognition of an image as the painting progresses, things arrived at rather than imposed.

Just as painting seems to become an abstract field of material it is at this very moment when it can push the consciousness (like a dream moment) and the making toward the Proustian labyrinth of recollections, echoes and associations. This is painting at its best, both the thing itself and yet not itself.

RP: Thank you so much Simon.

**Interview completed 29 January 2025**