

Robert Priseman Interviews

Olivia Browne

RP: Hello Olivia, thank you so much for doing this interview. I wondered if you could tell us a little about your upbringing? Do you remember your first encounters with art and what subsequently inspired you to go to art school and pursue a career in the arts?

OB: My roots are in Wiltshire. I grew up close to Avebury Stone Circle but a few months after I was born, my family moved to Togo and I spent my formative years there. I attended Madame Ayika's nursery and made my own dolls from clothes pegs and scraps of *pagnes* fabric. I was raised in a large Catholic family where the arts were really encouraged. Visiting the Prado in Madrid with my Dad as a teenager had a big impact, as did helping out in his makeshift darkroom at home. As a teenager I had a brief period of work experience at the sculpture foundry of Richard Cowdy and that left a deep impression on me. It was a very bohemian live/work space and the team sat down to share lunch together every day. I later studied Art History at Sussex and whilst there, I set up an art society with a friend organising art workshops, life drawing sessions and exhibitions. We had access to a darkroom and some great exhibition spaces and Brighton was a fantastic place to be in the early 90s. That definitely led to an interest in facilitating workshops and curating. I eventually trained to become an art teacher, but before that I worked in product design and skills training in the craft sector for *Wola Nani* and other NGOs in Cape Town. At the same time, I worked in an administrative role at Greatmore Studios which had just been founded in the late 90s as part of the Triangle Network that includes the Bag Factory in Johannesburg and Gasworks in London.

RP: That's really fascinating Olivia. I'm often struck by how being an artist is more of a way of being in the world. That one isn't just a painter, teacher or sculptor, but can be several things at once. Each informed by a core approach we have to life and creativity. One of your core outputs is making collages by hand, primarily using lifestyle magazines. Can you tell us a little about this, about your working practice? How do you approach a new work and decide what kind of image you will make? And what do you hope to communicate through your work?

OB: At the most basic level, I am processing images from everyday experiences, memories and dreams and I am trying to communicate in images something I can't articulate with words. My work is largely driven by the materials I collect, so each series uses different source material as a starting point. I work on several pieces at a time and with ongoing series and projects working in parallel. I enjoy overlapping fragments and working in layers, sometimes overpainting sections in oils. Borders and edges are very important to me.

Increasingly, I work in a square format which is compositionally more challenging but lends itself well to a modular approach and I like to play with the aesthetics of a polaroid photo with its trademark white borders and out of focus edges. Grids interest me too. The billboards that I source a lot of my papers from have these distinct sections, and there's often a mismatch or misalignment between sections as one is weather-worn and exposes a layer underneath or they are faded by the sun. I like the idea that with grids, there can be a shared language between the artworks, so that they have the potential for working as a much larger structure made up of modular parts. Sometimes those connections are only seen once work is posted to Instagram. I sometimes wonder how many artists have shifted to working in squares 'for the gram'. The grid is also a patchwork and I identify strongly with that.

The fact that I have chosen collage as my preferred medium is not surprising. My art practice is autobiographical in that collage utilises papers collected from a particular geographical location or specific time frame. I am currently in a state of deep grief and that has resulted in a sort of identity crisis and a feeling of being on the edge of something new, but in limbo.

RP: You raise so many interesting things here. I haven't heard the expression 'for the gram' before, but I really like it. It really resonates and kind of indicates that Instagram itself has become a kind of commissioner of art works – by dictating the parameters for how art is made for it. You mention your current state of deep grief and how this has led to “a sort of identity crisis.” It's not surprising when you lose someone important in your life that it will cause a major shift in how you feel, and then attempt to navigate the world again within a new paradigm. It cuts to the very heart of what you say about trying to communicate something without words. And I guess at the most fundamental level, that is what we are all trying to achieve in the visual arts. Otherwise we would be poets or writers. One thing that has really begun to fascinate me, and this relates to feelings, is that you have an analogue practice in the new digital age. I have a sense that the human or what defines our humanity, will become more significant in coming years. How do you think analogue works and work made by hand more generally will be seen in society as AI evolves?

OB: To be honest, I haven't fully got my head around the impact AI will have yet. At first, I found it funny. I made an AI-generated family Christmas card using some basic prompts and descriptors and the result was really dark and eerie, everything a bit off scale and our cats disembodied. Working with found images I think a lot about image appropriation and the law of fair use, not just in the sense of what is legal but in terms of what is morally right as an artist. AI throws up so much. There will be moral and legal repercussions as Copyright is under threat. At the moment, the onus is on artists to opt out of their images being used as opposed to permission being sought.

I spend a lot of time looking at art on a screen so when I am in a gallery and get the opportunity to get up close to a collage and see different papers, for example the reflective

qualities of photographic paper versus matt newspaper print, it's fantastic. I recently saw *Peter Kennard: Archive of Dissent* at Whitechapel gallery and it got me thinking about that. I agree with you and I think people will seek out authenticity in art in the same way that hipsters search out the most authentic food experiences. Someone told me recently that their artist friend summed it up as 'AI can make the Art but not the Artist.'

RP: Joseph Beuys saw part of his practice as being a teacher. And you have been a lecturer for a number of years now. And from what I can tell, there is an important element of creativity in education. In both education and making art one can observe and reflect society and hope to transmit ideas to them. What is most fascinating to you in working with communities? And do you feel you have a core belief system you are communicating?

OB: Prior to teaching, I worked with community groups, often as an outsider and on the edge of those communities. Within those roles the main drive was to identify products that were marketable in order for the income generation projects to become sustainable. However, it was also important to recognise the therapeutic potential of low-impact craft production and extremely rewarding to see benefits that were not just financial, but practical, psychological and emotional too. Working now as an old(ish) art teacher I try to reflect back to the young adults I teach what their work is about as their art projects develop. There is a lot of guidance and confidence-building in art teaching and I see myself as a facilitator. I hope to challenge my students to take risks and recognise the need for creative problem-solving. This is definitely a skill that should be seen as transferable to other areas of life.

RP: Which artists inspire you today?

OB: Recently I have been looking at Dean Fox and his Édouard Vuillard inspired palette and Yamini Nayar for her spatial illusions. I keep returning to Richard Hamilton, particularly his interiors. I admire the way that he creates depth in them and that is something that I strive to achieve in my own work.

There is a really strong global community of collage artists online and I have made some solid connections that have resulted in friends in real life. Richard Saltoun Gallery has had a great run of exhibitions in recent years and I've seen Helen Chadwick and Penny Slinger there. Penny Slinger's 2024 exhibition *Exorcism: Inside Out* was an incredible, immersive experience and the first time I have engaged with collage in an audio visual format. The entire gallery was papered with images of a decaying mansion and alongside the animated collages on screen was Slinger's voice so the whole experience was hypnotic and very memorable.

RP: Thank you so much for sharing some of your thoughts with us Olivia, I have really enjoyed it.

Interview completed on 18 January 2025