

Robert Priseman

Interviews Annabel Dover

RP: Did you always want to be an artist or was it something that emerged later in life?

AD: I think I always loved drawing and writing and I wanted to do something to do with these. I wasn't really sure what form it might take.

I loved writing stories and making drawings. I really loved some of my mother's books:

Queen Victoria's Sketchbook by Marina Warner, a book on Stanley Spencer she had and one Elizabeth Blackadder that she got in Edinburgh, I really loved seeing Blackadder's work in Edinburgh and that and Edinburgh Rock were my favourite things of that holiday (I think I was maybe 6). My father had a serious case of Balmoralism so we sometimes went.

Like many people my age I *loved All Creatures Great and Small* on television and wanted to be a vet. I didn't like the idea of putting animals down though and after our vet shot himself I was less enamoured of the idea.

RP: Oh dear! I can see why that might put you off!

You have quite a quirky and often surreal imagination. I wonder if you can reflect on that and if how have any idea where it comes from?

AD: Hahaha oh I don't know. I love connections between things and find them magical. I don't really believe in a god anymore (I did as a child) and I wish I did but I love examining things and learning about them. I do feel sad that I'll die knowing so little about the world and everything in it.

RP: That's interesting. I tend to think of God as a force beyond our comprehension, as something behind the great unknowns of life. Like why are we here and why do we even have life and death in the first place?

I'm curious, do you tend to see images in your mind's eye and then seek to realise them, or do you arrive at images through some other means?

AD: I do see images when I fall asleep - do you? Wouldn't it be lovely if we could photograph those? I see so very many incredibly beautiful and interesting things every day that I never really know what to do with them.

RP: Ah, so it's more about a sense of wonder at the world we are in! Would you say there is a central message to your work, and if so, what might that be? Or is it more an expression of who you are made manifest?

AD: I don't think there's a central message- after doing my MA at Central St Martins lots of people viewing the paintings came up to me and told me things about themselves. I really loved that. I think people's stories are fascinating.

It was a 6ft x 4ft cubicle of 6x6 inch oil on gesso paintings. I'd made one a day for a year and they depicted other people's stuff: photographs, objects, newspaper clippings that I'd collected working for an antiques dealer and doing house clearances. I'd felt unable to throw these personal things away until I'd commemorated them.

RP: So I guess more specifically, what you feel is a sense of wonder at the human presence. I'm reminded of a series of photographs you took of the inside of your neighbours' old house after they had died. They were very powerful and evocative. I think you used a torch to light the rooms.

What do you find to be the hardest thing about being an artist? And conversely, what inspires you and gives you the most joy?

AD: Oh gosh, well I love painting in oil but haven't for years because it's such a physical act. I guess depressive thoughts stop me too and I sometimes feel "what's the point?" Sorry, that's a depressing statement. I think Instagram puts me off a bit and artists endlessly putting images of their work up. It feels like being on broadcast mode. It reminds me of the Dawn Chorus. I love the Dawn Chorus actually but Instagram can feel a bit overwhelming hearing everyone singing their song (myself included). I do like seeing the things in nature that inspire artists more sometimes. I think it feels more personal and as if something is being shared. I hope that doesn't sound too bitter!!

RP: Not at all. I don't use social media and I know quite a few younger artists are turning away from it because, as one put it to me a few years back "it can feel a bit like a mental prison." I think in the age we live now with an over abundance of images and AI growing in importance, we stand at a crossroads. Where artists are re-evaluating what it is to make art. Art is slowly becoming more a reflection on what it is to be a human, a kind of philosophical meditation, than a means to decorate churches, banks and art museums. I hope so at least.

Are there any artists living or dead who you draw inspiration from?

AD: Oh gosh so many. I love Fra Angelico's cell paintings. Roxy Walsh is so clever. She's sort of like the opposite of an advert...the images creep in and last forever in your imagination. They're so subtle and beautiful. Justine Moss' work is so nuanced and lovely and always changing. Schiaparelli, Sharon Kivland's writing, Laure Prouvoste, Nadia Hebson who explores complex ideas in a playful and beautiful way. How Cathy Lomax explores ideas and connects writing and images. She's incredibly generous with artists and open to ideas. Her work is always changing. I love the way Alli Sharma paints, Ruth Philo too. Meret Oppenheimer, Helen Frankenthaler, Paul Becker's observations of women and Alex Pearl's humour and playful poetic connections.

RP: Thank you so much Annabel, it's been a pleasure.

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