Robert Priseman Interviews
Lewis Chamberlain

RP: I would like to begin by covering a little background on you if I may? You were born in East Yorkshire in 1966 and in 1975 became the youngest artist ever to exhibit at the Royal Academy Summer Exhibition. Your parents were artists, and your younger brother became an artist too. You engaged in the family tradition with art until you went to secondary school. Then you gave art up completely, I think partly because you didn't enjoy the attention it bought. You only picked it up again when you were 18, when you applied and were accepted into the Slade School of Art. Since graduating you have worked full-time as an artist.

Can you tell us a little about your childhood and what it was like to grow up in an artistic family? What was it about drawing and painting which attracted you back at 18? And do you think there is a conflict in wishing to be on your own quietly making art and the attention it brings if you are any good at it?

LC: Although my family all made art I'm not sure I'd say I came from a particularly "artistic" family. My dad taught art at the college in Hull (as did my mum, briefly, in Leeds). We visited art galleries and owned art books but I don't remember many conversations about art. It was, out of necessity, also a way of making a living and, therefore, not always much fun. But I did develop a genuine interest in drawing, I think mostly as a way of recording things I found. I grew up in a village near Hull in the 70's - early 80's in a flat, fairly bleak landscape, outwardly unremarkable. Big fields, small woods. Canals. Lots of ditches and hedges and pylons. And endless greenhouses. And the River Humber (over a mile wide at that point). I spent a lot of time in that landscape, often wishing I lived somewhere more exciting (as did, I imagine, most kids growing up in rural England in the 70's). There wasn't, I guess, a lot to do. But, despite being aware of the limitations of the place, I don't recall being bored. I found stuff. Old pottery, coins, bones, bird skulls, insects, shells. A message in a bottle from Holland. And plastic. The banks of the Humber were covered with stuff, mostly plastic in faded shades. I never found a body but they did turn up. And I drew all this stuff. Sometimes I'd bring it home to work on, other times I'd draw on the spot. I liked the strangeness of these things and their incongruity in that landscape. I remember fishing down there and the thrill of catching something bright and silvery from those murky brown depths. That's something that's lived with me, the idea that if you look hard enough there's always something to discover, something unexpected, something to marvel over. A reward. Something with meaning.

Yes, I showed at the RA when I was a kid (9, 10 and 11). I was interviewed for tv - a helicopter visited our primary school. I hated the whole experience. I did stop drawing for a

while, though not entirely and not because of attention - I grew up, moved to secondary school and found other interests. I drew much less. They weren't a means to an end, they weren't "pictures." They didn't really become "pictures" again until some years after art school in London.

I don't honestly know how much of a conflict there is between working alone and gaining attention. Personally I just want to work. I don't go to exhibitions or openings and rarely show my work. I do get attention through social media but that's very easy to separate myself from. But I'm older now. Back in my 20's I was very different. I probably wanted all the attention I could get and I wouldn't begrudge anyone else of that age who wanted the same. You have to meet people and make a name for yourself while you can. You have to do all the shit that young people do.

RP: Broadly speaking one can observe that your work falls into two main categories; pencil drawings and oil paintings, all of which are meticulously observed and executed. They are usually still-lives of toys and small figures one might find on train set panoramas or in children's nursery's. They are arranged in quite deliberate ways which often indicates some kind of story is being played out. And they convey quite a profound sense of the surreal. Conversely you also produce works based around your daughter, usually standing in a lit room at night or observing some kind of arrangement in front of her. And whilst not still-life, they have the quality of being so.

When you attended the Slade, you chose to work in the life studio and not in the Narrative Painting department. I find this quite intriguing given the qualities of your work. As your work appears to be narrative and yet is based on still-life. I wondered if you can speak to this please?

LC: For the Slade, I began, as everyone did back then, in the life studios (the 'F' studios) but moved out as soon as possible into the 'Narrative' studio. I think 'Narrative' was just a generalised term they used for anyone who didn't do life drawing, abstract painting or sculpture. Traditional Slade life drawing was like an extension of school - set hours and instructions. Not for me. Not at 18 having just moved to London. I was done with that side of education. The life studios were then run by Euan Uglow. I don't remember having more than the briefest of conversations with him but I did go on to appreciate his work, as well as many of those painters on which the Slade had built its reputation.

I haven't painted for a few years now. I will again, possibly quite soon. Though probably not very soon. I've no particular dislike of painting and no urgent desire to use only pencil. And I haven't experienced, at least in recent memory, any incidents of horrific life changing oil paint trauma. But I've never been interested in process. Or technique. I just want to work, all the time if at all possible, and I was increasingly finding the painting process - mixing

colours, preparing surfaces, allowing for drying time etc - restricting and tedious. Of course that's largely my own fault for working in a way that is often overly cautious and necessitates an amount of preparation. If I was more spontaneous (and less concerned everything was about to go horribly wrong) I'm sure the whole painting process would be very different. But my work is not spontaneous. I'm slow, often painfully and impractically slow, and I find making art relentlessly difficult. It's a struggle - everything about it. I struggle with space, with time and with money - I know, we all do. I also know my work has, to a greater or lesser extent, developed as a response/reaction to the restrictions placed upon it and this has inevitably shaped it's evolution. Sometimes, I'm sure, for the better. Other times not.

I do enjoy colour. And I enjoy working with colour. I certainly don't see things purely tonally. I don't, personally, find myself in many situations where a subject has to be, specifically, either drawn or painted. I tend to draw because I want to draw or paint because I want to paint - the subject matter rarely determines the means by which I'll portray it. That said, last night I stood outside and looked at our street in the dusk - everything was subdued in a strange, quite lurid monotone. Little stood out tonally other than the lights in people's windows. It wasn't entirely undrawable but I'm sure paint would have described it more thoroughly than pencil.

The first time I remember using toys in my work was back in the early 90's. I'd moved to Brixton and was living in a flat across from the Brixton Academy. That - the view from my window - instinctively became my subject matter. But the window itself, and it's frame and the walls of my room were of just as much interest (and importance) as what I saw outside. And on the inside things didn't endlessly change. The light remained constant, shadows didn't run away. There was no setting sun and no night and day. So I increasingly worked in artificial light, setting up objects within the flat. I spent several years on a large drawing of a mannequin. Other mannequins came and went as did dolls and, ultimately, a variety of toys and figures. These suggested, to an extent, a human presence. Or, perhaps, something emotionally relatable. I certainly hoped they would help lure the viewer into the world they were now inhabiting.

RP: Many of your paintings and drawings have qualities which are, to me at least, reminiscent of the paintings of Giorgio de Chirico and Balthasar Klossowski de Rola, known as Balthus. But much more intense. Given this sheer intensity your paintings and drawings convey I assume they take an inordinately long time to produce. Can you give us an idea of how long you might typically spend on a work? And are they produced from direct observation or do you ever use photographs as an aid? How would you describe your working process?

LC: I've often used/referenced children's toys, but I don't think this is necessarily because I find the objects themselves to be of any particular interest. They can be, of course, but I

rarely use, for instance, objects of personal attachment or with which I share any sense of personal history. I've said in the past that these things often signify something personally meaningful but I really don't know if that's true insofar as my work goes. They clearly suggest a human presence or, at least, something familiar, something identifiable, something that places the viewer inside the picture. They are also rarely, in themselves, particularly odd or eccentric though the context in which they are used may occasionally make them appear so. Some I find, some I buy, many I make myself. There's rarely a story. By which I mean there's rarely a deliberate narrative. When any objects are placed together, particularly the kind of objects I tend to be drawn to, some kind of narrative will inevitably be suggested. But I generally try keep it ambiguous - I hint at something. I want to lure the viewer in but without providing easy answers. Which I guess isn't particularly nice. I spend a long time setting up my subjects in terms of composition/lighting/positioning etc. But I deliberately avoid constructing anything remotely "realistic." They're badly made, badly put together. They exist momentarily to create a temporary, fleeting, shadowy world and then I move on and they're gone. I'd actually love to do something more permanent with them (currently a possibility) but space and time rarely permit. Lighting is important. I often use dim torchlight and, when possible, illuminate the paper I'm working on with a brighter light simultaneously. The subject matter (the objects I've set up) are always to my side while I work but I now take a number of photographs prior to beginning the drawing, largely because I frequently have to change the lighting around. I used to be dead against working from photos, everything had to be directly from life, but now I'll gladly use any source of information I can get.

RP: Thank you so much for talking with me Lewis, I have found it fascinating. The image I'm left with, is of your younger self sitting on the banks of the Humber Estuary. Collecting washed up plastic and other discarded detritus which you take back home with you and draw. And how, 50 years on, long after you moved away, you took your fascination with you. It is now highly evolved and infinitely more sophisticated, yet at its core, the same. A study of humanity in it's absence.

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