

Annabel Dover Interviews

Ruth Philo

AD: Your work makes me think and feel about light...do you think that's a part of it?

RP: Absolutely! I think colour and light are inextricably bound together so can see what you mean. I'm interested in ideas of painting as experience both for the audience and the painter and maybe an experience that can somehow have some illuminating aspect - not in a grand sense but even just seeing colour in a certain kind of way?

AD: You research a lot don't you? Reading and visiting places that relate to colour?

RP: Yes I suppose I do. I've been doing some residency based work recently, which has been increasingly site specific, so I want to get to know as much as possible about the history uses and cultural connections of that place. Often the time is limited so I do research before I go and on the ground when I get there - picking up on the material and emotional qualities associated with the site. My first job was working for an archaeological unit in Lincolnshire, so I think that the process of excavation that I was familiar with kind of underpins my process with this kind of work. I enjoy making colour swatches when I get there which kind of maps out the colour spectrum.

AD: Do you think an important part of the work is discovering ways colours respond to one another?

RP: Yes this is always a fascination, though I often pare my colours down to use a small interconnected range. In recent work on the pollen paintings, I have been concerned with how colours respond to one another. I used Dorothy Hodges book *The Pollen Loads of the Honeybee* and went to see this and her amazing pollen grain drawing in the collection at Kew. Once I'm painting though, the work becomes intuitive and feels more like a musical improvisation - stopping when the colours coalesce together.

AD: Do you plan your colours?

RP: The source of the colours might be mainly material as on the residencies but there's also an emotionality to colour and once painting, the time, weather, atmosphere and my feelings or emotions at the time become an intuitive, almost unconscious part of it. Recently I painted a Station of a Cross painting for a church in Essex and I was very aware that I wanted to use the emotionality of colour as a driver in what is a geometric abstract painting. Afterwards I also noticed I'd used colour symbolically, though this wasn't planned.

AD: You mention painting as an experience...is painting a unique experience for you and does the medium you use impact the experience?

RP: Yes it is, it might begin with a site or an idea, an experience of landscape or an emotion, but as soon as I start to paint the process plays its part, building up and paring down - often the painting feels like a palimpsest of the time spent painting. Inner and outer worlds, conscious and unconscious elements blend and it is only afterwards that I fully realise what the painting is about. The media definitely impact the experience, especially with their various qualities in terms of blending and overlaying colour as well as their different drying times. I enjoy working in oil, acrylic and watercolour.

AD: You travel a lot Ruth. I know you've just been to visit the Rainbow Lake. Where are you now?

RP: I think place and walking are at the core of my work - art and life all one. I love to be immersed in a landscape and notice things, a particular colour, surface, sound, atmosphere ... it feels essential and draws me into thinking of the magic of life here on this planet. Recently I've been travelling more and my latest trip was to the Yucatan peninsula in Mexico, then on to Belize and Guatemala, experiencing the landscape and cultures and meeting local people. I was lucky to be able to fly over the the Great Blue Hole off the coast of Belize, a large marine sinkhole off the Belize Barrier Reef Reserve which was an amazing experience. I also went swimming in Cenote Azul, an inland sinkhole and the Rainbow Lake, a freshwater lagoon at Bacalar where you can see 7 shades of blue, although it had been raining that day so I could only discern 4.

AD: How does this impact your relationship with colour?

RP: Visiting different places is hugely important to me, the different qualities of light and atmosphere and colour in the landscape especially through natural pigments as well as plants and vegetation, also the way that colour is used culturally in local buildings, people's clothing and foods.

AD: And maybe more specifically is this something you find easiest to communicate through painting?

RP: All of this naturally goes into my painting and feels a deeply rich experience. It is at its best when I can spend time in a place absorbing its atmosphere through working on an artist residency. Having enough time to slowly take things in, looking at the colour at different times of day and in different weather conditions is important ... in a way my paintings try and capture something of the essence of that place as an abstraction.

Darwin took Werner's Nomenclature of Colour with him on HMS Beagle. This resulted in some beautifully poetic descriptions of flora and fauna (among other things) in the ship's log. This

language was used to describe new and previously unseen (to Western eyes) wonders. Photography stepped in to replace these written descriptions...

AD: How do you feel about photography in terms of capturing colour?

RP: I love Werner's *Nomenclature of Colour* and it's so interesting that Darwin took it with him. It's beautiful as a material object and poetic in its descriptions. I've always been fascinated by any form of colour chart, especially if they are hand painted - you understand colour as a painter through your body as well as your eyes, memories of colour and all their associations. Poets somehow can distill these experiences into words which can conjure up a sense of those experiences. Photography seems to do something different, photographers can create beautiful images but for me there is always an emptiness in a photograph ... it doesn't have what I need, it doesn't feel so direct. I often paint colour swatches when I visit places or make small abstract watercolours. I also take photographs, but use them together as an aid memoire to bring me back to an internal memory of being in that place rather than as something to work from directly.

AD: I wonder too if there's something in your painting that engages with the energetic essence of a colour?

RP: I love the idea of engaging with the 'energetic essence of a colour' - yes absolutely, like a perfume, trying to distill it for others to experience it too. I'm fascinated by the power of colour in our lives, how colour can make us feel, how it's so much part of memory and also how it can be used for wellbeing. It is so hard to pin down in words ... a couple of years ago I began a podcast *A Geography of Colour* where I spoke with different painters about their individual relationship with colour, attempting to capture what was important about it for them. In my painting it is at the heart of what I do - trying to make something of colour as an abstraction.

AD: I love your idea of "painting that engages with the energetic essence of a colour."

RP: I might have only talked about colour materially but I think colour is so powerful metaphysically and can hold so many feelings and memories and open up emotional connections and states - though this aspect is perhaps only understood long afterwards.

Interview completed on 6 March 2025