

Robert Priseman

Interviews Karl Bielik

RP: Hello Karl. You work on up to 30 paintings at a time, applying thick layers of paint in a visceral, confident manner. It has led many artists describe you as a “painter’s painter.”

KB: Thanks, not sure about the confident bit - that depends on the day, the mental state, the physical state, doubt can be a worthwhile studio companion as long as it doesn’t hang around too long. I work on a lot of paintings so they can each have time to breathe and settle into becoming whatever they will be. It is an attempt to stop any blocks or overworking, when a painting reaches a point where something interesting is going on then I just leave it alone for a while and move on to another piece... The paintings can be hanging around the studio untouched for many months but always in view and then at some point they become finished or I carry on. It’s a carpet bombing approach, something is bound to hit if I work on enough pieces.

RP: That’s such an interesting description. It reminds me of the way a tree works, like an oak. It doesn’t move around, but quietly grows and drops huge numbers of acorns. Only a few of which will grow, but when they do, they too become acorns.

I understand you have a Hungarian heritage. Can you tell us a little bit about this and was your upbringing in any way chaotic or transitory?

KB: An old oak tree is how increasingly how I feel. Yes, my Father Attila is Hungarian and left Budapest with his elder Brother Laszlo after the 1956 uprising failed, leaving the rest of his family and his country behind carrying only a briefcase full of cigarettes...a pretty monumental thing to happen to a 20 year old.

There was no real chaos for me, a large group of Hungarians settled in Bradford as it seemed like a decent place to live and work in the late 50’s and that’s where he met my Mother Jean. Being half Hungarian played a big part in my childhood, we would spend Sundays at the Hungarian club in Bradford where the people had great style and life about them, quiffs, suits, smoke, music, chess, pool, dancing...it all felt exotic and way more interesting than the English side of the family. As I got older I wanted to know more about how they all came here, what happened in 56, I talked to them, asked questions, read about it, watched documentaries, spent a lot of time in Hungary including having a solo show there in 2010. Images from books on the Uprising and photographs I have taken there do creep in and out of my work and have done for years, but as with many things in my paintings they tend to get obliterated/hidden in the making.

RP: I wonder if you can tell us a little about your earliest memories of being engaged in painting and who influenced you?

KB: My earliest memories of being engaged with art are not early. The only art in my parents' house was an A3 print of *The Haywain* which had a clock in the middle of it. I am not from a family where art was a thing. Bowie, Roxy, Pistols etc album covers, music, clothes and attitude were the first engagement with art for me - I left school at 16 to be an apprentice electrician, which I did for four years, before leaving that after qualifying and going to study Graphic Design for four more years. I have had no formal fine art training but had a couple of great tutors on that course who let me kind of drift in to different areas like film making, pottery, animation, screen printing, collage and painting. At some point they recommended for me to check out Kurt Schwitters and from there, like marijuana leads to heroin, I got into Rauchenberg, Johns, Guston, De Kooning, Beuys, Dada amongst many others.

It took me a lot longer to start painting though, it wasn't something I did after leaving that course - I spent quite a few years scraping around on the dole in Bradford, making the odd collage and writing a bit but essentially treading dark waters. In 1996 I moved to Prague on a whim and it was there that I started painting properly at the age of 30, by properly I mean showing up every day to get on with stuff and not just noodling. Initially I mainly used found materials and household paints and spray paint – no “real” art materials for quite a few years until I started working in oils in 2002. Those initial years of working with found/used materials have never really gone away and are becoming prevalent again in my practice.

RP: As well as painting, you are also in a band. Which weirdly reminded me of Derek Jarman and how his creativity was expressed through film making, painting and his garden at Dungeness. It is like creativity is a spring which emerges out of us. Yet it can manifest in different forms. Does this ring true for you, do you feel music, painting and curating are all different expressions of the same source?

KB: Music is something I love dearly and I had also wanted to make something but had no real idea what or how - a friend of mine announced out of the blue that he had written an album and he upgraded his recording gear and gave me his old Tascam 4 track and I decided I was going to do the same - so with having never played an instrument before I got together a rag tag bunch of cheap found and loaned instruments and wrote 14 songs and made a CD - This was an incredibly lo-fi cd even by my standards, I gave this out to friends and a few of them were musicians one of them suggested we learn the songs and perform the 14 tracks – we rehearsed for a few months and put on a one night only gig in the back room of a bar in Hackney supported by legendary poet Jock Scot. I got a taste for it and the band was born - a six piece, 3 musicians/3 non musicians and I started writing songs for real - they were and are still very raw and to a degree naive like elements of my paintings - these lo fi recordings would then be worked on by the more skilled musicians in the band - it was pretty wide

ranging from complete novices to classically trained with me at the helm – we played live more and got signed and released a couple of albums on that label and a host of 7” inch singles which were remixed by the likes of Andrew Weatherall and Scritti Politti. The split between painting and music was 50/50 at the time while we were gigging but has since become much more loaded toward painting since I stopped playing live after my daughter was born 10 years ago. The music still carries on and Lark have just released a new record in January 2025, but I don’t play live anymore or have any permanent band members, I ask people to play something and they do it and send me it and I mix it when putting the songs together. It’s an unusual way of working that works for me.

Is it the same spring it comes from – I guess so - Music can be a quicker to satisfy than painting - songs hit quicker with me and the performance aspect takes it to a different place. The one thing that is similar is that I feel and want to feel like a beginner in both art forms, both are a struggle and a thing of beauty with no real set idea of what I am going to make when I start out. I don’t differentiate between the two, they are both me making some art.

As for curating... it’s like arranging some beautiful furniture in a nice room...once you’ve got artists and have the room. The way I do it brings artists together on an even platform, it is a hopeful arena. It is work but running Terrace Gallery gives more than it takes... there are so many painters out there that don’t get much of a look in and hang around on the edge of the art world, its a good place to be and I want Terrace to hang around in that place.

RP: I love your description of curating and also your reasoning and belief that there is a lot of talent out there that doesn’t get much of a look in. That completely resonates with me and the reason I have put on so many shows in the past.

Moving on a little, in his 335 BC work Poetics Aristotle explores the thesis that performative poetry enables our sensitivities to be eased, specifically how tragedy can enable emotional catharsis. Is there a sense of this process at work for you when you are making music or painting?

KB: Is it cathartic? Maybe, I just play with what I’ve got - I work through good or bad moods or states of life and mind... I turn up, as Tom said “Get behind the Mule” it’s one thing I believe in doing is getting in there and working - regardless of failure or success or acclaim or whatever - keep the fire burning, something might happen if you continue to stoke the fire. I don’t make work out side of the studio - I might have the odd idea - a line from a poem or film that I use - or a photograph I take outside the studio that gets used in a painting but it’s really about being in there and working - this is most likely out of my working class northern/son of a Hungarian refugee background - to go to work.

Music or more accurately lyric writing can drift towards personal self-expression and a lot of my writing does but I tend to distort the message by deliberately abstracting it and quite frequently using cut up lyrics and reassembling or just turning the mic on and pressing record and seeing what comes out of the subconscious - Not always a great idea but it can shift things somewhere unexpected, like painting with your eyes shut.

RP: If I may, I would like to turn to the practical side of things. Your palette appears quite extensive, can you tell us about the paints you use? And more specifically how they resonate with you?

KB: I use a huge variety of paints, from Old Holland, Wallace Seymour and Micheal Harding at the pricey end to cheap oils bought online and the UK low cost brands like Lukas and Winton alongside enamel, household, bitumen and spray paint. I can't describe how they resonate with me - muted greens and oranges, bright pink, light blues I veer toward and but also work with the unwanted ones left in the Quality Street box - the yellows, darker/brighter blues and reds - I find these harder to work with and it's more of a struggle to see what I can get out of them. Coming across older paintings and seeing what paint, how much, what colours and how you applied years ago can be an eye opener. I try not to have a set palette.

RP: Your wide ranging choice of materials is emblematic of this "carpet bombing" approach to work you describe. Can you tell us how you approach utilising these paints – and what are the practical steps you take when you make a painting? And how long does each work typically take you – if you even know?

KB: It's a bit like working on paper or cardboard or some other inexpensive surface, the mind and arm free up, they care less which sometimes makes for better work, or at least a different flavour... it's the same with paints, the expensive ones hold me back a little, I care about them too much or maybe it's just the tight ass Yorkshireman in me. I cut the paint with Turpentine as well as a self-made mixture of Damar, linseed and turpentine. The supports range from straight forward handmade canvasses or panels through Formica, Glass, Wood, my old bedsheets and clothing, towels and anything that I find on the streets that suggests a way into a painting... These things carry their own and in some cases my history with them. I set up purposeful accidents in the studio, putting small paintings, paper, adverts from art mags underneath larger paintings to see what happens to them, put work outside exposed to the weather, painting and drawing with my 'wrong' hand or my eyes shut as mentioned earlier... one of them hasn't been working that well due to a recent detached retina and has been a bit of an issue but hopefully with one more operation am coming to the end of that very soon.

The timescale on my work can be anything from half an hour to a few years, older works get taken out of my store room or shelving and I rework things quite often... the age old artist storage issues. Recently I took some old works out and one was finished in 1999, reworked again in 2008 and then now will be started again, elements of these older works are sometimes still part of the work but equally I could sand them down or just paint over completely. Paintings need a little living with, plus I like that slowness...so it could be a days work and 3 months hanging in the studio till the next move.

RP: You mentioned earlier about being on the dole for a while then training to be an electrician. Would you describe yourself as working class and would you say this has an effect on the way you approach art and the way you are perceived as an artist?

KB: Yes Working/Immigrant class and that runs deep. I left Yorkshire pretty young and have lived all over Europe and now in London for 20 plus years but that stuff is in your blood and bones and it isn't going anywhere. The art world can be a very middle class capitalist ass licking place and somewhere I am on one hand very uncomfortable with. But complaining about the state of things while waiting for an Amazon delivery, eating a Big Mac, booking your 3rd flight of the year in new trainers made by an 8 year old in a factory in Asia is for the birds. So I don't. Do something about it, be the (art)world you want to live in.

I approach the work as straight on as I can, and it is work, I spend very long hours and days in my studio and that work ethic is important to me. I'm here to try and make good paintings. How I'm perceived, probably worse after this interview...God knows.

Interview completed 21 May 2025