Robert Priseman
Interviews Richard Baker

RP: Hello Richard, thank you so much for agreeing to do this interview. I would like to begin by asking you about the nature of your paintings. Almost all your works depict mid-century furniture or sometimes clothing. They are painted on a small and intricate scale, usually under 50 x 50 cm square. And they are highly representational and made with great care and skill. In all these ways they seem highly at odds with the 21st century art scene, yet you have won many awards and adoptions of your work into collections.

So, my first question is: What draws you to produce small scale interior paintings?

RB: Hello Robert. Thank you for asking me.

Firstly, I don't think that my practice puts me at odds with the 21st century art scene in any way. I see a lot of contemporary painters who are working representationally, and on a small scale. The art scene in a more general sense perhaps, but I wouldn't say that my practice is at odds with contemporary painting.

What draws you to produce small scale interior paintings?

You're really asking two questions in one. Why Small? And Why interiors? Both questions have distinct, but sometimes overlapping answers.

Small scale:

Working on a small scale, for me, is simultaneously doing several different things. Some are philosophical, some pragmatic, and some are basic responses to physical needs. For example, I like to be able to hold my paintings while I work on them, brush in one hand, painting in the other. So, they need to be easily moved and held. I turn them upside down, hang them in different rooms, I work with them flat, on a table, and then sometimes I'll work on a wall, or at an easel. Although my process is controlled, it is very physical in this sense and the small-scale enables that.

Also, my studio is small, and I see no point in competing with my working environment in a way that becomes uncomfortable or difficult. About 1m x 1m is the largest I can work on comfortably in my studio.

In addition to these physical confines, I have always been drawn to small things in general. Perhaps it's a product of being quite small myself? I don't know. But I admire scale models of things and in a way the paintings are just that, two dimensional models. There is something about the viewer having to walk up to them, to interact with them and inspect them, as if they are precious curios or jewels, that appeals to me. The idea that they are small, quiet, and unassuming.

I was taught in an era when all my tutors were heavily informed by abstract expressionism. They always pushed me to work bigger. But without the philosophical rationale of wanting to envelop the viewer in the work, there is no reason to work on a bigger scale than I do.

Interior space:

The depiction of interior space as subject has a longevity running throughout the history of painting. Vermeer, Hammershoi, Edward Hopper, all immediately spring to mind. It isn't unusual. Interiors are geometrically simple and robust. They're compositionally strong and affecting.

Paintings themselves, like interiors, are containers of space. There's a given framework and you work within it. Although the extended practice of painting has challenged that notion, it's a notion that I rely on to concentrate my mind and organize my thoughts. There are so many things to think about when painting, I enjoy the restriction of working within a contained space, a frame, be that of a painting, or of an interior space.

Interior spaces and the objects that inhabit them offer endless possibilities of composition and potential for implicit narrative, be it deliberate or imposed by the viewer. I've always found interiors interesting; they can represent ambition, memories, dreams, or notions of home and longing, among many other things. They also naturally possess some of the forms of abstract painting.

When I was young, I used to be obsessed with decorating my bedroom and I saved pocket money to buy household emulsion paint to do so, repeatedly. It felt like a space where I could, and should, express myself. We use our own interior space as expressions of the self, and I have always been acutely aware of that, and I am very sensitive to my interior environment. I have a deep admiration for both architects and interior designers. I think, like painting itself, it has to do with the notion of containment, and having control over a contained space in which to express yourself.

RP: You have, as far as I am aware, never painted people. Yet your paintings are all about the human figure; the places people sit, the clothes they wear, the objects they use. In this sense a

core subject of your work is the absence of people. More specifically that absence is the memory of presence. How does this observation feel to you?

RB: I have, on very rare occasions, painted people, but, yes, it is not common in my usual practice. For me, as a viewer of paintings, figures immediately become the overwhelming subject of a painting. They become what the painting is about. Because of this, the inclusion of the figure can act to ostracize the viewer to some extent, or at least turn them into a voyeur of someone else's story. I want my paintings to be more available to the viewer's participation than that allows.

You describe the figure as being at the core of the works and I understand why you would say that, after all, the objects relate back to the human figure, as you suggest. But what is at their core changes continuously as time passes. When I first started this series of works of furniture, over 15 years ago, from my point of view, they were studies of furniture and nothing else, there was nothing more going on. The furniture itself was at their core.

But once you place a work into a gallery environment, then you allow the viewers notions of what the work is about, and the viewers invariably talked about the people who aren't depicted, and their absence. This was never my intention but something which I had to come to terms with and begin to accept it as being as much a part of the work as the furniture itself.

Over time, as my own thinking changed and grew the works became much more about the formal, abstract qualities of painting, more than the actual furniture itself. Their placement, and the overall compositional qualities, which began to rely on, and quote from, 20th century abstraction, especially colour field painting. But they were still not about the figure, or any notions of absence. These things are the poetic by-products of my intentions.

As I changed and as I continue to do so, the paintings become a way to talk about other things. I've become increasingly interested in notions of time, temporality, and A-temporality. The work often elicits feelings of nostalgia and timelessness from the viewer. The art historian David Joselit talks about paintings as being time batteries and being a deep reservoir of temporal experience. He argues that time is at the core of all paintings, and I am inclined to agree. As well as the time taken making and looking there is also a more obvious dialogue with time due to the dated nature of the objects being presented in contemporary settings and then presented as contemporary paintings.

There is also an element of the uncanny, in that the objects are familiar but are presented out of time, displaced, and dislocated. Because of the nature of the photographs I draw on (collected from selling websites), the objects often appear in warehouses or barns, instead of domestic environments. So, what is at the works core continually shifts and alters over time

as my concerns change and they are always partially reliant on the viewer as much as the painter to decide what is at their core.

RP: There is a thought in art production, that making art makes the producer God-like. In the sense that you are the creator of a special and imaginary world. You get to dictate the terms and control a space. Like playing with a train set or doll's house, or creating a theatrical stage. This sense somehow seems to detach the mind from reality and stimulate the imagination. Would you say this is something core to what you are doing? Creating empty spaces so we as viewers can imagine what has gone before and what will come next?

RB: I've touched on some of these themes in my previous answers, and I agree with what you say in terms of creating theatrical stage sets and controlling space. That is certainly an element of what I'm doing. But I don't think painters, or artists in general, can lay claim to being in charge of it all in a godlike way. I think it's more that we endeavor to stake a claim to a small part of it. A proclamation of a small area of control amidst a chaotic and unfathomable existence. This is perhaps best described as a longing for home or "a" home, even one that has never really existed. This is the original definition of the word nostalgia.

RP: I understand that you use found images from the internet as source material for your paintings. I imagine a criticism you would face a lot is that your work is 'photorealist.' Yet I can sense you may make changes to the images you use. How do you counter such criticism and can you explain a little of your painting process for us please?

RB: Found Images:

The use of found images is very important to me. It's important to me to be one step removed from any emotional or inventive process. To be a curator of these ephemeral images from the internet which appear and disappear with immediacy and regularity. Gerhard Richter said that he paints from photographs in order to "save them". I elevate them into oil paintings and art objects and then present them to different audiences in a gallery setting.

The installation artist Annette Messager stated that the role of the artist is to collect, to sort through and to point out, not to invent. I have a vast collection of these ephemeral images that seem to me to deserve greater things from their existence than a listings page on the internet.

With regards making changes to the photographs, on the contrary, I make very few, if any, deliberate changes to the photographs I work from. I choose them specifically for their compositional qualities and their palette, and the object they depict, so they suit my purpose from the beginning, without making substantial or deliberate changes. It kind of works the other way around, when I search for photographs, I search for my paintings that I haven't made yet. A certain arrangement of shapes that I can make sense of.

Although I rely on a photographic source, my work is far from being photorealistic, as you suggest. My work is very painterly when viewed in real life. Ironically, it is perhaps the reproduction of them as digital images that makes them appear more photographic than they are. In person they are very obviously paintings, made up of marks and layers. They have bruises, and scratches, errors, and corrections. There is also a lot that I leave open to chance. I work from 3 or 4 different prints of the image. All of them printed differently, of varying quality and on varying papers. I will often adjust the saturations and contrast and then also work from the original image on screen. So, the resulting painting is always a composite that never stays true to any one of them. And then changes happen in the physical making process as well. Accidents happen, etc.

RP: That's so interesting. It reminds me of a quote by R.B. Kitaj who said he enjoyed seeing reproductions of his own paintings as they always looked different to the originals and it made them a bit like interpretations. Who would you describe as important influences on your thinking and practice?

RB: The list is genuinely endless and is always in flux. On my thinking: David Joselit, is important, especially his essay *Marking, Scoring, Storing and Speculating (on Time)*, as is the writings of Annette Messager. Gerhard Richter is important to me for both his paintings and his writings.

On my painting practice it's a list of painters who I don't paint anything like, but I aspire to. I long for the looseness and the deft touch of less controlled, more painterly painters like Luc Tuymans and Wilhelm Sasnal.

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