

Robert Priseman Interviews

Narbi Price

RP: I wonder if we can begin with where your interest in art began? What motivated you to take up painting and are there any artists of the past who inspired you?

NP: A similar route as a lot of people I'd guess, I was the kid at school who was good at drawing. Along with reading, it became an obsession and a refuge very early on, drawing anything and everything I could, and every day. Painting came a little later, and Chuck Close was the first artist that really grabbed my imagination, not only the skill but the concept, how the work was more akin to minimalism than photorealism despite the look. Not to mention how he talked about process and thinking. The first paintings that really moved me though, were colour field paintings of Rothko, Klein and Louis, because I didn't understand them, but I could tell that there was something there, something I didn't yet grasp.

RP: How fascinating. I saw the Chuck Close retrospective at the Hayward Gallery back in 1999, it was stunning. And yes, what really struck one was just how painterly they were "in the flesh," as opposed to how photographic they looked in book reproductions. And as you say, it was much more about process, about how he mimicked the layering of photographic colours, but with the human hand. This abstracted the work and made it much closer to Rothko and Klein, even though the end result was completely different.

It might be argued that your paintings are more broadly photorealist in nature. Do you paint directly from sketches and life or use photographs for source material? And if so, are they images you create yourself?

And, going a little deeper, when we look closer at your works "in the flesh" that photographic quality disappears and the works become more painterly. More abstracted almost. Can you tell us a little about this and how you approach making the image itself?

NP: Photorealism was something I needed to get out of my system. When I was doing my BA in the early 2000s, I did a couple of paintings that were more photoreal than any of the 70s photorealists that I hadn't yet seen in reality. No brush marks at all, shifts in focus, flat surfaces and so on. And then I felt like I'd done it, and to go on would've made the technique the focus.

I work from my own photographs, rarely make sketches and never from life. My process involves traveling to the specific sites of various historical events and taking photographs which became the basis of the paintings. I see this part as analogous to drawing, I'm filling

the rectangle of the viewfinder with the painting, there's seldom any cropping, editing or postproduction.

Much of my approach to making work comes from a place of reaction, and I think back to Chuck Close again, when he said something like 'you get to the work you want to do, by having a clear idea of what you don't want to do'. In crits at art school, the abstract work would be discussed in terms of gesture, formalism, composition, materiality, philosophy and so on. When it came to the figurative work, the discussion was invariably limited to what the work was of, which stuck in my craw. So the technique developed in a way to force the conversation to a place where the more physical painterly elements would be front and centre. I think we all try to make the paintings we want to see ourselves, and I want the job of the paint marks to be multifarious. I sometimes think of myself as an abstract painter trapped inside a representational one.

RP: Yes, that makes sense in the context of Chuck Close, who was of course really an abstract painter. Returning to your own paintings, they are usually of people-less landscapes. Yet people are central to them. They typically include themes like park benches, places where murders have taken place or where TV programmes have been made. It is as if you are looking at the impression of where some kind of psychological imprint has been left. Is that how you see it? And has that always been the case in your practice? Or was there a time when you painted people but decided instead to explore the "psychology of place?"

NP: They've always been empty. I think of them as vacated stages, the viewer becomes the actor or the active part of the work. If there were people, we would be thinking about their relationship to the space, and their narrative. Without people we're complicit in it, in the looking. The psychological resonance (or the search for it) is the crux of it, yes. The act of pilgrimage, to commune with the dead, to seek meaning or belonging, to want guidance or reassurance from that which has preceded us, is a universal thing, common to all countries and cultures. Painting allows a slowing of the search. I'm literally encoding past time, deep time and lost time into the making of the work. There's a beautiful futility to it; I'm searching for something that is impossible to catch. A quicksilver glint of a memory that's not mine.

RP: That is such a captivating concept Narbi. Expanding on this a little more, one might imagine that interiors could offer a more intensely human psychological imprint, and I'm thinking of works like Walter Sickert's *Camden Town Murder* series or van Gogh's paintings from his time at The Yellow House in Arles. How do these paintings resonate with you? And, what is it about the landscape itself which works so much better for you?

NP: I really like the paintings you mention, and I have painted interiors; the room where Agatha Christie stayed in Harrogate, following her disappearance, and some 25 years ago the empty house of my Grandad after he'd died. I see each specific site ultimately as a painterly

problem or challenge so wouldn't limit myself to any particular type of location. The histories drive the work.

RP: That's really interesting, what strikes me is you are really engaged in a kind of Memento Mori project. I'm reminded now of Nicholas Poussin's 1637 painting *Et in Arcadia Ego*, which is one of my all-time favourites. It depicts four shepherds who happen across a tomb, and reminds them that just as the dead had once lived where they now stand, so they too will one day die. Which by turns, reminds us the viewer that we will also die. What are your reflections on this? And more broadly, where do you think your obsession, if we can call it that, with the theme of the philosophical reflection on mortality, spring from? Was there some early tragedy or trauma, and might you describe yourself as a naturally interested in the morbid?

NP: Ha! Maybe, I am a bit of an old goth... I'm not sure it's all about the morbid, but when you're thinking about history, mortality is never far away. On reflection I think it's more about a sense of melancholy or rather, mourning than the morbid; mourning for lives and people, yes, but also mourning lost time, unknown events, scenes you were never part of, mourning truths, mourning youth, mourning experience, mourning dreams, mourning change.

RP: It seems then, if you are painting in the vein of narrative works, but without any specific narrative. Would that sound right to you? And in this context, I'm reminded a little of Lucien Freud. He was a great reader, and loved novels, saying they often inspired ideas for his paintings. Where do your ideas for paintings come from? Is it reading novels like Freud, watching movies like Hopper, or somewhere else?

NP: Yeah, in terms of narrative, I select sites typically because of a single event, but I'm equally interested in the unknowable other, more prosaic happenings that have occurred at a site, someone stroked a dog, someone sheltered from the rain, someone received a life-changing phone call, someone adjusted their clothes in their reflection, someone fell in love, someone stopped, someone didn't.

The selection of the sites comes from everywhere really, culture, history, books, music, movies; it's almost like when I die I'll leave an extended self-portrait, a map of my interests, like stickers on a teenage exercise book.

RP: Yes, that's a very evocative description of what motivates you.

If I may, I would like to turn to your interest in The Ashington Group, who were also known as the "Pitmen Painters." I believe you wrote about them for your PhD thesis and have curated exhibitions on their work. Can you tell us a little about them and what appeals to you about their output?

NP: The Ashington Group were a group of mine workers in and around Ashington, Northumberland who after starting out as a Workers' Educational Association class on Art Appreciation, soon embarked on a remarkable project making paintings, to significant plaudits mainly in the 1940s. They occupy the singular position of documenting close to 50 years (1934 - late 1983) of working class life from within. Most similar types of work are grainy black & white photographs, and from an observational and broadly journalistic or even anthropological angle. The fact that they are paintings, and made from first-hand lived experience is unique. My particular interest was initially based around two things; firstly was from a very practical viewpoint; how did they make their work? I'm an art materials nerd and it became quickly evident that there was a lot of uncertainty about the materials and techniques that the group used. In the permanent exhibition housed at Woodhorn Museum, the gallery captioning frequently declared that pieces were in 'Oil or Walpamur on board', which bore the questions, 'which is it?' and 'what's Walpamur?' The understanding as a painter that the choice of medium and support has a very tangible effect on the work and the experience of making it was a natural 'in' for the project.

Secondly, there's currently only one book published about the group *Pitmen Painters: The Ashington Group 1934 - 1984* by William Feaver. When a whole legacy is based on a single dominant narrative, it inherently becomes 'small p' political, so I also wanted to scratch away at that a little, and discover more nuanced and rounded versions of the story.

RP: How fascinating. So, if I may ask, what then is Walpamur? And following on from that, I'm reminded of how van Gogh painted on jute, a very coarse kind of fabric, because he couldn't afford canvas. And this necessitated him having to paint in a very heavy impasto technique as the jute was very absorbent. Did Walpamur have a similar impact on the Pitmen Painters?

NP: Walpamur was the brand name of a concentrated housepaint, which was superseded by the development of household emulsion. It was supplied in tubes and small cans, and thinned with either water or a proprietary 'petrifying liquid' to make it suitable for brushing onto the walls. In full concentration however, it would hold a brushmark and dry at a slow rate akin to that of oil paint. Technically it was based on a water-miscible alkyd resin, so not dissimilar to modern water-mixable oil paint. The group used it mainly at the beginning of their artistic career due to the cost and availability. I'd say the supports the Ashington Group used had more of an effect on the paintings than the paint itself however. They used a lot of plywood, frequently with no ground, and just sealed with hide glue of some kind. They capitalised on this, by frequently using the colour of the support as a compositional device. These techniques were taught to them by their founding tutor Robert Lyon, who at the start didn't know that this class was going to involve making work at all, hence the cheaper materials. Lyon trained at the RCA and the British School at Rome and a lot of the techniques of the

atelier style of painting can be seen in the early work of the Ashington Group. As the group continued, they switched to normal artists' colours but largely stuck with the panels.

RP: Expanding out a little, you live in Newcastle, not far from Ashington. Are you from Newcastle originally? Is this where you grew up? And, once you took to painting yourself in a serious manner, what kind of canvas and paints did you settle on and why? Can you describe your approach more broadly to making a painting from the materials side of things and what appeals to you about them?

NP: I grew up in Hartlepool, far enough away for Newcastle to be 'the big city', and now I've been here longer than I was there. I painted in oil on canvas and board until I started my MFA in 2008, when I switched exclusively to acrylic. I'd always made an acrylic underpainting, and I organically found myself doing more and more of the painting in acrylic, before applying a final layer of oil paint. This felt increasingly like a tokenistic act, and I thought of Robert Rauschenberg's *Bed*, where he daubed oil paint onto his bed and displayed it on the wall in the painting orientation. He spoke of the transubstantiation qualities of oil paint. I was more pragmatic, and when I started my MFA the decision to go over to acrylic was a practical one. I'd had four years or so off from painting, so I wanted to learn how to do it again, as quickly as possible, and that way my technique was very much in dialogue with the medium. I use a lot of indirect painting methods, optical mixes, glazes and so on which could take literally years with oil paint.

RP: It's beautiful when paintings take a long time to produce isn't it. The slowness of the process adds to a kind of philosophical musing in the production of the work. How long do you typically spend on a painting and over what kind of time scale? And how many works do you typically produce in a year?

NP: That's a bit of a how long is a piece of string question for me, it depends on a multitude of factors; complexity of the image, size, how cooperative the painting is being, deadlines, available time in the studio and so on. Very broadly, it's seldom under a month. Similarly with the number of works made in a year, all of those factors play a part in it, so anything from 8 or 10 typically. But over the last couple of years it's been more like 50, as I worked on making paintings for a specific commissioned project, *Going Back Brockens* which looked at the legacy of the Miners' Strike in County Durham. The initial idea was to make 40 paintings to chime with the 40 years since the strikes. The key difference that enabled that volume of production for that show was size, with works ranging from 120 x 90cm all the way down to 25 x 30cm, and everywhere in-between.

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