

‘A Gallery of Ghosts’ by John Finlay

An Interview with the Painter Robert Priseman

John Finlay: Robert, would you begin by telling me about your first encounter with a piece of art?

Robert Priseman: It was a print of Constable’s painting *The Cornfield*. We had it on our wall at home and I remember that I enjoyed looking at it a lot, but I don’t think Constable has been important to the kind of art I produce today. However, what fascinates me is the idea that his paintings contain some sort of emotional charge which is locked into the paint itself.

JF: Were your parents interested in art and did they encourage you to learn about other artists?

RP: Yes, my Mother used to take me to art galleries in the Midlands where I grew up. We used to go to the Derby Museum and Art Gallery a lot, and they have a large collection of Joseph Wright paintings. I have always been struck by his scientific work and feel that his intense use of artificial light has been an influence on my own approach to painting.

JF: What were the first things you made as a boy?

RP: I enjoyed the activity of drawing and worked on a lot of portraits. At this time, I recall being fascinated by Holbein’s portraits. Years later, I saw an exhibition at the Fitzwilliam Museum in Cambridge, ‘Holbein and the Court of Henry VIII’. This exhibition and the encounter with so many Holbein drawings in one place had a great effect on me. It was like seeing a gallery of ghosts. I loved the sensitivity of his line and his ability to somehow capture the essence of a sitter’s very being with a minimum of information.

JF: What kind of books or literature did you read at this time?

RP: I read all the usual sorts of things that kids like to read. However, the book which had most impact on me was Robert Louis Stevenson’s *Treasure Island*. One of the reasons I liked the book was that we had a hardback copy at home, it seemed such a beautiful object in itself and the book felt significant to me in some way.

JF: In what way?

RP: Now I think about it, the idea of escapism and of living on a desert island appealed to me a great deal. But I suppose the real fascination with the story lies in the conflicting emotions of a child simultaneously trusting and distrusting the adult world and the idea of going on a journey which is somehow a metaphor for the process of growing up.

JF: Have you always been an observational artist?

RP: Yes, I have always been drawn to realist painting. Representational artists like Hopper and Vermeer hold a strong fascination for me. Vermeer in particular. I love the sense his paintings have of being beautifully crafted objects and his use of perspective is especially appealing. He seems to use it as a way to contain his sensitivity to the world. I like paintings which are set in interiors and have a stillness to them. The sort of stillness that occurs just prior to, or after change. There seems to be a silence in these moments which is somehow profound.

JF: Do you use sketchbooks and how do your ideas for paintings come about?

RP: No I don't use sketchbooks. I have feelings about things. I have always been taken by ideas concerning terror and sin, and for years, became fascinated with learning about events surrounding the Holocaust. I think what interests me is the idea that we all have the capacity for great acts of cruelty as well as kindness, even when we live in a civilised society, and that somehow we have to learn to live with this dichotomy. However, in my own work, I try to trap and lock all this subjective emotion away. In my painting 'The Death of George Dyer' (2006), I was drawn to the bland and sterile environment of the Parisian room where he died and the thought that a life can echo through others even when they are no longer there. Often I am thinking of other paintings as well, and had also been thinking of Henry Wallis's painting 'The Death of Chatterton' while I was working on it.

JF: Robert, you say that you try to trap and control the emotions in your paintings. Has this anything to do with your epilepsy or with things that have happened to you in the past.

RP: Yes. Controlling my emotions may have something to do with my epilepsy and the way my paintings evolve. I have also suffered from depression in the past but I'm much better at dealing with it now.

JF: You have told me about horror and being haunted by things. Has something major in your past affected how you think about the world in relation to the way in which you create art? For example, I notice that there are a number of 'portraits' on your walls of a young female child who

has her back to the viewer. These are not portraits in the traditional sense of the term and I wanted to ask you about the significance of these images.

RP: Yes, I was haunted by something in my past that took place when I was about eight years old. I was sexually assaulted by a paedophile, and he was later caught and sentenced. The thing that affected me most about all of this at the time was that he tried to pay me, presumably to keep me quiet. The impact of that left me with a suspicion of the adult world outside of my family. My wife has also pointed out the connection between my paintings of the young girl who was also eight years old when I painted her.

JF: You must therefore feel that this is significant given that she was exactly the same age – eight years old - when you yourself were sexually assaulted by a stranger.

RP: Yes now that you mention it, it must be significant and might be one of the reasons why these paintings and other paintings came to be, but I haven't really thought about it that deeply before. But yes it seems significant now that you mention it and the connection with my work.

JF: Technically how do you begin working and how do paintings occur? Explain the process to from beginning to end?

RP: As I said, I have feelings about things. I have these emotions floating about; churning over all the time. The emotions seep out and become ideas for pictures. The experience is rather like the epilepsy - it is yanked or jolted out of me. Then the pictures emerge in my mind's eye. The whole process of producing a painting from beginning to end takes around two years. I settle on a subject I would like to paint such as the 'Mortuary' or 'Operating Theatre', and then begin to research spaces that would suit my purpose.

I work from photographs that I take of specific environments and build a perspective image based on those in order to try and rationalise the information. During this process, I remove all the extraneous details because I am more interested in the atmosphere of the space rather than its reality. I think I derive the essence of my emotional response to a space via the photographs because the photographs separate my emotional world from the real one and enable me to deal with it safely. They help me disconnect in some way. The perspective acts to provide a structure to contain the emotion, to hold it in place. I like to build up the paint layer by layer within this structure to then somehow pin it down. I suppose I think of emotions as fluid and paintings as a place to hold them.

JF: What about your influences outside art?

RP: Films and books have an effect on my painting. I enjoy watching films and they often help with ideas that I might be concerned with in my paintings. One example of this is the film *Lost in Translation*, which for me is a study on the state of being alienated from one's social and family networks. I find the analysis of alienation quite important to my understanding of the world and it is a central theme in my painting.

I find looking at the light in films interesting too, and how it can create atmosphere. The building of suspense appeals to me and I like the idea of an unseen threat or promise. I also enjoy books which challenge our view of what is morally absolute or where our understanding of moral boundaries exists. I have recently been reading Bernhard Schlink's *The Reader* and Joyce Carol Oates's *Rape: A Love Story* which both push a sense of where moral boundaries lie. H. G. Wells's *The Invisible Man* I would say has been a key book for me, because I am fascinated by the way a human presence can be felt through a person's actions and through their legacy. The concept of an invisible presence is a core concept in the work I produce.

JF: What artists interest you most now?

RP: Francis Bacon, I love his use of paint and the violence of his imagery. I like the way his figures are presented so that the soul can seep out and the way he makes this manifest in paint. I am also interested in artists who use photography more directly as source material for painting like R. B. Kitaj, Michael Andrews and Gerhard Richter. And, I am drawn to the work of James Turrell and Dan Flavin. Their use of light appeals to me in a similar way to the way Joseph Wright exploited it. I think it has a spiritual quality.

JF: Can you give me a brief history of the kind of work you started out doing to the work you do today?

RP: Initially I made a living as a portrait painter making individual pieces to commission. These were always oil on canvas and I made about 120 paintings. I also made landscape paintings for about five years. These became increasingly empty and I became interested in the idea that they could represent the threshold to a journey. Then I started painting interiors as they seemed to do the job better. Now I find myself drawn to spaces which are completely man-made and devoid of natural light. Settings which are designed to be transitional and where life and death are in close proximity to one another have a strong appeal. I am interested in a sense of transience and detachment.

JF: Finally Robert, where do you see your place in the art world; in what context, if any, and what do others think of your work.

RP: Francis Bacon said in an interview with David Sylvester that all art has become a game and that to be any good at all an artist must deepen the game. I would like to think that I have taken that on board and am engaged with the legacy of artists like Bacon. What interests me is the idea of unlocking a subconscious part of oneself and projecting it onto the world through paint.

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