

# Barbara Howey interviews Robert Priseman

Barbara Howey: 'I'd like to ask a few questions. Firstly, you've had training in photography and graphic design, aesthetics and art theory, which is quite an interesting combination of subjects. How do you think these differing disciplines have shaped your development as an artist?'

Robert Priseman: 'I guess I was always interested in painters but never thought that I'd be good enough to be one, so I thought that I would do something a bit more practical, something that I could make a living from in a creative way, graphic design, illustration or something. But after I did that, I guess one of the things that struck me was that art is an engagement with an audience, so it's not like a diary. It is partly a diary but it's also to do with engagement with your audience. I became very interested in, I guess, kind of the way artists had evolving conversation between themselves and their audience and how that conversation shapes itself and changes over decades and then over centuries. I became very interested in the underlying concepts and principals of that conversation and that's why I studied aesthetics and art theory. Then with the painting I just got on with it.'

BH: 'I'd like to talk about your painting actually. There is a photo-realist quality to your work I would say, I don't know if you describe it as that. Could you say what the relationship between photography and painting is for you?'

RP: 'Yes, I know people see the paintings I do as being photo-realist, but actually, as you've kind of indicated, I don't necessarily see them that way myself. What I've been doing is going to places and photographing them. I photograph the ceiling, the walls and the floor in a very kind of broad way, and then I arrange those photographs to reconstruct the room and it ends up being viewed in a kind of fish eye perspective. Then I redraw that into a sort of plan and use that plan to draw out the painting, so that I'm creating degrees of separation. I like subject matter which is to do with extremes of emotion, so I'm very interested in suicide or execution or whatever. I'm very interested in this idea of emotion but then separating yourself out from it. Then when I paint I very much simplify right down the subject matter so I take out all sorts of detail. I take out writing, I like to alter the colours slightly, I like to make things much more muted, and to sort of graduate colours and things. So I mess around quite a lot with the interiors that I'm working on and I kind of make it more akin to a picture that I'd like to see rather than the picture it is. But yes, people do sometimes think that what I'm doing is specifically just a photographic representation.'

BH: 'So there's quite a lot of manipulation involved.'

RP: 'Yes, but that's kind of like you are doing stuff because you enjoy it, because there is a kind of process that you are engaged in which actually is just really, really enjoyable and you are thinking that it is fun and interesting.'

BH: 'Yes, I was actually going to come on later to talk about pleasure because a lot of your subjects are quite harrowing subjects I would imagine, like gas chambers and hospitals, and I have the tension in my own work to be torn between pleasure and making what you are trying to depict as well....'

RP: 'Well I was noticing that in your own picture you've got sort of a temporary prison and things like that and it is a strange subject to pick for a painting. When you've painted a temporary prison you've done it in a very beautiful meditative way. I think that there is that sort of quality, there is that aspect certainly, and I find that with my own work. If you take something like a lethal injection chamber or a gas chamber or a room someone has committed suicide in, by creating different layers of separation from the event itself and then by representing it in quite a sort of quiet and as beautiful a way as you can make it, what you do is enable your viewer, and this is where I think art is very much to do with an engagement with an audience, what you are doing is building a bridge from your subject to your audience. I think I am engaged with paintings in building this bridge from the incident to the viewer and you are allowing the viewer to approach it in a way.'

If you just saw something that was stark and brutal, you'd just think that it's horrible, but by kind of softening it down you enabling people to approach it, to ask 'what does it make me think, what does it make me feel?' I am specifically interested in looking at subjects which I think are.... I guess which make me quite distressed in a way. I sort of look at things and think, 'That's strange, it's bizarre. Why is it happening?'

I do a lot of reading around subjects, in fact I spend more time reading and watching films and documentaries than I do the actual painting. What I then try to do is distil this information down to a set of images, perhaps five or six different pictures, which I think sum up the subject, but I then hope that they create some sort of forum that other people can use as a sort of template to have their own debates and discussions.'

BH: 'I was going to go on to ask actually about what could have been sensationalist in terms of your subject matter. Do you think for you it is actually a question of ethics or morality? Is that something you consider in your work?'

RP: 'As I have said, I am interested in extremes; I think most people are interested in extremes. I was saying earlier that I think people are interested in the tallest and the shortest, the fastest and the slowest. I think that does interest people and I think what that does is sort of amplify, if you like, the norm and it enables you to reflect on what's in everyday life. But also I think there are distressing things within human nature. I think there is a very strong, disruptive element to human nature and actually that really puzzles me so I think I am kind of..... I don't understand it, so I'm trying to understand it. But then in my case of trying to understand it I realise that I have to kind of step back and allow other people to engage in it. I'm not actually trying to come up with a solution to the problem. I look at something like execution and say, 'Why does that happen in society?' I think it has a ritualistic quality and certain theories start to emerge from engaging in the process of producing pictures about it and organising talks and getting essays and articles and doing interviews. So certain new ideas start to spring from that which is exciting and interesting, but I realise for myself I guess the practice of being an artist for me is actually to step back from offering any solutions or answers because they can't be my solutions or answers. It's for me to really just create the forum for other people to have their own debates and discussions within. I think that in itself is a privilege to be able to do and it's really fascinating.'

BH: 'I was wondering about your relationship to theory. I was thinking in the way of situating and practise, I don't know if you use theory specifically. I was thinking of Foucault and discipline and punish, I don't know if you have read that, and the technologies of power. Do you use theory specifically for the debates around theory in your work to inform the paintings do you think?'

RP: 'No I don't think.....well, of course I mean I do read the theory, I read Aesthetics and Art Theory as a student. I think I use the theory as general background for myself. What I am very interested in is the idea of people trying to control other people and I think actually ..... I mean one of the things that struck me is that we try to even control ourselves on an individual basis but actually all control is just an illusion, just as the market place is an illusion. I suppose you sort of think about controlling your own life and sort of think, 'I'll decide when I go to sleep, I'll decide when I go take a piss, I'll decide when I eat', but actually your body takes over eventually. There is a point at which you just fall asleep, there is a point at which you can't continue until you have a drink of water or some food to fuel your body, there is a point at which your body takes over or it stops working. Something else I'm very interested in is this idea that the body is a shell that contains us, we are kind of trapped inside the body and that we have this idea that we are in control of things, in control of ourselves. I think society, or certain people who are in positions of

power, like to think that they can control other people within society, but at a certain point that control kind of breaks down or stops. So I think it's true that there is control to an extent but it's only to an extent and I think beyond that it's an illusion.'

BH: 'So paintings are a kind of intervention into that process of control do you think?'

RP: 'I don't think they're an intervention, I think they're a reflection. I suppose what I would hope is that .... I mean I'd like to think that they could be an intervention because you're perhaps tricking yourself into thinking that your work might have some sort of benefit to your society or community, that actually it would enable people to reflect on these things and then lighten up a bit and find better ways to do things. So yes there is that aspect of that slightly.'

BH: 'I just would like to ask a ..... it relates really to my own work in a certain way because I use autobiography and memory and I quote from you, 'All creative acts are driven by emotions which we rationalise at a later stage.'

RP: 'That's what I was just talking to Nick about.'

BH: 'Yes, can you expand more on that?'

RP: 'Yes, well I do think we are completely driven by our own emotions and I don't think we necessarily understand what our emotions are saying to us. I think there is perhaps a strong impulse at the moment to intellectualize, but I think what we try and do is kind of rationalise things after we have made emotional decisions. I think actually most people are quite decent, most people want to be kind to their fellow man and actually I think when you are engaged in acts which perhaps might be a bit disturbing or distressing to you if you stopped to think about them, actually that is maybe why you rationalise them. I think maybe that's part of what being an artist is; that actually what you are doing is reflecting society in some way, what society is engaged in, and you are engaged in a process of rationalisation in some way. I would certainly say that's a point I'm interested in.'

BH: 'We are involved in a dialogue at the moment which is really interesting. Five artists have got together and are talking about their work and I know on your website your work is actually usually accompanied by text that you have written or there are other texts that other people have written. What do you think the relationship is between the texts and the paintings?'

RP: 'Well, as I say, I hope that by producing a body of work on a particular subject that will help stimulate a debate around it. I look at things that fascinate and interest me so at the moment I am

engaged in the Palestinian/Israeli conflict. I have just done a series of paintings on the Ipswich Murders and at the moment am also developing a series I'm very interested on iconoclasm. So I'm looking to buy icons, damaged icons, but I'm looking to destroy them a bit further and then rework them, which for me is a very sort of sensitive and emotive subject to be engaged in. But I'm very interested in the process of production of an artwork which is reflective of the subject itself, which is in some sense a sort of universal destructive impulse that we perhaps have which maybe or maybe doesn't cause us some distress.

So for me, by engaging and reflecting in these subjects, what I hope is that other people will be fascinated and interested and want to engage themselves. You're setting up a forum if you like; it's a space where people can create their own debates. I aim to do one or two interviews as a result of each body of work. I aim to get one or two essays written, and I then hope that other people can use that as a foundation to have their own debates around the ideas which seem fascinating and fundamental. When we did 'No Human Way to Kill' for example, that's being used now by Amnesty for training. It's also being used in schools in Europe and it's being used in an anti-death penalty campaign in Trinidad where they have been trying to introduce hanging. It's also been passed onto President Obama's advisors. So to me those are interesting outcomes to get from an art project. At the time, you've hoped to engage with debates about being an artist but I think there is a kind of wider thing at play which is sort of social responsibility and social reflection. For me, if I am having these outcomes as well I find that quite exciting and I think I am doing something which I suppose I feel pleased about.'

BH: 'I've just got one more question. I would just like to ask you about your interests in the current exhibition which focusses on five East Anglian painters.'

RP: 'Well I just love the idea of artists getting together and exploring what their kind of common themes, interests and experiences are. I think when you are working specifically as a painter, it can be quite a lonely experience and you can get kind of wrapped up in a loop of your own thoughts which can be quite destructive and depressing. I think when you find other artists, even artists when they are working in completely different ways, you find surprisingly that you have a lot of common ground and I think that is what is particularly interesting. I think it enriches your own practice and your own life when you are open to share debate and discuss things which are common to you which aren't necessarily common to lots of other people. When you can create a community of people with similar interests and experiences that's a beautiful thing and it's a great privilege.'

BH: 'Thank you.'

Interview conducted 2012