

Professor Margaret Iversen Interviews Robert Priseman

MI: I thought I would come up with a few topics or key words to set the ball rolling, and if there are some pictures we haven't talked about too much I thought I would indicate them, and then open up discussion for questions.

You were a portrait painter for some time weren't you? Doing Lady this and Sir that... and then the Dalai Lama and Phil Collins...

RP: I have a love of people and a love of portrait painting...and I love looking at Holbein's work. I was very lucky to be shown a lot of his drawings in the Royal Collection when I did some work for them. I think there's a great sensitivity in painting people. But I think what you are getting at is that I spent the best part of ten or twelve years painting people and now I have eradicated them from what I am doing.

MI: That was the general drift of my direction, and I wondered if some notion of displaced portrait was going on here, and with all your work in fact. There is a tradition of a kind of portraiture that doesn't include the person...I'm thinking of Van Gogh's boots, at least that's Shapiro's version of Van Gogh's old shoes. They are his - and like a self portrait, or his painting of his room. Now there is a close link...what do you think?

RP: I am very drawn to Van Gogh's painting of his room and his bed, and I suppose when I look back over the portraits I've painted, for me they almost all become self-portraits because you are loading your own sensitivity on to the subject. What I was looking to do as a portrait painter was I suppose draw some sort of sensitivity out in the sitter, and I think for me, in removing people from the setting I wanted to explore the idea of a personal sensitivity, a personal presence or a human presence and what that might mean not just to me but to people who are looking at the paintings.

MI: I was trying to think of other examples, and I am sure there are loads, but ...in recent times there is Tracey Emin's bed which is obviously autobiographical and kind of a self portrait without her in it, and I think it's quite an interesting phenomenon of work...to not have the image of the person there.

RP. I've been thinking quite a lot about Tracey Emin's bed...I've done probably half a dozen bed paintings now, and that makes a little narrative in and of its own. Yes, I suppose it is a sense of the presence of the person not being there. It makes you think a little bit harder

MI: the thing about Tracey Emin's bed is that thing about the traces (if I can put it so delicately) of her and other people having been there. That evacuation of the traces of somebody's presence, as it were, marks your work out very much from 'the Bed'. Do you see what I'm getting at?

RP: I think I get what you are saying. For me I'm not so interested in the physical traces of the presence, but what interests me is an emotional trace of someone's existence, so it is almost like a haunted presence. And I'm interested in the idea that paint is a metaphor for the emotional world and I suppose I think about paint as being like an emotional gel and it's locked in place with the structure that perspective offers. So I am interested in this idea that there's been an emotional presence in a room, and I am trying to tease that out in the paint in some way.

MI: I wish I could understand that a bit better, because it seems to me that you attend very closely to the architecture, and although it is quite detailed, for example the floor... We can see the very carefully done floorboards. There is also a great sense of simplification, so that it is not some kind of photorealist work (though there can be simplification in photorealist work too), but there is an elimination of a lot extraneous detail as well. So it's almost as though it is like there are traces of things emptied...that are 'non-traces'. I am trying to work out the emptiness of these rooms... how they have a kind of negative presence to them.

RP: I can't say that it is something I necessarily understand myself, but I think that all paintings are autobiographical. That is something I would feel very strongly about. So even when you are exploring someone else's biography you are still exploring your own by looking at theirs. I was very interested in Bacon's asthma and how that had an influence on his work, and how his screams could be seen as suffocations as much as yells of terror. And in my own history I have epilepsy and I think that has a strong bearing on the way I view the world and therefore the way I treat painting. There is a sense for me that is very palpable: of being like a spirit trapped in a body. So when I was thinking about Bacon's painting 'In Memory of George Dyer' when he is referring to 'The Turn of the Key', the TS Eliot Wasteland poem...this idea of the spirit being trapped in a body conjures for me a very powerful sensation. That's something I am carrying with me when I am approaching painting and I think by stripping out all the detail it is like I'm putting myself into some sort of dream sensation or some sort of other worldliness.

MI: I observe that of Hopper's work - that it is almost as though everything in Hopper's work is made of the same substance. You know he doesn't really differentiate between textures so there is an enormous simplification of the world that gives a kind of homogeneity. And you like Hopper's work do you?

RP: I do love Hopper's work. I think what's interesting with Hopper that you get a sense of a breeze going through all his pictures. They are more than just pictures of a landscape or a room. They do appeal to me.

MI: What about light in Hopper's work, and shadow? He is really into shadows.

RP: For me again light is metaphorical. There is a spiritual metaphor at play with light for me, and I am very drawn to Dan Flavin's installations and I am very drawn for instance to the way Joseph Wright uses light in his paintings. And I am also very drawn to the way Rembrandt uses light when he is painting the human figure. But there the light seems to come from within and I suppose I am using light as a kind of substitute for the inner world of a person.

Also, one of the things that I found very interesting when I was looking at Bacon's work is that there is a brutal and direct confrontation with the world. When I am looking at the same subject I *want* there to be some element of hope. I want there to be something beyond what we are looking at...something that is just beyond what you can see, which is better. So that is the confrontation, that for me is what I most palpably got out of doing this set of pictures. It crystallized that feeling for me.

MI: Do you want to talk a little bit about how it started? Did it have to do with living down the road from Bacon's empty studio?

RP: It did a little because I'd often walk past it and marvel at the fact there's this tiny little cottage - a two-up two-down, or as it turned out a one-up one-down cottage, as he had taken one of the bedrooms out. And I would wander past it and think...one of the greatest artists of the twentieth century and possibly one of the greatest artists who has ever lived has spent time painting in this little room and no one even bats an eye at it... It's magical really. And I thought - I'd love to paint that, but had no reason to, other than the fact that I had a desire to do it. I couldn't see how I could continue to make a body of work out of that. Then I saw the Arena documentary on Bacon and they showed the room that he died in at the Clinica Ruber (which is the painting there). It is very similar to a painting I was working on at the time I saw the documentary - which was a painting of a critical care bed. I thought - there's a room he worked in, there's another room he died in - I've got the beginning and the end of a set of paintings. So I thought I should look more closely at, and read around the subject a bit, and see what else I can find interesting there.

MI: I suppose one's first response to the project is that in certain ways your paintings are at the opposite pole to Bacon. That is - he is ultra expressionist and distorts figures and spaces and is quite abstract sometimes, and as you say brutal. Your aesthetic or style, if I can put it

that way, is what I refer to as 'de-personalised'. So thinking about Bacon and his kind of world, and your very different world - there is a kind of contradiction there.

RP: Yes - Bacon obviously worked with a gestural mark making. If my approach to painting was similar I would never have undertaken this, because of course I could never do anything more than a pastiche of a master. But I saw more than that I am working in a different style... I saw lots of overlap of interest. Bacon is interested in enclosed spaces, which obviously interests me; his asthma had an influence on his work, whereas I feel that my epilepsy has an influence or a bearing on what I am doing. He is interested in the more brutal aspects of life which draw me as well. Looking at death as a subject matter...and it's exploring things which are a returning to a moralistic subject matter... going back to painting before Impressionism. So the subject matter he is working on really influenced me as well. So I saw all those themes at play and they really appealed to me. And I thought if you are going to do painting why not pit yourself against someone so major and make it really exciting and interesting. Of course, you find out what you are as a person and an artist...it throws up all your own weaknesses as well as your strengths and it does make for a very interesting experience.

MI: I was thinking of somebody like Gerhard Richter who quite often is drawn to themes of death and more obliquely to themes like the holocaust. But also has this 'neutral' style, basing his work on mostly found journalistic photographs, but also treating the surface of the paint in a very neutral blurred way...which gives it a technical look. So that there is this compression of extreme states...of the violent death of student nurses, of the holocaust...and this neutral very much 'held in check' anti-expressionist style of painting. What I am getting at is that one calls to the other in some artists work: that they just feel they can't reproduce an emotion...but you can allude to something highly emotional but not spread it out all over the canvas as it were. It is much more subtle and provocative to allude to something so that it's not 'in your face'.

RP: It's like play. It's like a game. I often think of dolls houses or train sets. It's like a world that's like the real world, and you are the master of it, and you can contain and control it. I think of painting as being like that. It's a world which is *like* the real world - but it *isn't* the real world; so you can explore the emotional - but at a safe distance.

MI: Is that how you see photography? That somehow it is another distancing thing? Because you do use photographs don't you?

RP: Yes, I take lots of photographs of each setting and that gives me a lot of background material and I then transfer or translate those photographs into a perspective plan, which I then scale up to the canvas. So in fact what I am doing is giving myself two elements of remove from the subject.

MI: I notice that perspective is an important feature of your work, or maybe it would have to be if you are doing interiors? Perspective itself is often thought of as a kind of organising, containing, distancing strategy.

RP: That's certainly how I see it. I am very drawn to Vermeer's work for example. Again, being a master of perspective, I can just look at his paintings for hours. They are magical. And obviously he is working on a smaller more intimate scale, but to me there is a containing of the emotional world. But then I like to think of it in an opposite sense too – of someone like Constable. You look at his painting and it's like a crackling... of the emotional world: the emotions are fizzling away on the surface. He is a genius – and for me there is something between those two things which is very interesting.

MI: So Vermeer for you is 'the room at peace with itself' in a way. It is very contained and calm and everything is restrained. Or maybe restrained is the wrong word because restrained suggests something having to be restrained. But maybe the tension in your work is that you are alluding to, in this case, [in the painting *The Death of George Dyer*] to violent death but there is no trace of it...so that the spectator is put in the position of having to do a lot of work. Is that fair to say?

RP: Yes, that interaction for me is very important.

MI: Another artist who might be relevant is Thomas Demand: he makes paper or cardboard models of scenes, and quite often scenes of crimes and then takes a photograph of the model. So there is a double kind of distancing. Then you have to read the title to know that this is where someone was tortured. In that case too there is this haunting sense of something having gone on in this space that is completely *clean* of any trace.

RP: I am very drawn to clinical spaces and I like the idea of what I might think of as 'human traffic'...that large volumes of people have passed through an area - which has often been designed for that purpose. When I was doing the portrait painting I was taken to the execution chamber or the holding cell at the Old Bailey. It's the only cell with two doors – one to go in and one to go out. It's just plain white tiles on the wall and a little six foot by two foot bed...and I stood there and looked at this room and thought...my God, people have gone in here knowing that they are about to leave to be hung. It's the last room they are going to be in, and I am thinking to myself you'd be screaming - if not outside, you'd be screaming on the inside. Yet it was completely cold: the room was completely cold and completely bare of emotion. And it really struck me that if you think about hospital environments or even in a less traumatic sense, train stations or airports...a lot of very intense emotions occur in very sterile and bland environments and that really intrigues me.

MI: You've done several images of critical care beds, and this happens to be an image of one that Bacon died in. But before you did that you did a whole series?

RP: Yes, I did a critical care bed, an operating theatre, and a special care baby unit as well.

MI: You say you are attracted to these clinical spaces and to corridors and so on, and it begs the question: why?

RP: I don't have an answer to the question why. All I know is that I want to paint without any restriction. I don't want to impose a rule or order on myself other than if I feel very very strongly about this, then I want to find a way to do it.

MI: Maybe most people shrink from looking at those things and say... that's the sight of death. I've just been doing a class about Timothy Clarke's 'The Sight of Death' which is about Poussin's 'Landscape with a Man killed by a Snake'.

RP: That's my favourite Poussin painting.

MI: I'm so surprised! Well you should read this book. It's a diary of his encounters with it day after day. But that's how I see quite a lot of your work, especially the hospital environments...they strike me as very scary.

RP: I suppose death is the big mystery of life, and we all know we are going to die but we spend our lives avoiding it. That's quite interesting I think.

MI: What about your painting ['7 Reece Mews']...this requires a little bit of explanation.

RP: I don't know what it was about that that appealed to me. I think it's just a fascinating idea that you've got this incredibly personal chaotic space. A space where a genius of the twentieth century created some of the world's greatest paintings and there it is like a goldfish bowl put on display, again, in a stark minimal environment.

MI: Maybe I can explain that this was Bacon's London Studio, and it was thought that one ought to preserve it...so it ended up like a caged animal.

RP: In a way it's like looking at his soul. It's like a soul trapped in his body or something like that for me. It's like looking at the inner workings of his mind, and it's there on public display. I don't know that it should be but it's fascinating that it is.

MI: But you have sort of played up the alienating (though this seems not a strong enough word for it) character of the museum environment. That it has these grizzly education facilities on one wall.

RP: I suppose in a way, what I've been doing is analysing in a very detached way a very very personal experience of life.

MI: So, this is the inside of your mind is it?

RP: I have heard there is always some hope somewhere.

MI: I thought it was some kind of critique of the museum world. But maybe it's not just the alienating bit, but the display of the false immediacy of Bacon's studio...that you can kind of see the artist at work. That kind of false immediacy and then the kind of dreadful museum quality of the surroundings.

RP: Well the museum environment is the exact opposite of Bacon's own environment isn't it? It's completely wiped clean.

MI: How about opening the discussion up a bit...and taking some questions

Q1: What about your office? What's your office like?

RP: Yes, recently, I have decided that it probably does look like the room of a serial killer. It has lots of writing on the wall, it has lots of photographs stuck to the wall. It was an old lady's bedroom and I've just torn away the bits of flock wallpaper that stop you from being able to write on the wall. It's very very messy and my wife comes in every now and again and moans about the state of the floor, but what can you do?

Q2: I was very interested in the painting at the back as I was at the Hugh Lane gallery in the summer. I was intrigued that [Bacon's studio] was there as I thought Bacon had always renounced his Irish heritage and would have been absolutely horrified to have been reclaimed by Dublin like this.

RP: I don't know what he would have made of it, he probably would have been very amused wouldn't he? As I understand it, John Edwards who inherited the studio offered it to the Tate, and he believed that the Tate had turned it down. So he then offered it to Dublin because that's where Bacon was born as you say, just round the corner in Baggot Street, and the Hugh Lane accepted it. But I was speaking to Michael Peppiatt the other day, and he said in fact Nicholas Serota had said they'd love to have the studio, but he had to put it to the trustees first. But in between him going to the trustees and saying he'd love to have it, the decision to

take it to the Hugh Lane had been made instead. So John Edwards just didn't have the time to wait.

MI: And what was your impression seeing it?

Q2: I thought it was very weird...like a specimen in a zoo, was the impression I got. To so carefully try and construct chaos seemed incredibly perverse. Didn't they reconstruct it from photographs?

RP: There's a fantastic book on it. It was a proper archaeological excavation in fact ...they mapped every little piece of paper and photograph and recorded every square inch of it and then reassembled every square inch of it absolutely perfectly.

Q3: I wondered if there was a protective way you have painted Bacon's studio here...you know, you've kind of hidden it away at the back...almost protecting Bacon from this affront to his memory... if you want to put it that way.

RP: No, I don't think that's going on in my mind. I think the thing with painting is, certainly from my point of view, it's not actually an intellectual approach I am making, it's an emotional approach. So you rationalise it afterwards I suppose. You sort of pick it apart afterwards and understand what it is you are playing at...for me that just seemed to be the right way to do it. Partly I didn't want to get too close to the studio because I figured that if I got bogged down in painting his studio it would be like an illustration, and that really didn't appeal to me.

MI: There's a very odd quality of the light in that one that fascinates me. I suppose it's because there's more than one source of light that creates...spotlights, so that you get this shadowy effect around the edges...it's very odd.

RP: They are very difficult to paint those shadows actually.

MI: The reflections in that very very shiny floor are very striking.

Q4: You were saying about reclaiming Dublin, but there is something very interesting about where he died as well which is similar to that...the idea that he got away from Dublinand didn't want to return to it. And you were saying that about Catholicism - he had always been very much against.

RP: He was vehemently anti-religious in his life so much so that he almost made a religion out of it. He once commented on a friend of his who had been tended by nuns in his final days, and he said...how awful! Could you imagine anything worse!...It throws up a great

mystery about Bacon that he actively *chose* to live out his final days in the care of Catholic nuns in a Catholic hospital in Madrid. He had actually been there for treatment before - so it's an enigma that he made that decision. But it does make you wonder whether what you rail against most is what you most crave. His earlier images of Screaming Popes, the Figures At The Base Of A Crucifixion...they are rooted in Catholicism and he then spends his final days in the care of Catholics. That's something that I find very moving. And I think also his Screaming Pope images are something that I find particularly powerful because it's like saying a Pope is not someone who is so deeply spiritual that they are not a person. It's like with his other figures... you are cracking the body open and revealing this tormented all too human soul underneath.

Q4: I think that Francis Bacon did have a struggle with religion anyway. He despised religion I think, but at the same time he admired religious people, so there was this conflict you can see which I think comes across a lot in his paintings.

RP: I think we are all conflicted about things. And I think with Bacon you are looking at extremes in lots of different ways that are held in check... that are brought together and held in a balance with each other, that makes his work and his world in fact, very potent.

Q5: I have a concern about the nature of enclosed spaces as a moral expression and I wondered if you had visited Auschwitz and seen the rooms there, and the death camp? And what you might make of that kind of space? The reason I ask the question particularly is because after I visited I went back and looked at the photographs and I realised quite strongly how none of the photographs could do justice to the space and the light being in those rooms.

RP: No, I agree I don't think you could ever do justice to that, but I think that sixty years on maybe now is an appropriate time to start thinking about how could humanity go so wrong. I think it would be cowardly not to start looking at that...

Q5: One of my strongest impressions coming out of the physical spaces was that it was a space designed as a moral expression: it was designed for a particular purpose and there were other impressions also that come along with that. But I am interested in the comment that was made earlier about painting artists spaces as an emotional and not intellectual or rational exercise.

RP: I can only talk from my own experience. What leads me to produce work is an emotional drive and where your intellect kicks in or marries with that, is something that I find very intriguing but it's not something that I have an answer to.

MI: I think it's something that we all have to reflect upon. You say... well that's my favourite Poussin... And then you think: Do I have a favourite Poussin? What is my object? But

perhaps we don't reflect enough on that kind of thing... perhaps it is the artist's job to do that? To be very much in touch with what their object is.

RP: When I was a student I wrote an essay on Poussin's 'Landscape with a Man killed by a Snake'...so I know that it is very definitely my favourite Poussin. There's no doubt in my mind about that.

Q6: Following up on that is ...the role of emotions. I know in one of your responses you talked about the importance of light and how you use light to manifest something about the emotional, and obviously light can be contrasted to other features in the painting. But I don't know if it's possible to say anymore about the 'emotional' because there are many different kinds of emotions. I guess it's really a question of trying to capture that range of emotions that might be going into the painting and how the use of light relates to that, to the range of emotions. When you say you are emotionally drawn to something. Why is it that someone might be drawn to hospital rooms? I'm not too sure what it is that draws me to the hospital rooms... But it maybe that the emotions that are at play may have greater purchase once the painting has been finished or is in the process of being constructed. And I wonder if there is anything more to be said about the emotions that you find are important in the paintings.

RP: I suppose at a very personal level I find a lot of the world emotionally overwhelming. So when I think about what is emotionally overwhelming to me, I want to try and find a way of coming to some kind of understanding about that, and also of finding some way of containing or controlling that. So it's like you are putting a lid on your emotions. When I think about things which are very extreme, very dark in our own psyche or our own experience, I think that's what a call to life is... that we are always able to maintain some element of hope...that there's a flicker of something hopeful no matter how bleak things become, and if you lose that you end up with suicide, which is why the Death of George Dyer as a painting particularly interests me because it's to do with the extinguishing of hope. That's why when I painted this picture I had to open the door, because at a personal level, I wanted there to be some hope, I wanted to think actually there's an alternative.

Q8: Which is interesting because if I stand here...near the door all the perspective works for me, and I am ready to go out of the door. I felt I was forced to look at that painting from a particular spot which led me, if I was to engage with the painting, to leave it.

RP: Yes, I have my own personal dialogues with the paintings, but it's important to me that I don't force that on anyone. What I want is for an audience to engage with the paintings in their own way and find their own dialogue with the pictures. I want to throw up issues and specifically not to answer them.

Q9: I have a sister-in-law who was in the French Red Cross in an active position. She was taken away to Buchenwald and was one of the first people on the nursing side who went in, and she told me, and it has stayed with me all these years, that the first impression when they first opened the doors, was absolute absolute silence. This has kept with me all these years. I think this relates a little bit to this discussion of the emotion and the emptiness.

Q10: When you began your journey through the life of Bacon, through reading books about Bacon...when you then went to these places and looked at them, did it change anything for you?

RP: It did change something. When you read a lot about Bacon and watch the documentaries you get one impression of Bacon that is this larger-than-life flamboyant bon-viveur and you go round and see these rooms that he lived in, and you think about how wealthy he was, and yet all of the rooms are very small modest rooms. I think about the fact that he got up early every morning and he painted solidly until lunchtime in these small rooms and so all the paintings that he did, not the head and shoulders ones, but all his major pieces measure 78 x 58 inches ...and they measure that size because that was the biggest size he could paint in order to get it out of the door.

And he could only work on one canvas at a time, yet he produced all these triptychs and I think it's fascinating...He couldn't get back that far, he couldn't see the work that much...there is this very small contained world that he lived in a very intense way. Then he would go out and he'd drink and eat and socialise. I suppose what struck me was that it was almost as though he was a monk...living a monk's existence, painting like a Fra Angelica or something but then living this other life. It was like two completely different people living a simultaneous life. That's what I found really fascinating.

Q11: When I first came in here your picture reminded me at first sight of the Danish painter Vilhelm Hammershoi who painted interiors and like you – he would always play with open doors- shut doors and open windows - shut windows, but at second sight I thought the important difference between his work and yours is this lack of atmosphere that is so obvious in your work. I thought that your pictures seem to be much closer to photographs that landlords may publish in order to show their rooms to possible buyers...in terms of the way the rooms are presented (and not of their function), and this made me first wonder about what the medium of painting adds to your pictures and secondly about the question if there is also a portion of irony in your approaching Francis Bacon's biography who makes us think so much of personality, passions and biography, that is the opposite of what the landlord photographs of his rooms would ask us to think about.

RP: That's interesting – I am very interested in the banal. And there is a banal element to death, which is shocking in a sense I suppose, because it is such a traumatic thing. So I am

interested in the idea that spaces, which could have had trauma, can also be banal. In fact you can't photograph, unless you had some very expensive equipment with parallel shift lenses or you can get those cameras with bellows...the photographs I take are very fractured. So I'll photograph the ceilings, and the floor and the walls and then I compose those photographs in such a way that I can then translate that information into a perspective drawing. So what I am doing is simultaneously looking at the ceiling and the floor which isn't something you can do when you just use your eyes. When you look at the wall ahead of you the floor is out of focus and the ceiling is out of focus. You can see them, but they are in your peripheral vision, and what I am doing is putting the peripheral vision into focus. So that's why they would be different from a landlord's photographs.

Q12: Also I have seen some of the photographs you have taken originally and when you are looking at those they do look clinical and you can see the potential for it to go very super-realist. I still see these more as portraits as well because they have got the essence of somebody being there; almost of someone passing through - whether that's passing from life to death, or going through an open door way. I always feel I'm like a voyeur actually. It's as if you are there, but you are standing at a slightly strange angle. And although they are quite stark and clinical I think the paint quality – because you can see the brush strokes and you can see the marks and they are not so slick - that gives you that emotion. They make my hair stand on end: I do always feel really haunted.

RP: A sense of unease is something I am interested in.

MI: And do you think it has to do with this impossible space? That in fact it's not the perspective we are used to seeing in our photographic world, and that in fact they've opened up.

RP: I think it adds to it. I want to try and generate some sense of being sucked into the space when you look at it.

Q13: Speaking of the strange quality of the perspectives, especially I find in this piece with the diagonals...they remind me of Bacon's own interiors. The toilet and tiles, and the corresponding ceiling grid recalls the cage-like structures in Bacon's work. I was wondering if that was intentional?

RP: No it's not intentional. It's just something I enjoy working with. Perhaps I was drawn to Bacon for that reason, though it wasn't conscious...and actually the Hammershoi parallel has been drawn before as well. I find it interesting, He worked from photographs – and they were all black and white photographs which is very interesting. I've only seen one of his paintings which is in the National Gallery. Though I am keen to see more.

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