

# Jessica Litherland Interviews Robert Priseman on the series ‘Never Knowing Why’

Jessica Litherland: What first drew you to this subject?

Robert Priseman: Being alive in any era offers up a wide range of human activity to look at, consider and feel moved by. And it is the extremes of human action which are the most puzzling and thought provoking, whether it's the large scale social orchestration of genocide or the individual experience of a child being bullied in a school.

All of these behaviours are troubling, principally as they reflect the limits of feeling we all possess, yet which we usually manage to suppress and control. With *Never Knowing Why* I was especially interested in reflecting on my own experience of being picked upon as a child and thinking around how bullying has often seemed to be the root cause of many mass shootings. I don't see those who commit acts of this nature as 'evil', but as people (like anyone of us) who have somehow bent under pressure then 'snapped'.

JL: I know that colleagues with children who have seen these paintings have had particularly strong reactions to them. What effect do you think being a parent has had on you in relation to producing work?

RP: All children face difficulties when they are growing up and all schools have issues with bullying, even if it is something they deny. I think as parents we have a duty to look at these issues and raise them with our children, talking about them openly and frankly so they may learn to deal with them in their own ways.

JL: How much research do you do before you start and what does your research entail?

RP: I typically spend around a year looking into a subject before deciding whether or not to work on it. For *Never Knowing Why* this was a much longer period of around 5 years.

As with other projects the research involves approaching the material from a variety of viewpoints and media. I usually read both factual and fictionalised accounts relating to the theme as well as watching films, documentaries and reading news articles. For *Never Knowing Why* I read around a dozen books which included *Columbine: A True Crime Story* by Jeff Cass, *Columbine* by Dave Cullen, *No Easy Answers: The Truth Behind the Murders at Columbine* by Brooks Brown, *Rampage: The Social Roots of School Shootings* by Katherine S. Newman, Cybelle Fox, David J. Harding, Jal Mehta and Wendy Roth and *We Need to Talk About Kevin* by Lionel Shriver.

For films I watched *Elephant* by Gus Van Sant, *Zero Day* by Ben Coccio, *Bowling for Columbine* by Michael Moore, *If* by Lindsay Anderson, *The Wave* by Dennis Gansel and *Surviving Sandy Hook* by Jezza Neumann.

JL: How do you ensure your research is balanced? Or do you? There are very polarised views about the causes of school shootings in America. Do you take all view-points into consideration when considering the subject?

RP: I try to take in a wide range of references and hope in doing so to unearth some kind of consensus opinion, or at the very least challenge any pre-conceived ideas I may personally have. For example, with rampage shootings many people seem on the surface to blame easy access to weapons and a lack of strict gun control. But if you look at what the gun lobby in the United States say, there is a strong case in their argument that it is not guns which kill people, but the people who use them. Equally Michael Moore in *Bowling For Columbine* points out that they have just as many guns in Canada as in the USA yet only a fraction of the gun deaths. This could lead us to look instead at what causes someone to 'snap' and think the unthinkable.

JL: Are you trying to make a particular point with this series of works, or is it more a case of drawing people's attention to the subject?

RP: With all the projects I work on, I do not aim to present a particular point of view, but instead seek to create an overview which I hope will act as a forum for open debate and discussion. I also hope to produce the material in the most beautiful and sensitive way I can so it may act as a bridge between the subject and the viewer. My approach in this way is drawn from a love of renaissance religious painting, especially crucifixion imagery which offers up depictions of the most brutal form of execution portrayed in the most sublime manner possible. With this series in particular I was especially drawn to renaissance paintings of 'Massacre of the Innocence's', only in this case thinking around how it is the innocence themselves who have carried out the killing.

JL: You work from found images of the scenes of these shootings- how do you go about selecting the images to use- what are you looking for in them?

RP: I like to gather as much pictorial material together as I can. I then sift through it over a long period and attempt to distil it down into a visual gestalt. By using photographic source material I aim to build up layers of emotional separation between myself and the subject. I will then often combine several images from a scene to form a new 'composite' work which I seek to visually enhance through the muting and harmonising of colours, simplifying of detail and application of perspective.

JL: What would you say to someone who considers this topic to be too distressing to work from/present or considers the topic to be 'off limits'?

RP: That many of our films, novels, children's stories, fairy tales, plays and soap operas deal with some of the most challenging social issues that face us. In doing so they offer a form of socio-emotional mediation on the subjects they depict. This work attempts to do the same.

24 July 2016