

John-Paul Pryor Interviews Robert Priseman on the series 'Never Knowing Why'

John-Paul Pryor: Talk to us about creating a series based on high school shootings - what are you seeking to say with these images such as that of the Jokela classroom? What is it about empty space (post-act) that fascinates you?

Robert Priseman: Thanks for asking J-P. I have always been interested in the extremes of human behaviour, primarily because they reflect the limits of feeling we all possess. For this series I became fascinated by schools and educational establishments where mass shootings had occurred and found that there have been over one hundred in the USA alone. So I decided to narrow it down to places where students and former students had carried out the attacks.

For the picture of the Jokela classroom, I was thinking a lot about the painting *The Massacre of the Innocents* (produced 1611-12) by the Flemish Baroque artist Peter Paul Rubens when I started it. Ruben's masterpiece went on temporary display at the National Gallery in London shortly after it sold at Sotheby's in 2002 and I made a number of visits to see it while it was there. It's an exceptionally stunning painting and one of the few artistic images I've ever seen which communicates a real terror and masculine power – it's quite visceral. I found myself especially drawn to the contrasts between the muscular bulk of the soldiers against the softness of infant flesh and the cold hard steel of a sword against tender giving skin.

Considering Rubens *The Massacre of the Innocents* led me to wonder if I could attempt my own version of a massacre of the innocents for the 21st century, only in this case thinking around how it is the innocent themselves who have carried out the killing. My approach in making this a 'post-act' work was to align it with my own 'meditative' personality. The upturned tables and chairs of the Jokela classroom in some way seem to maintain a contemplative approach whilst also absorbing some of the pictorial dynamism of Rubens.

JP: How do you hope to engage the viewer when you present these empty scenes - what changes when these photographs are represented as paintings? What is the process like for you to explore these subjects?

RP: I like to gather as much pictorial material together as I can, then sift through it over a long period and attempt to distil it down into a visual gestalt.

By using photographic source material such as witness pictures and crime scene photos I aim to build up layers of emotional separation between myself and the subject. I then combine several images to

help form a new 'composite' work which I seek to visually enhance through the muting and harmonising of colours, simplifying of detail and the application of renaissance perspective to help draw the viewer into the work. In this way I hope to create a bridge between the subject and the audience.

JP: You often focus on dark, violent or difficult subject matter - what for you is the role of the artist in society? Why do you choose the subject matter you do?

RP: Many of our films, novels, children's stories, fairy tales, plays and soap operas deal with some of the most challenging issues which face us today. In doing so they offer a form of socio-emotional mediation on the subjects they depict and I think that this has also become the same territory many contemporary artists seek to explore. Of course artists have always examined brutal and disturbing subjects, but in the distant past this was largely done through the mediating lens of depicting biblical and historical stories of martyrdom, exodus, battle and betrayal. Nowadays though we often go directly to the subject itself where the mass media acts as the mediating lens we draw from.

JP: In painting portraits of Dylan Klebold what did you hope to achieve? What kind of response do you hope for from the viewer when they engage with the portraiture?

RP: Dylan Klebold was especially interesting to me. On the morning of 20 April 1999, along with his friend Eric Harris, he entered Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado and together they shoot dead twelve of their fellow students and a teacher. At 12.08pm, in the school library, they turned their guns on themselves and committed suicide.

Dylan was only 17 years old when he carried out this shooting. He had been a bright student and came from a good family home, yet he appears to have felt marginalized and alienated by his community. In a journal entry on 15 April 1997, he wrote, "*OOOh god i HATE my life, i want to die really bad right now – let's see what i have that's good: A nice family, a good house, food, a couple good friends, & possessions. What's bad: no girls (friends or girlfriends), no other friends except a few, nobody accepting me even though i want to be accepted, me doing badly & being intimidated in any & all sports, me looking wierd & acting shy.*"

It is this marginalisation which seems to have been the trigger for the awful event he carried out, and so I painted a series of seven portraits of him at various ages to see if this estrangement is something we can sense in his face, which of course we can't. By doing this I hope to create a sensitivity to Dylan Klebold and open up a discussion around the idea that it is not necessarily ourselves and members of our communities who are 'born bad', but that sometimes good people do bad things, and that these are triggered by a build-up of external influences.

JP: What do you think that these mass killings say about American culture, and in particular bullying culture? Can you see a way back from the gun culture in the US? What do you think underpins the fascination with guns in US culture?

RP: On the surface it seems easy to blame trouble-free 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 his film *Bowling For Columbine* points out that they have just as many guns per head of population in Canada as in the USA, yet only a fraction of the gun deaths. This should lead us to look instead at what causes someone to emotionally 'snap' and think the unthinkable, that it isn't the guns themselves which cause the killings, but often a culture of bullying and marginalisation enabled by a 'jock' culture. This seems further enabled by institutions when they choose to turn a blind eye to injustice when it's enacted by the strong on the weak and socially alienated.

So I would say that whilst mass shooting is prevalent in the USA, 'going postal' isn't confined to guns and the States alone, that in other countries mass killings take place with machete, poisonous gas and suicide bomb as well as guns and are also enacted by the socially marginalised. And whilst there is a love of arms in the USA, and that written throughout American films, novels and TV programs is a story of injustice being righted by the gun, it is not guns per se which kill. Killing is enabled when a society fails to notice and nurture the individuals who fall through the cracks. Our way back from this is to become more attuned to those who are falling behind, to become more nurturing and caring for our weakest members.

JP: Why did you employ crayons when drawing the outside of the schools?

RP: I wanted to conceptualize the work. Crayons are traditionally a drawing medium used by kids to create pictures and this really interested me. They heighten color and make everything seem more vibrant and joyful. I liked the idea that by working in crayons I could somehow attach to the drawing of children, especially work which is produced within school, and that this would make them seem safe, carefree and naïve. I hoped this approach would set up a contrast to the events which took place inside the schools depicted, schools and colleges which have become synonymous with mass shooting such as Sandy Hook, Columbine and Virginia Tech.

JP: Do you think given the surge of global violence in the zeitgeist that *Never Knowing Why* is even more relevant right now? What is your ultimate ambition with *Never Knowing Why*?

RP: I think *Never Knowing Why* forms part of a larger picture which relates to terrorism, extremism and ultra-violence. It is my hope that as a series it can help form part of a broader dialogue on the subject which will help us move away from vigilantism and towards a caring vigilance.

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