

# Never Knowing Why



Seabrook Press



# Never Knowing Why

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Published in conjunction with an art project of the same title  
Paintings and drawings by Robert Priseman

Text by Robert Priseman, Jessica Litherland and John-Paul Pryor

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(Top) Ipswich Museum (Bottom) Xi'an Academy of Fine Arts  
2014 and 2015

An Introduction by  
Jessica Litherland



# Introduction

Robert Priseman is an artist who has spent the past decade exploring the darker side of human nature in an effort to expose its gentler and more understanding heart. Believing that fundamentally we are all kind and share a desire to help each other, the thought that we can also be cruel, destructive and vindictive is a great mystery to him. Fueled by the desire to understand what motivates us to behave in the ways we do Robert has tackled subjects in his paintings as wide ranging as the Holocaust, suicide and civil war.

Building on these previous series Robert now presents a selection of new works looking at the phenomena of high school shootings in the USA. The project consists of three sections. The first comprises seven portraits of Dylan Klebold, each based on photographs taken of him at various stages of his childhood. Dylan was one of the two senior year students who carried out a rampage shooting at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado on the 20th April 1999 and is one of the focuses of the exhibition.

The second set of pictures is a group of nine drawings of the outsides of schools in the USA where students have carried out shootings, employing coloured crayons as a medium so that the pictures might resonate with the drawings children produce.

The third part of the exhibition consists of five oil paintings which depict the insides of empty class rooms and school corridors where shootings have taken place. They are deliberately empty of people so that we might imagine ourselves standing in them, contemplating what has happened.

While there are no easy answers to such tragedies this body of paintings and drawings aims to explore how they may develop.

Jessica Litherland 2016



# About 'Never Knowing Why'

Given that this series of paintings and drawings is focused around the theme of high school shootings it's perhaps not surprising that people often ask me "Why do you paint such dark subject matter?" And I have to say it's a really good question, because whilst much of my work over the past decade has focused on subjects such as the Holocaust, suicide and civil war, I don't think I ever set out to spend so much time exploring the darker side of human nature. My sole aim when I began painting was to produce pictures which were really beautiful to look at, and so I initially concentrated on the traditional genres of landscape, portrait and still-life. Yet after a few years I began to feel there was something missing, that painting the wholly beautiful was somehow one-dimensional.

I've always taken pleasure in reading and especially enjoy studying history, popular psychology and classic novels, and I guess what unites all these books in my mind is a desire to understand what motivates us to behave in the ways we do. Fundamentally I believe we are all kind and share a desire to help each other, so for me the thought that we can also be cruel, destructive and vindictive is a great mystery. It was with this thought in mind that I began to approach the idea of producing sets of paintings around challenging themes, yet in a way which appears visually beautiful, so that we might linger with sensitivity when looking at them.

Working in this way I began to paint series such as No Human Way to Kill 2007-8, which explored the phenomenon of execution, SUMAC 2011, which examined the deposition sites of the Ipswich murders and how a traumatic death can help define the sacred, and Nazi Gas Chambers: From Memory to History 2008-9, which considered how a society as culturally advanced as that of Germany could also have engineered the Holocaust. For this new series I wanted to look at the phenomena of high school shootings in the USA and particularly where mass shootings have been carried out by students on their class mates.

In starting a new series I usually find influences from the

art of the past, especially where it transmits some kind of deep emotion to me, and I use this as a kind of bridge to the new work. No Human Way to Kill, was specifically influenced by renaissance crucifixion paintings, most especially The Mond Crucifixion 1503, by Raphael which hangs in The National Gallery, London, while SUMAC was influenced by early religious icon paintings and Nazi Gas Chambers: From Memory to History by Mark Rothko's Seagram Murals 1958-59, which are on display in Tate Modern.

This new series has been strongly influenced by paintings of 'massacre of the innocents' and most especially the Massacre of the Innocents 1611-12 by Peter Paul Rubens which has been on loan to the National Gallery. In approaching this new group of pictures I didn't want to look at adults who massacre as in Rubens' painting, but instead wished to place a focus on where 'innocents' had killed 'innocents'. I divided the project into three sections. The first is made up of seven portraits of Dylan Klebold, each based on photographs taken of him at various stages of his childhood. Dylan was one of the two senior year students who carried out a rampage shooting at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado on the 20th April 1999, a date chosen because it was Adolf Hitler's birthday.

Dylan, along with his friend Eric Harris shot and killed 12 of their fellow students and a teacher whilst wounding 21 others. They then committed suicide in the school library. I was especially struck by Dylan, who seemed from the stories about him to have been a 'nice kid', well brought up, bright and a little bit awkward socially - yet, or maybe because of this, he ended up being picked on and bullied. In carrying out these portraits I wanted to see if it was possible to tell what was to come by looking at his face, to see if there was a hint of his future there.

The second set of pictures in this series is a group of nine drawings of the outsides of schools in the USA where students have carried out shootings. I specifically wanted to employ coloured crayons so that the pictures might resonate with the drawings children produce and hope that the vibrant palette used may in some way echo the sense we have of schools being a safe haven where our young can be nurtured and educated.

For the third and final part of this project I have produced

five oil paintings which depict the insides of empty class rooms and school corridors where shootings have taken place. Largely based on crime scene photographs, the paintings have re-created the environments in a simplified way, making use of the geometry of perspective. They are deliberately empty of people so that we might imagine ourselves standing in them, contemplating what has happened.

Columbine is the key to this series and is the one school which features in all three sets of pictures, creating a thread which runs through them. I chose this because although it was by no means the first school shooting in America, it seems to have acted as a template for the many more which have followed. The fact that it was carried out on Hitler's birthday also seems resonant to my own thinking, because when I was developing *Nazi Gas Chambers: From Memory to History* it appeared to me that genocide somehow has its seed in bullying. But where the Holocaust was an act perpetrated by a group who created a bullying culture, the agents of high school shootings appear to be the victims of bullying who hit back at the feelings of exclusion and rejection which have been created for them by bullies. Young men like Dylan Klebold, in this context, appear to carry out rampage shootings in order to assert a need they have to be noticed and taken seriously by a peer group who have mocked and rejected them.

Robert Priseman 2015



John-Paul Pryor Interview  
With Robert Priseman

# John-Paul Pryor Interview with Robert Priseman on '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',

that it isn't the guns themselves which cause killings, but often a culture of bullying and marginalisation. 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.

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.

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.

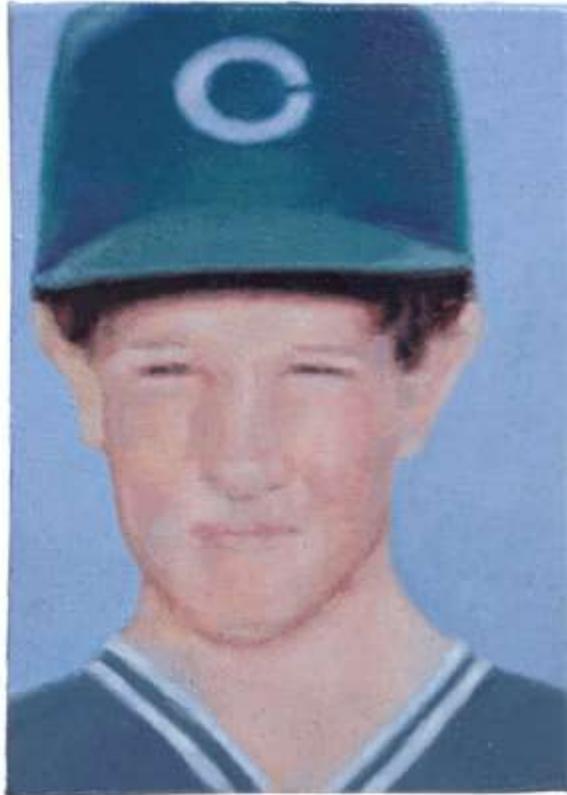
25 July 2016

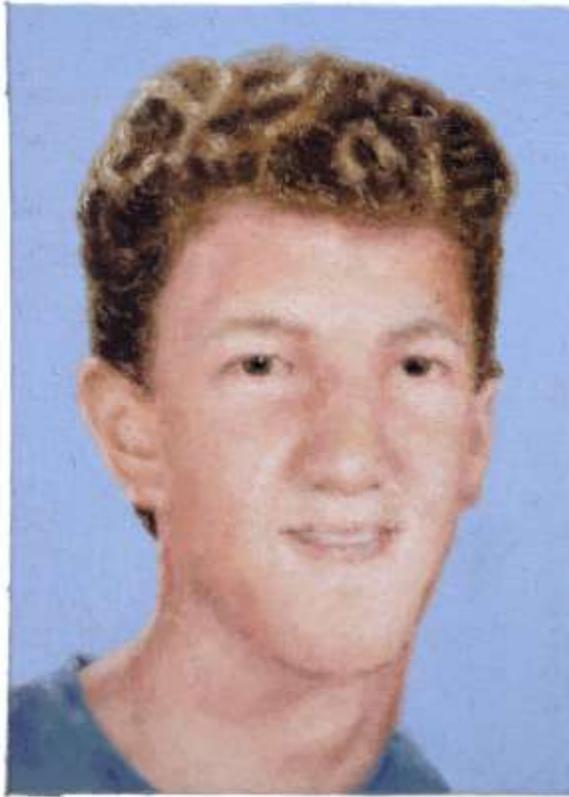


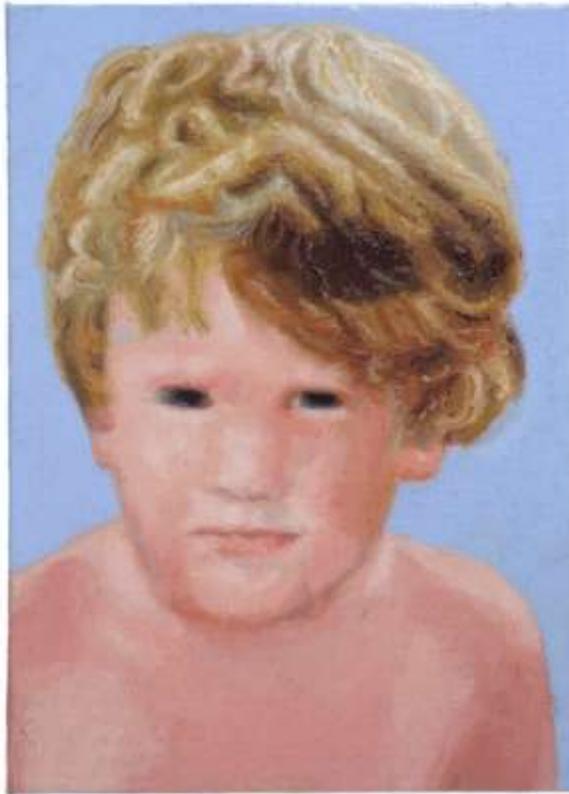
Seven Portraits of  
Dylan Klebold

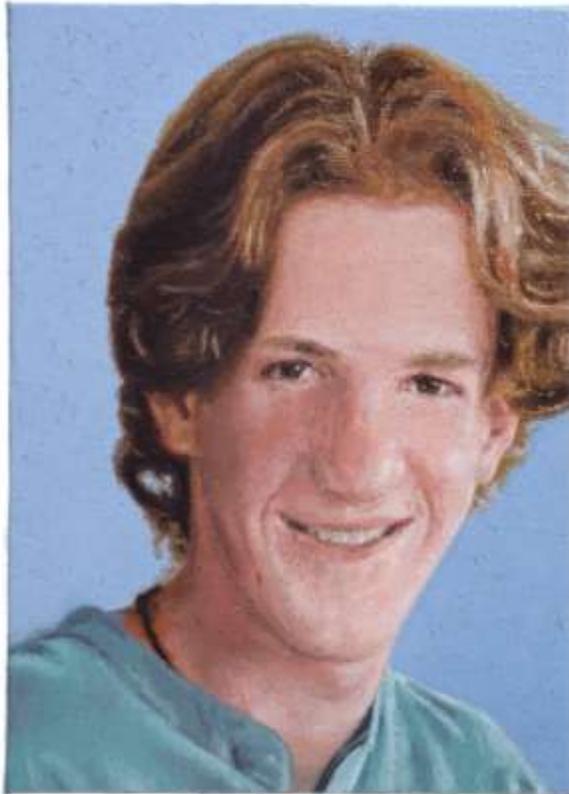


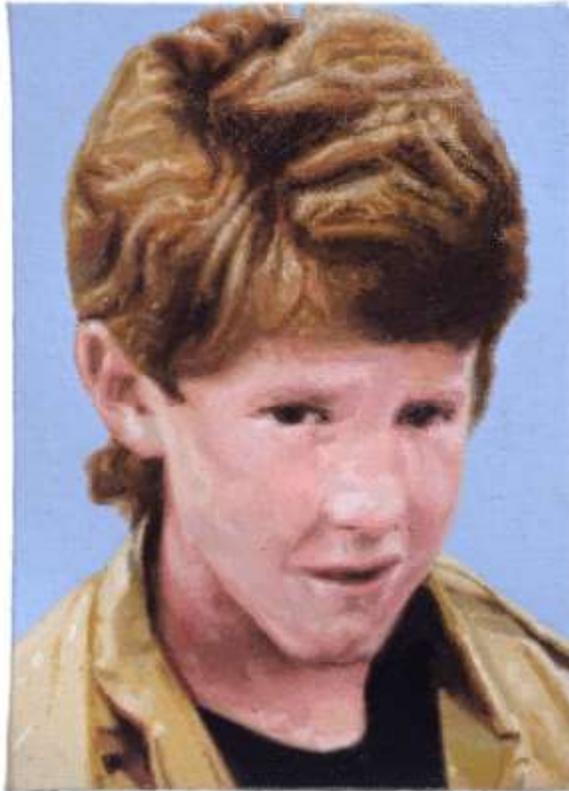


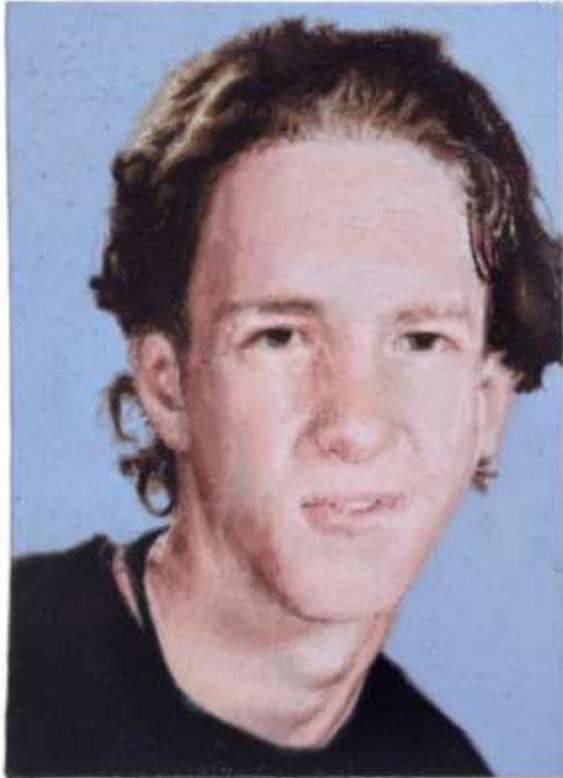














# Nine School Crayon Drawings

## Columbine High School

The Columbine High School massacre occurred on 20 April, 1999, in the state of Colorado. The perpetrators were two senior students at the school, Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold. They killed 12 students, one teacher and injured a further 21 people. In addition to the shootings, the complex and highly planned attack involved a fire bomb to divert firefighters, propane tanks converted to bombs placed in the cafeteria, 99 explosive devices, and car bombs.



## Louisiana Technical College

On the morning of 8 February, 2008, 23-year-old nursing student Latina Williams shot six rounds with a .357 revolver in a second-floor classroom at the Baton Rouge campus of LTC before turning the gun on herself and committing suicide. The two victims were Karsheika Graves (21) and Taneshia Butler (26), who were both fatally shot.



## Red Lake High School

The Red Lake shootings occurred on 21 March, 2005 in two places on the Red Lake Indian Reservation, Minnesota. That morning, 16-year-old Jeffrey Weise killed his grandfather (a tribal police officer) and his grandfather's girlfriend at their home. After taking his grandfather's police weapons and vest, Weise then drove his grandfather's police car to Red Lake Senior High School, where he had been a student a few months before.

Weise then shot and killed seven people at the school and wounded five others. The dead included an unarmed security guard at the entrance of the school, then a teacher and five students.



## Cleveland Elementary School

The Cleveland Elementary School shooting occurred on 29 January, 1979, in San Diego, California. Shots were fired at the school killing the principal and a custodian, while eight children and a police officer were injured.

A 16-year-old girl named Brenda Spencer, who lived in a house across the street was convicted of the shootings. A reporter had reached Spencer by phone while she was still in the house just after the incident and asked her why she carried out the shooting. She replied: "I don't like Mondays", which inspired Bob Geldof to write the Boomtown Rats' song of the same name.



## Sandy Hook Elementary School

On 14 December 2012, in Newtown, Connecticut 20-year-old Adam Lanza fatally shot 20 children aged between 6 and 7 years old, as well as six adult staff members. Prior to driving to the school, Lanza shot and killed his mother at their Newtown home. As first responders arrived at the scene, Lanza committed suicide by shooting himself in the head.

The incident was the deadliest mass shooting at a high school or grade school in U.S. history and the third-deadliest mass shooting by a single person. It prompted renewed debate around the issue of gun control in the States, including proposals for making a background-check system universal and for new federal legislation banning the sale and manufacture of certain types of semi-automatic firearms.



## Frontier Middle School

The Frontier Middle School shooting occurred on 2 February 1996 in Moses Lake, Washington. The gunman, 14-year-old Barry Dale Loukaitis killed his algebra teacher and two students, then held his classmates hostage for ten minutes before a gym coach subdued him.



## Westside Middle School

On 24 March, 1998, two students from Westside Middle School, located approximately two miles west of Jonesboro conducted an armed ambush on teachers and students, which resulted in five dead and ten others injured. The shooters, 11 year old Andrew Golden and 13 year old Mitchell Johnson, were arrested and prosecuted for the crime.



## Rocori High School

The Rocori High School shooting was a school shooting that occurred at Rocori High School on 24 September, 2003 in Cold Spring, Minnesota, United States. The shooter was identified as Rocori High freshman John Jason McLaughlin, who shot and killed 15-year-old freshman Seth Bartell and 17-year-old senior Aaron Rollins. Prior to the shooting, McLaughlin was described as a "quiet and withdrawn" student with severe acne.



## Virginia Tech

The Virginia Tech massacre, occurred on 16 April, 2007, on the campus of Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University in Blacksburg, Virginia. Seung-Hui Cho, a senior at Virginia Tech, shot and killed 32 people and wounded 17 others in two separate attacks (another six people were injured escaping from classroom windows), approximately two hours apart, before he committed suicide.

The attacks received international media coverage and drew widespread criticism of U.S. gun culture, sparking intense debate about gun violence, gun laws, gaps in the U.S. system for treating mental health issues, the perpetrator's state of mind, the responsibility of college administrations, privacy laws and journalism ethics.





# Five School Interiors















Jessica Litherland Interview  
with Robert Priseman



# Jessica Litherland Interview With Robert Priseman

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



# Thanks Due

Doug Atfield  
Marco Cali  
Carol Gant  
Laura Leahy  
Jessica Litherland  
John-Paul Pryor  
Fred Robinson  
Emma Roodhouse  
Ally Seabrook  
Stephen Snoddy  
Dan Twyman  
Lisa Wade  
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Ipswich Museums and Art Gallery  
Rugby Museum and Art Gallery  
The New Art Gallery Walsall  
Xi'an Academy of Fine Arts



