

# On Why I collect Art

Historically Britain has nurtured some of the world's greatest painters, from Holbein in the sixteenth century, to Constable and Joseph Wright of Derby in the eighteenth, Turner and Atkinson Grimshaw in the nineteenth and Freud, R. B. Kitaj, Rego and Francis Bacon in the twentieth century. This level of excellence in the art of painting in the United Kingdom has continued to evolve into the twenty-first century with a new generation of artists who have made the production of significant painting their life's work.

In 2014 I came to realise that many of this new wave of British painters had yet to be collected with same the geographical and chronological focus of their predecessors and foreign contemporaries. So, with the help of my wife, I began the process of bringing together a body of work by artists which followed the very simple criteria of being painting produced after the year 2000 within the British Isles. The painters we began collecting included European Sovereign Painters Prize winner Susan Gunn, John Moores Prize winner Nicholas Middleton, 54th Venice Biennale exhibitor Marguerite Horner, East London Painting Prize Winner Nathan Eastwood, John Player Portrait Award Winner Paula MacArthur, Griffin Art Prize exhibitor Matthew Krishanu, Birtles Prize Winner Simon Burton and Mary Webb who received a solo show at the Sainsbury Centre for Visual Arts in 2011.

So far we have brought together over 120 paintings by more than 100 artists, which has now become the very first collection of art dedicated to twenty-first-century British painting in the UK. Creating this focus has enabled us to uncover a number of significant themes which at first were hard to discern. In it we can see that painting is now expressing itself along the same lines as the slow food movement, meditation and unplugged music. Within the era of the digital revolution, it offers a direct and contemplative connection with the handmade, with real objects which mediate our emotional makeup. We see this most clearly in the fact that the paintings within the collection display no clear and consistent group narrative or movement, and are instead an assembly of highly individualistic interpretations which offer visual interactions with the physical world.

Another big change we begin to notice is the shift from the predominantly male dominance the genre experienced up to the end of the twentieth century to a significant ascendancy by female practitioners. Of the 75 painters so far represented in the collection, 44 are women. Within the field, the multitude of 'isms' which previously made up the landscape of twentieth-century art have instead been replaced by the one big 'ism' of the twenty-first century: 'individualism'. In the light of this we may begin to think of and experience paintings not as works of art produced from the hands of specifically female or male artists, but from a group of individuals; unique, talented and united by the common bonds of time and place and a desire to connect to the elusive experience of what it is to be human.

Yet some things have remained consistent. When we look to the past we notice how many of the greatest painters who practiced in the UK were born abroad, including Holbein, Freud and Auerbach who were born in Germany, Bacon who was from Ireland, Kitaj the USA and Rego who was born in Portugal. Indeed it is this international influence which has probably helped create such a strong and vibrant tradition in the genre in Britain and which is most reflective of our civilisation as a broadly international and multicultural society. In the twenty-first century we see this strand of internationalism continuing in British painting and being signified in the collection by Monica Metsers who was born in New Zealand, Claudia Böse and Silvie Jacobi who were born in Germany, Laura Leahy and Julie Umerle who are from the USA, Alison Pilkington who is from Ireland and Ehryn Torrell who was born in Canada.

In bringing this body of work together we are seeking to explore, promote and question the relevance of painting and the handmade work of art in the digital age through public loans, exhibitions, talks and publications. I am delighted to say it has continued to grow through direct working and personal relationships with many of the artists represented and been enabled by painting swaps, donations and occasional purchases. We especially welcome loan requests from schools, not-for-profit galleries and art museums in the UK and abroad. We have worked with, and continue to work with, venues including the Museum of Richmond, London, Huddersfield Art Gallery, University of Suffolk, The Minorities Art Gallery, Colchester, Ipswich Museums and Gallery, China Academy of Art, Hangzhou, XAFA, Xi'an, Yantai Art Museum, Jiangsu Arts and Crafts Museum, Nanjing, Tianjin Academy of Fine Arts and The National Museum of Poland, Gdańsk.

**Robert Priseman 2019**