

# Jules Clarke Interview with Robert Priseman

**Robert Priseman** Historically, many of the greatest painters in the UK were born outside of the British Isles, we might think of Van Dyke coming from Belgium, Holbein, Freud and Auerbach from Germany, Paula Rego from Portugal and R.B. Kitaj from the USA.

You were born in New York then moved to London. I wonder what brought you here and if the legacy of previous generations of artists impacts on the way you think about your practice?

**Jules Clarke** I moved to London as a reluctant teenager in 1989 for my father's job – he worked for Cadbury's. We weren't supposed to stay for long, but I never ended up moving back to the US. I admire artists like Peter Doig who draws on his Canadian childhood, but seems to integrate the nostalgia with a greater perspective into something like a personal magical realism. Perhaps his UK perspective freed his memories from Canada in some way? I think there is great value for the expat in having perspective on your native country, as well as your adopted one.

**RP** Many creative people are considered 'outsiders' to their communities in some way. Do you think a forced disconnection is a benefit to the creative process?

**JC** I'm more interested in a kind of observation which is not necessarily about being marginalised, but takes into account the alienation one feels from technology – in the infinite number of images and the speed of information and how it affects our perception, memory, and our relationships with images. A painted image, as a hand-made surface created over long periods of time, feels like a resistance to the speed of the internet, film and the digital world. At the same time, I want to develop a painted surface which relates to this world and the pattern of the screen and of movement.

**RP** The images in your work concentrate around family life, images of weddings, domestic interiors and gardens. What is it about these personal scenes which appeals so strongly to you?

**JC** I have always been interested in finding the extraordinary, or sometimes just the sinister, in the everyday. I like the idea that mundane subjects can reveal something more significant, articulated in a particular way through the medium of painting. Something about the physical communication of paintings can strike these psychological or emotional truths. I'm interested in the work of Vuillard in this sense, how a concentration on pattern and distortion finds meaning beyond his ordinary domestic subjects, in a very quiet and ambiguous way.

I started working from (the T.V. show) 'You've Been Framed' years ago at college, and it's still a source for many of my paintings. The degraded quality of the film relates to painting for me – as colours bleed and the edges between things become ambiguous. Also, there is an honesty about some of the moments captured – perhaps people are never more human than when they're slipping up, or falling over, as superficial pretences and composure fall away. The possibility of finding something

significant within such a mundane medium appeals to me, as well as an interest in the sinister side to humour.

I am also very absorbed in domestic life, with 2 daughters and a third on the way! The hours of isolation in the studio are always counteracted with family life, and the balance is often difficult to maintain, but the studio world and home life also have to interact to a degree. I have been thinking a lot about the recent Vanessa Bell exhibition at Dulwich Picture Gallery, and her successful and maverick immersion of art and life.

**RP** It is true to say that all of your paintings are sourced from video stills and photographs. Do you take any of these images yourself, or do you acquire them all second-hand?

**JC** My sources are always photographs I take of the moving screen – I don't freeze the frame as I'm interested in the surprising and distorted things the camera often does to compensate for the lack of information as it tries to deal with extracting a still image from a moving one. It seems to relate to one moment becoming another, and to the act of memory, which is often very distorted.

**RP** What is it about creating a sense of emotional separation from the world you observe appeal so strongly?

**JC** I like the objectivity of preserving the way technology presents a moment – the interaction of the moving image with the physicality of the screen, and the camera's ability to record, and often distort, a moment. It seems like this detachment can unlock what is significant, more than I could through fabrication or imagination.

But there is a physical side to the painting and my relationship to control that seems important too – I try to use the paint in a very fluid way, in many layers over time. There has to be an element of independence for the paint, somewhere between referring to the source and retaining a material independence. The painted surface becomes a personal record occurring over time, and the physicality of materialising something in paint is a slow process for me, at odds with the speed of images from film, tv, and the internet.

Also, I am always drawn to areas of ambiguity to balance what is recognisable, since I find this ambiguity resists a straightforward emotional or narrative meaning, or can also somehow have more meaning in itself, like when a person starts to resemble an animal or a ghost. I am always faithful to the ambiguities in the image, however, so even if they are areas of abstraction they are actually representational.

**RP** I'm interested in parallels your work draws with the paintings of Walter Sickert. Like you he was born outside of the UK and moved to London, and like you he produced paintings of mainly domestic

scenes which were often adapted from mass media imagery. For both of you it is almost as though the artist is a floating and detached observer. What do you think of that?

**JC** Although the detached perspective through the filter of mass media imagery is interesting to me in Sickert's work, I am much more drawn to the work of Vuillard who was also painting domestic scenes in a similar period. The way distortion and claustrophobia of pattern in Vuillard's compositions merge the subject with the scene in an ambiguous emotional and metaphorical space is, for me, more unsettling.

**RP** How fascinating. When I look at it now it seems very clear that a painting such as your 'Red Curtains' 2016, which appears to show a figure standing in a (bedroom) has a very clear and powerful connection to Vuillard's 'Le Corsage Rayé', 1895, especially in terms of its visual patterning. Can you explain a little more about the ways in which this kind of artistic influence transfers and informs your own practice?

**JC** 'Red Curtains' came from a 'You've Been Framed' episode where two people are laughing and falling into some curtains. I liked how the patterns and colours of the recorded image enfold the people into the curtains. There seemed to be something familiar and domestic, and also sinister and menacing about the composition. It's a small painting but is complicated and the surface was built up over many months. When someone suggested a connection to Vuillard's work, and also to the Victorian short story 'The Yellow Wallpaper' by Charlotte Perkins Gilman, both these influences seemed relevant in allowing an individual to merge with their surroundings, both on psychological and visual levels. Although historic references, they related to the contemporary project of finding a painted language of an individual in a surface from the screen, whose place is patterned within a changing moment.

**RP** Who else has a strong influence on your practice as an artist?

**JC** I've always been interested in Luc Tuymans for his emotional, but subdued, engagement with reproduced images. Jaqueline Utely is a contemporary painter of domestic, small scale work which I think has a strange emotional fragility and Kaye Donohie's work interests me for her approach to figuration with an internal and dreamy, as well as cinematic, feeling to it.

**RP** Do you make preparatory drawings or prefer to go straight to paint?

**JC** I have the photographs made into old-fashioned slides and project those to draw directly onto the canvas, or sometimes onto paper. I like the process of drawing from these shadows, relating to film and projection. It allows more fluidity than a grid for me, like imprinting the traces of a projection.

**RP** I get a sense that the abstracted patterning apparent in Vuillard's paintings not only creates an emotional separation, but also create a simultaneous emotional connection with his mother who was a

dress maker. For you, abstracted patterning is created by the distortions of the television screen which then sets up an emotional distancing. Does it also create a simultaneous emotional connection, and if so how?

**JC** I think it places the individual within their surroundings, even if the moment is streaming past. My great grandfather was one of the founders of Metro Goldwyn Mayer, so maybe there is an emotional connection for me in the medium of film and moving image.

**RP** What a special connection to have. I notice how many of your paintings, such as 'Liesel' 2012, 'Freeman's Pool' 2013 and 'Brink' 2015 are quite monochromatic, whereas other works such as 'Parade' 2012, 'Begin at the Beginning' 2014 and 'Alice' 2016, make use of quite intense colour. Can you explain a little as to why some of your works are subdued and others quite vibrant?

**JC** The ones which are monochromatic allow me to focus more on form, and what I consider 'drawing' in paint. Some are from black and white films, or scenes lacking colour like the rainy gazebo in 'The Sound of Music', and often those are easier to resolve. While adding colour complicates, the colours from a screen which are lit from behind have a vibrancy I'm always trying to capture in paint. I use thin washes of colour, which can be difficult to control.

**RP** One thing which strikes me quite clearly about your painting is how many of the figures stand still, and as they stand they seem to occupy the edge of a moment of change. On the outside they appear calm, where from our own experience we know they will likely be feeling something, some kind of emotional excitement or interference.

Your use of camera distortion through which to observe these moments seems to provide an outer visualisation of this inner feeling, where painting appears to act as a metaphor for human emotion. Do you feel this is true?

**JC** I think that is very insightful and captures the interaction of camera/screen distortion and human emotion, through the filter of the fluidity of painting, which is very much my project.

**RP** Thank you so much for sharing some insights on your work, it has been absolutely fascinating.

**29<sup>th</sup> July 2017**