

ART2LIFE

ACADEMY

Interviewer: Hi, everyone. I'm excited to be here in New York City today and talking to Rob Szot, who has an opening this coming week. This coming week? This week-

Robert Szot: Yeah, this week, mm-hmm (affirmative).

Interviewer: At the Anita Rogers Gallery. So we're down in SoHo and we're talking with Rob, who I know a lot of you know and follow on Instagram, so you're probably going to be really excited to hear from him. I wish you could be here in this space because it's magnificent. Thank you, Rob, for-

Robert Szot: It's my pleasure. Thank you-

Interviewer: Taking the time, because I know-

Robert Szot: I really appreciate it.

Interviewer: You were just telling me you have another show coming up in October.

Robert Szot: In about six weeks from now, but I'm perfectly happy to sit down with you. So thank you.

Interviewer: Great, great. Well, the work is amazing. But before we get to that, tell me a little bit about how you became an artist. I mean, was it just always a done deal, or were there some side roads?

Robert Szot: Yeah, I think there are no straight lines as far as an art career is concerned with anyone. My original intention was to be a journalist and a writer. At an early age, I fell in love with Charles Bukowski and Hunter S. Thompson. And was convinced, at least at some portion of my life, that I could be like those people. There was always something very dynamic and passionate about that kind of work that really appealed to me. So I ended up getting a degree in journalism from the University of Texas.

Interviewer: You grew up in Texas?

Robert Szot: I did, yeah. I grew up in Houston and then went to college in Austin before I came here to New York.

Interviewer: You don't have an accent or anything.

Robert Szot: When I get a little bit on the tired side, or if I've had three drinks, then you can't understand a word I'm saying.

Interviewer: Okay, got it. Got it.

Robert Szot: This is my professional New York voice now, yeah.

Interviewer: I see.

Robert Szot: But it was really soon after I got that degree that I realized that journalism really wasn't for me in the long run. Call it more of a feeling than anything else. There wasn't any specific incident that got me off the track with writing. For a number of years in my early 20s, I really didn't know what I was going to do with my life. Music was important to me, but not on any level that could provide a sustainable career, I don't think. But I guess the common thread throughout was one of creativity, and having a voice and having an ability to author a vision. So I had to find something that could accommodate that. I remember I went to Italy with my brother and I saw the work of Egon Schiele for the first time.

Interviewer: Wow, yeah.

Robert Szot: I had never really been exposed to anything quite like that. It wasn't his subject matter necessarily, even though obviously, it's a very intense subject matter that he worked with. I looked at his work and I was actually fascinated by what I perceived to be a very limited vocabulary, just a line here or a little bit of wash or water coming to there.

Interviewer: With so much emotion.

Robert Szot: But he was saying so much, and I was really fascinated by that, and struck by it. I think like anybody, I just started to emulate his work, doing some really bad one off sketches of [crosstalk 00:03:34]-

Interviewer: But you have no art background-

Robert Szot: No, no.

Interviewer: So you just bought a sketchbook and started playing around?

Robert Szot: I did. I did, yeah. I remember being on the plane back from Italy, and I was just feverishly just going through all of his work, and just consuming as much of it as I possibly could. And then regurgitating it into some sort of ... not in a very successful way, but I felt like I was on a path at that point. And it felt good, you know?

Interviewer: Wow. Did you think then, I should go to school?

Robert Szot: No. Art school really never came up for me. Not because I have some aversion to it, I don't. Certainly there is value in learning technique, and learning about materials and having a space to work. I mean, I think if you're 18 or 19 and 20, and you're developing these hard skills, I think it's important to have a community and a place that you can go and refresh these ideas-

Interviewer: But how did you know that? I mean, as a kid, I would've thought, well, I have to go to school. Nobody-

Robert Szot: They do engrain that in you.

Interviewer: Yeah.

Robert Szot: Maybe I was just sick to death of school at that point, and I thought, you know what-

Interviewer: It's just like, that's not an option.

Robert Szot: I don't know if I could go back.

Interviewer: Yeah.

Robert Szot: And then I remember getting home to Austin and getting back to my life as a computer programmer and my routines. And then someone bought me a book on Mark Rothko for my birthday. Here I was, confronted with somebody that even-

Interviewer: Totally different.

Robert Szot: Had a smaller vocabulary than Egon Schiele.

Interviewer: Right.

Robert Szot: And was saying these important, beautiful things through very simple expression. So of course, started emulating Mark Rothko's work and doing these bad copies of them. I think it was through those experimentations, you begin to get a voice for yourself. You learn who you are as an artist or as a painter. And I think once I was convinced I

knew who I was, which was not the reality, I decided at 25 years old to move to New York City and become an artist and New York City.

Interviewer: Wow.

Robert Szot: I know.

Interviewer: So that would've been 80 something, 90 something?

Robert Szot: No, it would be 90 ... no, I came here in 2001.

Interviewer: Okay, 2001.

Robert Szot: I came here in December of 2001, so it was about a month and a half before September 11th occurred.

Interviewer: Wow, wow.

Robert Szot: So it was a little bit of an odd time to come to New York. I think in hindsight, the benefit of having experienced that is that you see a city that you love and that you want to be a part of undergo a tremendous amount of pressure. And to see how people came together during that time, how we all carried each other through those weeks and months, and even years really, it was remarkable. And I think immediately, it made a part of the community.

Interviewer: A part of it, right.

Robert Szot: I adhered to everything. And I love that. Look, I'm getting goosebumps talking about it.

Interviewer: Yeah, exactly.

Robert Szot: I love it.

Interviewer: Right.

Robert Szot: It's a very sentimental idea and I realize that, but I'm so attached to this place.

Interviewer: It's funny, there's something about it. Whenever I come to New York, I think two things. It reminds me of visiting my crazy family, or I have this thought that, kind of like sex, I should do this more often. I should come here more often.

Robert Szot: Yeah, I think like that too a lot. I'm like, why isn't this happening more often?

Interviewer: There is something about this city. And it feels like a small town. It's weird.

Robert Szot: It's very strange.

Interviewer: How can it be such a big city, but it feels like a small town?

Robert Szot: I think what's remarkable too is that there is a perception of New York City that is not very pleasant or polite, that a lot of people ... they look at New York as being this very tough place to get along, and everybody's out to get each other. But the reality is, is much different.

Interviewer: If you just need some directions and you ask somebody, you'll have three to five people arguing-

Robert Szot: Listen, New Yorkers love-

Interviewer: Over which is the best way.

Robert Szot: They love to do that. They love to show off how much they know about the city because there is a pride here. There really is. It's like, "Listen, I've survived this long in New York City." It's great. It's a badge of honor, really. And I'm grateful not only to have the opportunity to live in a place like that, and to actively participate, but also to be able to paint here, and to do what I want to do with my life here. It really is a remarkable thing.

Interviewer: Yeah, a lot of gratitude there.

Robert Szot: Exceptional gratitude. I mean, really, things that I can't even put into words. Stuff that really will make you lose sleep at night. It might really ... Is this happening right now?

Interviewer: Is this really happening? Is this my life?

Robert Szot: Yeah, of course. Sure.

Interviewer: Okay. I'm still trying to get over the fact that you just started sketching and painting, and all on your own. No community, no direction.

Robert Szot: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Interviewer: No other artists. And then just decided, I'm going to move to New York and be an artist. You have to be a very optimistic person, I've heard.

Robert Szot: I've always frankly believed that I could do anything.

Interviewer: Anything, yeah. That is huge.

Robert Szot: I think you have to at least think a little bit like that. If you want to express yourself really in any fundamental way, I think you have to have the courage to be able to move forward with whatever ideas you think are good or bad, and you have to be willing to flesh those ideas out, and be comfortable working on them. And then the end of that road is putting them out into a public that they don't know who you are. So you're introducing yourself to strangers through your work.

Robert Szot: There's an amount of fearlessness that I think, that has to come along with that. Not that I'm fearless. I have my doubts and I have my- I waver quite a bit, but I keep it all in the studio. I make sure that whenever I'm down or whatever, it's not negativity, I don't want you to misunderstand. It all gets put on the canvas.

Interviewer: That's what strikes me about your work is that it feels honest.

Robert Szot: I really appreciate that.

Interviewer: It feels honest and it's also ... it's almost like it's so beautifully designed. It's like if you took a handful of pebbles or stones and you dropped them, and they just happened to land exactly in the perfect place, but it's not fussed over and it just happened. That's how they feel to me.

Robert Szot: The reality is, is that I think they're incredibly ... I personally feel like-

Interviewer: Fussed over?

Robert Szot: I fussed over these things quite a bit.

Interviewer: I'm sure you did.

Robert Szot: The process is very much, and I've said this before, it's kaleidoscopic in nature, where you allow one move on the canvas to open up 10, or 15 or 20 other moves. It tends to elongate the process on getting these things finished, but I think the end result, though, is a very comprehensive, complete work that will unfold and tell a story the longer you spend with it. There's a depth there. There are reasons for everything on the canvas. And I think over time, the more you give yourself over to the work, I think the more that it gives back to you.

Interviewer: Tell me about that process. It feels to me like it may be sort of an additive process, and then it becomes a subtractive. Is that how you-

Robert Szot: The best painters in my opinion are the best editors. You, I think, have to be very willing to sacrifice anything on that canvas.

Interviewer: We're talking, you're working in oil-

Robert Szot: Right.

Interviewer: On canvas.

Robert Szot: Oil [inaudible 00:11:33]. And I started to introduce a bit of charcoal in there as well, just to ... To me, the dark charcoal lines, they segment the canvas I think in an interesting way. That's a new thing that I've been working out. I think, you know what it was-

Interviewer: I'm in love with this painting, I just can't stop looking at it.

Robert Szot: I appreciate it.

Interviewer: I really am.

Robert Szot: They had a retrospective of Willem de Kooning's work over at the Mnuchin Gallery recently. His use of charcoal with oil paint, it fascinated me. I think that that's an important thing to highlight too. I don't want to go all over the place, which I tend to do-

Interviewer: It's already happened.

Robert Szot: Yeah, sorry.

Interviewer: I've given up on this.

Robert Szot: I think you should always be learning as well, and not just from other painters. Taking things in your environment ... Like, going to the de Kooning show was, it transformed my work, even in a little way.

Interviewer: Yeah. I've heard artists talk about input output, or inhale exhale, where you get your inspiration and you collect your ideas.

Robert Szot: Sure.

Interviewer: You're just in this place where it can be coming at you from every direction. I mean, there's not only art galleries and museums, but there's just the experience of being in the city too. Do you think that-

Robert Szot: 100%.

Interviewer: Influences your work?

Robert Szot: 100%. I don't think that there's much separation between who I am and the work that I produce. That all along has been my goal. I want someone to-

Interviewer: Know you.

Robert Szot: To be able to look at one of my paintings and at least in their mind, whether it's true or not, sort of rationalize who I am as a person. Because the great art that I love, I have those experiences with. I can stand in front of a Francis Bacon painting, and having never met him, I feel like I know something about him. I feel like we make the same mistakes sometimes in our paintings. It's that commonality. And again, it's extremely sentimental and I understand that.

Interviewer: I don't think so. I think it's really actually ... it's a commonality. I don't think it's-

Robert Szot: Well, see, that's my community, right? That's my art school. It's that commonality, that perceived commonality anyway.

Interviewer: Right.

Robert Szot: I mean, most of these people are long gone. The title of the show is-

Interviewer: Yeah, I was going to ask you about that.

Robert Szot: It references that. It's a line from Blade Runner, which is a great film. The line is, "It's too bad she won't live, but then again, who does?" So my idea there was to co-opt that last part of that sentence because to me, it speaks to the things that remain behind of someone's life after they're gone. And with art, it's not about legacy building, it's not about keeping me around longer. It's about building a relationship with someone that possibly has never met me, or I've passed on, and that relationship continues. I love those relationships, I do. I'm absolutely fascinated with them, I really am, even if they're totally manufactured in my own mind.

Interviewer: No. I mean, it's like writers. It's the same thing.

Robert Szot: Sure, of course.

Interviewer: I'm sure you felt that you were getting to know Bukowski.

Robert Szot: Absolutely.

Interviewer: Yeah.

Robert Szot: I don't know I'm getting to know Bukowski is a very useful thing, but yeah, sure. Yeah. I mean, enough to inflame a passion in me to think, you know what? I can do that.

Interviewer: Right.

Robert Szot: Maybe not as well as him, or not the same thing certainly, but I can give myself over to something larger than myself, and then put it out into the world to be digested as it's going to be digested. I mean, who knows?

Interviewer: So all the titles of these paintings, are you really, really from the end? Artist and models abroad.

Robert Szot: Sure.

Interviewer: Are they connected to the title of the show as well?

Robert Szot: I think the connectivity there is, again, I maybe heard something or read something in my day to day-

Interviewer: That just sounded, resonated.

Robert Szot: That just hooked me, yeah. And I like to leave little hints and clues about my life through my titles that maybe somebody will come across one day and make the connection. It's happened before where someone decodes how I came up with the title for a certain piece, but they're not randomized in any way. They're all connected to me in one way or another. I'm always gathering things.

Interviewer: You're in it.

Robert Szot: I'm in it. I am absolutely in it. And I'm so in it that, I know we discussed this earlier today, that failure was never something I thought about. I committed to something, so that is success in itself.

Interviewer: Right, I love that.

Robert Szot: You have to do that. You have to-

Interviewer: It's like marriage. Maybe, maybe not.

Robert Szot: No. It is the most severe relationship I have ever had. And it happens to be with myself. There are tremendous highs and devastating lows. It's funny too because I get asked a lot about how I arrived here, or what did I do to get into this gallery or that gallery?

Interviewer: That's on my list. What did you do to get into this- no.

Robert Szot: I wish there was some terrible, heartbreaking story that I could tell. It certainly has taken a lot of work. It's taken a lot of commitment on my part, but the reality is, is I really loved every minute of it. I have no complaints. I don't. You caught me at a very rarefied time where I'm feeling very grateful, and I'm very high on all these things.

Interviewer: I can imagine. You just hung this-

Robert Szot: Yeah, we hung this three days ago. Yeah. The response has been terrific and I'm extremely grateful for it. This is good advice to people that are just starting out, have an expectation of both ends of that spectrum, and just be able to take things out of them, learn from them. And you have to live with them and just move on.

Interviewer: Right.

Robert Szot: It's very rewarding and absolutely worth it, without question.

Interviewer: Is your work changing? Are there things that are happening, or are you just really interested ... right now, tell me what you're interested in when you're working on this.

Robert Szot: I think the work is changing.

Interviewer: Hmm, where was I then?

Robert Szot: It's easy for me to illustrate that by looking at work that's 10 years older.

Interviewer: Yes. And I don't know if I've seen your 10 year old work, so I'm not sure how it's changed to today.

Robert Szot: I don't know if you'd notice that much of a difference. I-

Interviewer: You know it, yeah.

Robert Szot: I certainly notice a lot of difference. Again, I think when you are dealing with such personal matters, that there's always going to be a little bit of an embarrassment of seeing older work, not that you hate it, but there are things that you don't do now that you did then. Of course you want to go in and fuss with things, perhaps put your foot through them, I don't know. But I think the work ... for lack of a better term, there is a maturing there that I can feel.

Robert Szot: It's strange because I can make a thousand paintings between now and 10 years from now, and I get to a point where it actually is a little

frustrating for me, because I feel like I should be able to produce these things with a little bit more ease than I used to be able to.

Interviewer: Okay. You mentioned this before. I think you mentioned kaleidoscope.

Robert Szot: Yeah.

Interviewer: So the process, you feel like it's not a simple one?

Robert Szot: No.

Interviewer: But it's necessary.

Robert Szot: It's argumentative in a lot of ways.

Interviewer: Tell me about it.

Robert Szot: Well-

Interviewer: How do you start? How do you start a painting?

Robert Szot: Well, I'm not an idea person. Frankly, I'm not a fan of idea art to be honest with you, simply because I feel like it is a little too leading where the idea is what you're meant to get out of something. And I don't like to be told what to think, or how to look at something. So these paintings really start out as just me attacking an empty canvas. I'm not a terribly good starter because my strength as a painter I think lies more in fixing problems. When I'm faced with a blank canvas, there's just nothing to fix.

Interviewer: You need some problems, yeah.

Robert Szot: Right, yeah. I need to manufacture some difficulties in my life, right? I think that's what I'm talking about. It doesn't matter how many paintings I do, or how much experience I've had making paintings, it's the same argument over and over again. And you think, I know this argument, I know how to solve this problem-

Interviewer: Oh, my god. I so know what you're saying.

Robert Szot: But these paintings are ... they're singularities. They have their individual attributes, they have their personalities and it's never going to be the same answer over and over again. But in my mind, I think, Robert, you've done this.

Interviewer: You've done this, right.

Robert Szot: You've done this so many times. But there's something important to draw out of that. And that is, I think a good painter will make work that is different each time, but there is a string of authorship that runs through all of it.

Interviewer: Right.

Robert Szot: I don't like to do similar work. I like the work to be able to stand on its own, but also to be able to be at harmony when they're all presented.

Interviewer: They're relatives.

Robert Szot: Yeah, yeah. Yeah. So of course, they're all going to have their little quirks about them. And they're all going to be a fight, every last one of them. It's just going to fight me every step of the way-

Interviewer: I'm glad you say that because I've said that before, and I feel like it's not supposed to be. It should be joyful or something, and it's just-

Robert Szot: I hear that a lot too. I hear people talk about the joys of painting and how pleasurable it is. Listen, I love it. It's great, but I rarely get any pleasure out of making a painting. It's funny because people will say to me, "Well, do you like this painting?" And my answer internally anyway is, "I remember the argument I had with this painting, and the feeling isn't great." I'm satisfied with the way it turned out, but the process in getting there was ... it wasn't necessarily-

Interviewer: Describe it. Is it that thing where you walk into the studio, and it's like, "Oh, jeez."

Robert Szot: It can be. Let's say I'm working at night in the studio, I would look at a painting and go, I did very well here, I made the right decisions, I did the right things. I could go to sleep and wake up the next morning, and look at the same painting, and wonder what the hell I was thinking when I went to bed.

Interviewer: I've heard that so many times. It's a common experience.

Robert Szot: Yeah.

Interviewer: It's like that objectivity, you lose it as you're painting, right?

Robert Szot: Yeah. I mean, what am I, amnesia? What is that?

Interviewer: I don't know what that is.

Robert Szot: Am I really tired? What's happening to me?

Interviewer: Right, yeah.

Robert Szot: I don't know. I also find over and over again, there's a real fundamental thing I do in my process, and that is a lot of my motivation comes from this fear of boring myself.

Interviewer: Good.

Robert Szot: I don't want to be bored with the painting.

Interviewer: Right, you want to be engaged some way.

Robert Szot: I want to see it and, yeah, I want it to do something to me. I always find myself very deep into a painting, maybe a month in or whatever, and I'm like, Robert, you're repeating yourself. You've been here. It's good, but it's not enough.

Interviewer: So you have to fuck it up?

Robert Szot: Well, you do. You have to put it in jeopardy. Yeah, you really do. You really have to do something counterintuitive to how you work. And then that puts you in almost a panic mode. You're like, "What have I done here?"

Interviewer: Yeah, you're engaged then.

Robert Szot: Yeah. Then you're forced to go in and finish it appropriately, you know?

Interviewer: Yeah.

Robert Szot: I mean, I've done things to a painting that ... it's crazy. I feel like a crazy person sometimes.

Interviewer: You don't need to tell me. This sounds personal.

Robert Szot: No, I'm glad. It's good, it's good.

Interviewer: Okay. Are you, in your practice, are you there 9:00 to 5:00? What's your practice like?

Robert Szot: Oh, no. I work every day.

Interviewer: 9:00 to 5:00 every day?

Robert Szot: I would say between eight and 10 hours a day.

Interviewer: Really?

Robert Szot: I don't take time off.

Interviewer: Okay, wow. So you're painting eight and 10 hours a day?

Robert Szot: Yeah.

Interviewer: You're working on multiples?

Robert Szot: I find it difficult to work on more than, I'd say, one or two pieces at a time.

Interviewer: Really? Yeah, well, your studio space is ... wouldn't allow it, or-

Robert Szot: Well, yeah. Any obvious new space is a consideration out here in New York. But I just find that I end up repeating myself if I'm doing too many things at once. Again, I really try to avoid that as much as I possibly can. But I don't take breaks, I don't take vacations, simply because I'm where I want to be. I've worked hard and I'm on a really good track, I feel very positive about things. Not only does it not feel like work to me, but I also don't want to lose any ground. I just want to keep pushing it forward. Yeah. And it is why I make it.

Interviewer: How do you know when you're done?

Robert Szot: I think I end up getting a sense of, if I push this thing any further, it's going to be overworked. It's strange because this exhibition, I had a mantra basically- this took me about a year to put together.

Interviewer: Okay, wow.

Robert Szot: My mantra was, it's good, but is it September good? That mantra ended up leading me back to old paintings that I thought were finished. The one that you referenced earlier in particular-

Interviewer: This, yeah.

Robert Szot: It looked much different than its final stage. I thought I had it finished, and I put it away and moved onto other works. Very near the end of my working process for the show, I brought that painting back. There were several others I brought back and ended up reworking. It's weird how your idea of a finished product can change just in such a short amount of time.

Interviewer: And now, seeing everything here, do you want to take anything back to the studio?

Robert Szot: No. It's funny, I don't. I don't. I think one of the things I was concerned about was, once I got everything in the gallery, I can actually be further away from it than the fix feet that I could be away from it in the studio. So I didn't know how they were going to play. And certainly, I couldn't look at everything at once in the studio either, so there were a lot of blind spots, a lot of variables there.

Interviewer: It's really informative to have your work in a showing like this, to surround-

Robert Szot: When I brought it in originally to have it installed, everything was leaned up against the wall. Of course, my immediate thought was, there's nothing that works. It's not working. Honestly, honestly. I thought, oh, my god, what have I done? It just doesn't work together.

Interviewer: Totally [crosstalk 00:26:56]-

Robert Szot: Through the help of the gallery, the head patting and the massaging, like, Robert, it's okay, everything is fine-

Interviewer: Don't panic.

Robert Szot: Don't panic. Once we put everything up on the wall, I got used to the idea that these things are now done and out of my hands. I'm exceptionally satisfied with the show, I really am. I am.

Interviewer: There are a lot of colors that you wouldn't normally expect to be in harmony together.

Robert Szot: Yeah.

Interviewer: But they somehow work.

Robert Szot: I think that's my personality. I think ... I don't have an explanation for it. I don't know anything color theory, I'm not a colorist or anything like that. These are just, in the moment, it made a lot of sense to me. When I put it up there, it made a lot of sense to me. I'm glad that it continues to make sense now that the paintings are finished, you know? That they don't just all fall apart.

Interviewer: Are there paintings that don't work? Or do you never ... you don't ever put it aside and say ... I mean, it's not done until it works, right?

Robert Szot: Right. I rarely give up on a painting. It's just because it's a battle that you want to win, and you don't want to just walk away from it.

Interviewer: No, that's like the white flag.

Robert Szot: It's defeatist, yeah. It really is. I don't want to be that person. The only way to remedy that is to either finish the painting the way you want to finish it, or there's also the very cathartic act of destroying that painting.

Interviewer: Which probably ends up becoming a good painting.

Robert Szot: No, I've cut up a lot.

Interviewer: Oh, okay.

Robert Szot: Like, physically destroying it. Francis Bacon burned most of his paintings after his first show, which I'm horrified by, but I also love the idea at the same time. It makes sense to me.

Interviewer: I don't know, I think cutting them up ... they could then have potential life in another life.

Robert Szot: Yeah, I probably am a little too rash sometimes, but blame it on the coffee, I guess. I don't know.

Interviewer: So you're not enjoying painting? I mean, I know you're not going to ... you do enjoy it, obviously. You love what you do.

Robert Szot: I do, I do.

Interviewer: Is there a feeling that you ... You know how some works come out easy?

Robert Szot: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Interviewer: And some seem like a battle?

Robert Szot: I don't know if I've ever had an easy time-

Interviewer: Never had an easy?

Robert Szot: Honestly, I don't think I ever have. I don't know what it is about my personality or my relationship with painting. I don't know. It always feels like I'm just so ham-fisted and inexperienced. I'm just finding, and attacking, and changing, and editing, and altering, and getting mad at myself, and getting mad at the painting, and getting mad at the weather, you know what I'm saying? Getting mad at the birds outside.

Interviewer: Well, I was going to ask you, what are some challenges you face with creating art? But I guess that's answered that.

Robert Szot: Listen, though. These things aren't birthed out of anger, though. This is me trying to express myself. And maybe expressing myself is not

something I'm ... not I'm not very good at, but it's not an easy thing for me. I mean, I'm not-

Interviewer: Is it true in other areas of your life?

Robert Szot: I do talk a lot, but-

Interviewer: Yeah, I don't think you have any problem at all.

Robert Szot: You know what? I have unlimited amount of personal relationships, but they're all very important. I do tend to limit my exposure to people. I have a handful of very close people in my life.

Interviewer: What are the easy parts about painting? Are there parts that just seem easier than others? Maybe the beginning, or-

Robert Szot: No, I think when you get closer to the end. I think once you have enough physical point on the canvas, it becomes more of, well, I could take this out, and then these things work finally. That is very, it's thrilling-

Interviewer: That's rewarding.

Robert Szot: Yeah, it really is. I think when you work like I do, and you end up scrubbing the surface down, and you get a lot of transparencies and layers, I think when you get a little surprise of, oh, I wasn't really expecting those things to be that harmonious, or even that discontent with each other, that's exciting. I do like that a lot.

Interviewer: When something happens that wasn't planned.

Robert Szot: Yeah. Well, I could tell you also, working in a larger format like I've had to do for this exhibition, is something I really enjoy doing.

Interviewer: Good.

Robert Szot: These are some of the bigger paintings I've ever made. I've always been interested in seeing what that would look like, what these paintings would look like on a larger scale. Of course, they're bigger, so there's bigger problems with them. But you get through that.

Interviewer: Different problems, right?

Robert Szot: Different problems.

Interviewer: We talked about that, leaving some of those areas.

Robert Szot: Yeah.

Interviewer: It was hard for you to do.

Robert Szot: It was. Again, it's that fear of boring yourself and feeling like, well, you haven't done as much as you could with this area, you know? But with these larger paintings, I feel like the larger color fields are absolutely necessary.

Interviewer: They're beautiful.

Robert Szot: Oh, thank you.

Interviewer: And the restraint is beautiful.

Robert Szot: It's so strange to hear somebody use those kinds of adjective when it comes to my- like, restraint and things like that. I feel so ... I don't know.

Interviewer: Unrestrained?

Robert Szot: Unrestrained. And I'm not an action painter, you know what I'm saying? I always wanted to be like a de Kooning, or even like early Jackson Pollock works, where there's this unfettered, animalistic approach to painting where you're just splashing paint all over the place. But I'm just not that person, I'm not. I prefer to have a little bit more intention with my work, even though you look at ... if you look at a really good de Kooning, I don't know how he was able to do what he did.

Interviewer: I know what you're talking about, yeah.

Robert Szot: Yeah. It's fascinating to me, even now.

Interviewer: Mm-hmm (affirmative), because it looks so haphazard, just like ...

Robert Szot: It's crazy, it's crazy.

Interviewer: We talked a little bit earlier about emerging artists and advice for artists. I think you had some thoughts about that.

Robert Szot: I think first and foremost, you have to dedicate yourself to working in the studio. I've been in New York for a number of years now, and unfortunately, I don't see as much good painting in New York as I thought I would when I first moved here.

Interviewer: A lot of painting, though, right?

Robert Szot: A lot of painting.

Interviewer: A lot of art.

Robert Szot: But I feel like you can tell the difference between someone who's put in the time and the effort in the studio, and not rushed to put some gimmickry out into the public, or something new, but has really spent a lot of time considering what they're doing. My first and most tantamount piece of advice for anyone starting out, wanting to come here to do this, is it is a long road. But it's longevity that you're after. And the only way to get to that timeless ... timeless as a good painting and that longevity, is to put in the time in the studio.

Robert Szot: You're going to spend a lot of time by yourself. It is a very solitary existence. But it is so important to make sure the ideas that you're trying to express are as correct as you can get them before you venture out into public. Not only to avoid feeling that the work is incomplete in your own mind, but you don't want to present that incompleteness, I don't think, to ... I mean, the public knows, they know gimmick from effort, you know?

Interviewer: Right.

Robert Szot: So that's really important.

Interviewer: Are there some studio habits that have changed your efficiency?

Robert Szot: Jeez, I don't think so.

Interviewer: I mean, you're very prolific, so whatever you're doing is working. It's just simply a matter of hours and dedication.

Robert Szot: It really comes down to that, it does. There's been some physical materials that I've changed up. For example, I use a walnut oil that has an alkyd drying resin. So the oil paint tends to dry over maybe a 24 to 30 hour period, which allows me to go back into the work almost immediately, and to make the layers a little bit more-

Interviewer: You don't use acrylic at all?

Robert Szot: No, not at all. I think it comes from my obsession with the history of painting. I love linen and I love oil painting. It makes me feel like I'm part of a greater timeline. I think we talked about building a history of your work, and being able to present work over a 10 or 15 year span. That to me makes you more real as an artist. It makes you more marketable, I feel, as an artist, simply because it allows ... it allows your audience to look back on the work that you've done, and can see how that work has transpired over a certain amount of time.

Robert Szot: I'm a big believer in owning a little piece of someone's history. There's something very seductive about having the ability to pluck a moment out of someone's life, and be able to spend time with that moment.

Interviewer: Do you own some art of other-

Robert Szot: You know what I love about artists? It's not so much the artwork that they produce, it's the little bits and pieces of garbage that fall ... like, the [inaudible 00:37:02] or whatever that falls around at their feet. I love working. I love working artists, and just the little-

Interviewer: Visiting studios, that kind of, yeah.

Robert Szot: Yeah. I'll dig through someone's garbage and pull something out of that.

Interviewer: Yeah, it's the best.

Robert Szot: It really is great, right?

Interviewer: Yeah.

Robert Szot: I saw this Francis Bacon painting at ... it was a Soutine/Bacon show, it was uptown. It was this small little Francis Bacon painting of a dog running across a field of green grass. To me, it read like a secondary idea that he had. I could just imagine it just thrown into the corner of his studio. It was the most profound thing. Listen, I'm not a thief or a criminal, but I-

Interviewer: You wanted that.

Robert Szot: If I could run fast, which I can't, I would've taken it and run right out of that gallery with it.

Interviewer: Yeah.

Robert Szot: It was absolutely-

Interviewer: It's great to be-

Robert Szot: It was magnificent.

Interviewer: To be able to be moved like that by a piece of art.

Robert Szot: That's really the only thing I'm after, you know?

Interviewer: Yeah.

Robert Szot: I want to create those experiences with my audience, where I'm standing in front of a painting that I love and I can't even talk about it. Words just escape me.

Interviewer: It's so wonderful when you can have the experience of having people walk in here and engage with your work, and fall in love with it, and then take some of their hard earned money and purchase it. Isn't it a wonderful feeling?

Robert Szot: It is, it is a wonderful thing.

Interviewer: And that's what you've got coming up.

Robert Szot: It also feels very odd to me at the same time, you know what I'm saying? It's like, I know what I did to make this painting, and I know what my relationship with this painting is. And then you have someone come in and have a completely different experience with it. It's fascinating to me.

Interviewer: It is.

Robert Szot: And I'm super grateful to be lucky enough to have an audience, and to have people be willing to engage with my work, which is great. It's what everybody wants.

Interviewer: What kind of suggestions do you have for artists in dealing with galleries?

Robert Szot: I think galleries ... they're not easy thing to get into, they're not. There are a lot of artists in New York City in particular, so there a lot a gallery has to go through to find artists that they want to exhibit. My advice to other artists would be, I think if you are working and working hard, and you're concentrating on you're reputation, and you're concentrating on your work, these galleries will come. Cold calling, beating the street, it rarely pays off simply because there is just so much that a gallery has to sort through. But if you willing to put the time in and establish yourself as someone who is serious about their work, I think a gallery will take notice of that.

Interviewer: Focus on the work, and on the art.

Robert Szot: Yeah. I think especially now with the internet and social media, the access is so high that if you can somehow make your work stand out not in a gimmicky way, but in a way that someone can point to that work and say, "I know who did that," I really do believe it-

Interviewer: And that takes time in the studio-

Robert Szot: It's a giant waste of my time.

Interviewer: And that's exactly what you're doing.

Robert Szot: Yeah.

Interviewer: You're painting every day-

Robert Szot: I'm still working all the time, yeah.

Interviewer: And you're sharing it on Instagram.

Robert Szot: Sure. Again, I'm super grateful to have an audience on Instagram, which honestly, I never thought of as a viable option. But it turns out that's really how people-

Interviewer: It's a thing.

Robert Szot: Talk to each other now.

Interviewer: Yeah, it's great. You can communicate with artists all over the world.

Robert Szot: And I do.

Interviewer: And you do.

Robert Szot: I do. And I meet some of these people that see my work on Instagram, and it's like we're fast friends. We know a lot about each other already. That's been an interesting experience, for sure.

Interviewer: Yeah, that's great.

Robert Szot: But take advantage of that, you know what I'm saying? Take advantage of the access and your ability to disseminate your work to the furthest corners of the globe, those dark corners that 30 years ago would never have seen your work. Again, seriousness pays off, dedication pays off, purpose really pays off. You have to just stay on top of it. It's going to be a wild, up and down roller coaster. And you're going to dig ditches and work in bars, and make coffee for people. It's what's going to happen. But you cannot lose sight of why you're doing it.

Interviewer: Do you ever get stuck in your painting?

Robert Szot: No, I don't think so because, in my mind anyway, these paintings are not very separate from my life. And they're going to change as I change. So there's really no place for me to get stuck, unless I'm stuck in my life, which I haven't ... thankfully, haven't had that experience.

Interviewer: Yeah. Thank you for taking the time today. It's been such a pleasure to get to see this work in person.

Robert Szot: I appreciate it.

Interviewer: On Instagram, it's this big.

Robert Szot: It's very tiny on Instagram, yeah. So please, come out to the show. We'll actually shake hands and have a discussion about it.

Interviewer: Like I said, I know some of our academy members are followers, and you might know of their work.

Robert Szot: Very nice people. I've spoken to many of them. Very nice, very nice people. I guess as just a final note, I think it's important to always be open to have conversations about your work, and just talk about them as honestly as you can. I think you'll generate more interest and more sales in your work if you're just able to talk about them very plainly.

Interviewer: Right.

Robert Szot: That was something that took me a long time to learn, because I think you want to be ... I don't know-

Interviewer: Like, looking, listening to yourself, judging what you're saying, you mean that kind of thing?

Robert Szot: Yeah. You're trying to be erudite and say the right things, and things like that. I don't think that that's necessary.

Interviewer: Yeah, no.

Robert Szot: At least I hope it's not. I mean, I could be totally wrong, I don't know.

Interviewer: Yeah. I think maybe in the university world, maybe the academic world-

Robert Szot: Yeah, maybe [crosstalk 00:43:33].

Interviewer: It could be that way, but in the real world-

Robert Szot: See, that terrifies me. I get someone, like, an art historian in here, and I'm just sweating through, like ... "Well, why did you do this?" I'm like, "Why did I do what?"

Interviewer: Right. So that would be like, your fear would be around, that somebody could think that you don't have that kind of knowledge and therefore, this is invalid.

Robert Szot: Not having a pedigree is somewhat detrimental in the sense that, if you can write down on a resume that you went to Yale painting school, people will look at that and automatically just assume, oh, well, there's something here, right? He went to Yale and learned how to paint. But again, the proof is in the work that you produce.

Interviewer: Totally. I'm looking at the work, and I'm thinking, wow, that's just ... that's amazing that this is a product of dedication and time, right?

Robert Szot: That's really all, yeah.

Interviewer: And you can go to Yale and not put in the time, and not put in the dedication-

Robert Szot: Never been to Yale, for sure. I went to school, I didn't put a lot of time into it.

Interviewer: No, but I mean, someone else could get that education and not do anything with it.

Robert Szot: Sure. And just having the education doesn't ... I would much rather have the experience of not knowing what I'm doing, but to be in a studio in front of a blank canvas. Because then you can just do whatever you want with it. It's really lovely. It's lovely to not have ... Again, I don't want to seem like I'm bad mouthing art school because I'm not. There are things that you can get out of art school that I'll never get, but for me, it's the experience of the unknown, and just diving head first into it.

Interviewer: And you have an intuitive sense. I think the only thing that the education would tell you is why it works.

Robert Szot: Right.

Interviewer: I mean, it works, clearly. The design, color, theory, that sort of thing would tell you why. So what?

Robert Szot: Isn't it great just to make it up as you go?

Interviewer: Yeah.

Robert Szot: I love it. It's bulletproof. I mean, come on, tell me I'm wrong. I dare you.

Interviewer: You're not wrong. Absolutely, absolutely.

Robert Szot: It's great. It really is.

Interviewer: Thank you so much.

Robert Szot: It's been a pleasure.

Interviewer: I think our time is probably up, but it's been really wonderful talking to you.

Robert Szot: You're terrific. Thank you for everything.

Interviewer: Thanks, Rob. And good luck at your opening.

Robert Szot: Oh, thank you very much.

Interviewer: Yeah.