

ANITA ROGERS GALLERY

BRAINARD CAREY INTERVIEWS ROBERT SZOT TRANSCRIPT

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Brainard Carey (BC): Today on the show I'm talking with Robert Szot. Robert, thanks so much for being here with me today.

Robert Szot (RS): Well, thank you Brainard, I'm glad to be here with you and I appreciate the opportunity to talk with you.

BC: I'm really looking forward to it myself. Talking about your show, at the Anita Rogers Gallery, is running through November 9th of this year 2024, "The Picturesque Survival of Other Days". I want to get into the images here, the different works in the show, but I really love that title: "The Picturesque Survival of Other Days". It sounds very poetic somehow.

RS: It's a bit sentimental, right?

BC: Yea, well tell me, what does that mean? What does the title mean to you? Because it is about a reverence for history, or something around that, isn't it?

RS: Well, I think it really has more to do with. I'd say, probably the last four or five years of my own life. Unfortunately, I lost my father to Covid about 2.5 years ago, and just prior to that I had picked up and moved my studio from New York City to Los Angeles after having spent about 2 decades in New York City. So, the last couple of years for me, like for everybody with the pandemic and all this other craziness going around with politics in America, life felt very much in transition for me. And I think because I'm such a strong believer that you tie your life directly to your work, I feel like these pictures that came out of those years, the work that's in this show currently, is reflective of that kind of transition in my own life personally, and I think the title speaks more to that than anything else. You know, we're always looking into the past and sort of reminiscing about the good days and when we think about the future, we also think of

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that as being good as well. But I think with painting especially, I wanted to live very much in the moment and this work that came out of that mentality really reflects who I am as a person and the transitions that I've gone through in the last four or five years.

BC: Right, right. Thanks for sharing that, and first I just want to say I'm so sorry to hear about your father.

RS: I appreciate that, thank you.

BC: That's very difficult no matter how or when that happens, and I'm sorry to hear that. It's true that the last few years have been, since the pandemic, pretty brutal in a lot of ways.

RS: Yeah, a little up in the air, to put it mildly.

BC: I mean, I like to keep thinking that, oh, this happens in every moment in history, where it seems like a horrible time, but this does seem different though. Everybody says that too.

RS: I mean it must, right? It must repeat itself. I mean, clearly, if you want to just it at it from the aspect of the pandemic. Obviously there have been pandemics throughout the history of humanity. But I don't think you ever really imagine living through one, you know? It was a very odd experience, to suffer the loss that I suffered as a direct result of it. It feels a little strange, I feel a little untethered from the harsh reality of it all. You know, it's one thing to lose somebody but I think it's another thing to lose somebody and also manage to pick up the pieces of your life and continue and that was very important to me, so I think the title kind of ties into that as well. This new body of work is quite different from how my work looked even a year ago, and so the whole process of putting it together, the year that it took to put the show together, I really felt that the way the work was coming out and how things were sort of presenting themselves felt very transformative and very different, almost like I had come to the end of these last four or five years and I've come out of it stronger and a bit better.

BC: Yeah, it's true, the pandemic had such an unusual effect on all of us, and to have another pandemic, it hasn't been for quite a long time, and yeah, the reverberations of

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something we're still feeling. I mean kids, young adults, are going through things that that age group hasn't gone through in ages.

RS: I couldn't imagine what it would be like to be in your teens or early twenties and sort of having to face the reality of being in lock-down and all of that uncertainty. I think it really is going to affect that generation, and my hope is that they too are able to find their way clear of lingering effects from it, but I suppose time will tell.

BC: Absolutely. So, let's talk about some of these works and processes and perhaps the narrative in them. There's one called *Soft Story*; this is a really large work. Oil, metal leaf and charcoal on linen. Tell me a little bit about this one. Metal leaf means what - copper leaf, or gold leaf, or silver leaf?

RS: Yeah, copper, gold, silver, rose gold. That material actually has only really just come into play when it comes to my process. It was something I was always interested in using. I've had a deep affinity for religious iconography and for German expressionist paintings at the turn of the 20th century for a long time, and I've always enjoyed their use of metal leafing and gold leafing and what that did to their work. So, it was something I had always thought about using myself, but I was never too sure of how I could incorporate it into my compositions. My fear was that it would come off as feeling gimmicky. I didn't want to just finish paintings with gold leaf as though they were something that could be hung in a casino or something, you know what I'm saying? I didn't want to have that kind of gaudy, over the top look where I was worried people would again see it as just some sort of last minute, Hail-Mary pass to create something interesting in the composition. So when I decided to use the metal leafing, I promised myself that I would use it from start-to-finish, and what I mean by that is I would start to incorporate it even in the early stages of the painting, just to make sure that that particular material really kind of sunk into the composition itself and felt like a part of the painting as opposed to just some sort of last-minute add-on. But I've come to find that the material has transformed the look of my work. You know, if you go back a year or so to when I wasn't using it, you would find a lot of the fiscal connectivity that I would achieve in my compositions from left to right or up to down were all made through the use of oil paint, and I had this kind of great love of soft transitions and kind of organic edges in my compositions. But now that I've added this metal leafing, I've introduced something that really provides a much harder stop. Once you add that metal leafing in there, I mean, it is in there, and there's not much you can do to edit

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your way out of it. And so here I was, really kind of adding this hard mass into my work with this metal leafing and it actually started to give these compositions rather a geological look to them, like a split stone. And it wasn't my intention, obviously, these are abstract paintings, they are not meant to reference anything. But there's something that I really like about that reference to nature, right, the pressure of something, the way that stone is squeezed together over time. And so, when I look at these paintings now, I can't really get that imagery out of my head. And again, it's not something that I was deliberate in creating, I wasn't going for that look necessarily, but it's certainly not something I'm running away from.

BC: You mean the look of stone squeezed together over time, and that sounds quite literal and clear, what I'm seeing here. That's almost figurative, almost landscape, but of course it's not. That's what you mean?

RS: Yeah, you know it's funny. I got through maybe the first two or three types of these works right at the turn of the year, right at the end of December into January. And I started to notice that quality - that geological quality - to them. And I felt the same way you did. I felt that there was kind of a landscape-esque reference in the work. But then again, they're not meant to have that reference. I do like that rather interesting nod to nature. And I think that nod comes from that organic transition between compositional elements in my paintings. And I like that, I like that connection. It's not something I ever chased or even was looking for, it almost just sort of happened.

BC: And the work that you're talking about, the influences that you mentioned, religious paintings or German expressionism, does that figure in here somehow? Do you feel like that's also part of this?

RS: You know I think it all kind of finds its way back into your work eventually. I mean, there are nods to Francis Bacon in what I do, and my work and Francis Bacon's work couldn't be more different. But I feel like there are moments of all of that stuff in my work. I kind of shy away from influences, like I don't necessarily like to have other voices in the studio. I tend to just work alone and get these things done, you know, as an individual. But certainly, there are nods to Bacon, even Philip Guston, and Diebenkorn and de Kooning, and I love to look at those painters. I love to look at those paintings because I feel the painter that made them. I feel like if you look at an abstract painting, or really any kind of painting, and you abandon the idea of looking at

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something and trying to figure out why things were done the way they were as though they were some sort of equation you were trying to solve. I really embrace the “how” things were done. I like to look at paintings and sort of dissect the decision making that I feel inside of them. I like to see how chaos was mitigated and I like to see how mistakes were erased or even left in the composition and I feel like it ties my work more closely to theirs. Because for me, painting is more about editing and decision making than it is anything else. I’m not a contemplative person or an intellectual, I don’t pre-plan my works. What I like to do is I like to respond to moments. I like to respond to the immediate and be more reactionary when it comes to putting compositions together. And so, the “how” becomes much more important than the “why”, and I like to see that in my own work and in other people’s works as well. So, when you ask are these things influences in my work, I think yeah, the “how” is definitely more the influence than anything else.

BC: Well of course all these experiences, as you’re saying, life in the last four years, I mean, when you look at a past show of yours like, *Then Again Who Does?*, it’s 2019, before so much of this happened, I assume that was when your father was still living.

RS: Yeah, and I was still in New York City, and really my life at that point had felt very, with the ups and downs of being a full-time artist being put aside, my life felt pretty stable. You know, I was living in New York City, I had a house... Stability was a big part of at least how I felt, but it turns out it doesn’t take much to kind of destabilize somebody’s life or even a circumstance. It really is the recovery that counts. This show, “The Picturesque Survival of Other Days”, I’m particularly proud of this show, because to me, I can trace back exactly how I was feeling the day that I finished *Soft Story*, for example. I remember Guston used to talk about what he had for lunch the day that he finished particular paintings. I have that memory sense of this new work at Anita Rogers Gallery now, and I miss those paintings, Brainard. It’s weird - I’m not one to miss my work, I’m not a prideful person. I don’t look at my work as some great creation but there is something rather personal about the work that I’ve made this past year that I miss being around.

BC: Well, these works also seem, compared to the show from 2019, these are large works, most of them, and they’re bursting with color. I mean in no way do they look like paintings that are mourning or talking about tragic times. They strike me as paintings that have tremendous life into them and maybe that’s the survival aspect of it. I don’t

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know if this has anything to do with the west coast, but there's a certain exuberance to these, is what I'm seeing. Like visually, in terms of the palate and the structure of these. Is that something you can relate to, am I reaching a little bit there?

RS: No, I think you're absolutely right. A lot of people have asked me the question if the move from the east to the west has affected your work in a particular way, and I don't know if that's true or not. Maybe, possibly, on some subconscious level the answer is yes, it's not something I can actively kind of define and tell you how it's changed me. But to me, I think what you're saying, more than anything, is someone coming from a place of discomfort and finding comfort again, finding my footing again. Because the tortuous nature of my work between say 2020 up to 2023 even, I don't know that that torturous nature is as evident to other people as it is to me. Because of what I was going through at the time and the memories I have associated with that, it's not that I hate that work, I don't. But I think this new work, and this exuberance that you talk about, I think it's more about me finally being comfortable again and embracing where I'm at here in Los Angeles, embracing my current situation despite the loss of somebody important to me. But moving on with my life and finding that footing again. Maybe that's why I miss those paintings too, and maybe there was a certain stability to them that I recognize. And now I'm working again. I'm in the studio right now actually, working on a new body of work, and I've been able to carry over those messages and that stability into this new work, too. And I feel like, it's funny because I went to that opening of "The Picturesque Survival of Other Days" back in September, and to see everything hung together, and to see the kind of clearer messaging and to see the authorship that ran through all of that work, I felt like my clarity became sharper. And this road that I've been on has been full of all sorts of ups and downs and curves, and it straightened out just a little bit - I could see a little bit further down the road. There was this new promise in the work I'm doing now and I'm excited about it and I'm going to continue this path, and it's all sort of wrapped up in this positive experience. You know what I mean? It's almost like you're turning a corner there. And that feels really good to me. Looking back at the last 3, 4, 5 years, it didn't seem like that was going to happen, but I feel like it has.

BC: I like that, that is ok to say. I think there's a variety of works in this show. There's work on paper as well as work on canvas, right? Do you approach work on paper very differently? Does it have a different feel to it because it's paper, has a different surface to it, how do you see the difference between those two?

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RS: Well, I'll tell you, when I started painting, I didn't go to art school, I have no academic background in art. When I started painting, I was very narrow in my vision. I was an oil painter and I painted on linen - that's what I did. And it wasn't up until about 7 or 8 years ago that I started to incorporate works on paper into the catalog of all my works. My friend Luis, he's a painter in New York City, introduced me to monotyping through the Salmagundi Club over on 11th, and I didn't know what a monotype was, I didn't know what an etching press was. At the Salmagundi Club we started making these monotypes and I fell in love with the malleability of paper. I think when you're dealing with a full painting, of oil on linen, you're very restricted in the sense that the materials aren't as cooperative as you would want them to be, in terms of being able to reverse/add on things, correct errors of the things you don't like. But with works on paper, it's a much different animal, especially the way I work. I do collage and mixed media works on paper. So, if I'm in the middle of a work on paper and it's not working out, I can allow that kind of impetuous nature of my personality to overtake me and I can tear it up and literally turn it into something else entirely. That narrative that I create by tearing something up that I don't like can easily be turned into something else. And so, in that sense, a work on paper is a much more cooperative thing to create than a painting. Now, I say that with as much reverence that I have for a painting, because works on paper are just as important. And my goal is to get those works on paper to the same level as my paintings, so they all feel like the same messaging. And I think with this show in particular I was able to do that, because a lot of those works on paper kind of mirror those paintings in terms of their bold use of color, their sort of chaotic yet resolved compositions. I feel like everything sort of matches each other as you go from painting to work on paper to painting. That was important for me too, to get it sort of evened out.

BC: Yeah, the show works so well, it's a beautiful show, Robert. I want to ask you one more question, a little off topic: what are you reading at the moment?

RS: I just started reading *The Loft Generation* by Edith Schloss, and it is personal stories that Edith had with people like the de Kooning's, and Cy Twombly, really that whole crew that was working in Manhattan in the New School in the 1950s in New York and I think that ties directly into this idea of getting the backstory of an artist. You know what I mean? Sometimes it's enough to see a painting done by somebody, but to kind of know their backstory and to know a little history about who they were, even if they were horrible people, which, let's be honest, a lot of these people were pretty bad

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socially. But to have that knowledge and have those personal accounts, I think it makes painting and looking at someone's art 20% more interesting. So that's why I read these things. That's what I'm reading right now.

BC: Thanks so much, and Robert, I want to thank you for talking with me and putting together this beautiful show. Thank you so much.

RS: Thank you for your time and I appreciate having the opportunity to talk with you.