

ANITA ROGERS GALLERY

2024 ROBERT SZOT INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

Robert Szot (RS): Abstract painting isn't meant to mean anything. I look at abstract painting as a way of communicating with other people at the most base level in a language that we share as human beings. Oftentimes that language can't really be talked about or defined in any real terms. I mean, call it a feeling, if you will, but there's communication happening in those emotions and those feelings. Like, there's no messaging in this painting behind us. I'm not trying to present an equation for you to solve to kind of enjoy this work. It's not what this is about. And I think a lot of people look at abstract painting and they're quite perplexed by it because they're looking for the message in it. What is this person trying to tell me? The reality is, I'm not trying to tell you anything. What you're seeing is just sort of this pure expression of responsiveness, right. This kind of in-the-moment, and what I'm going for is more the messaging of velocity and action.

Interviewer Elia Emery Min (EM): Do you think that the initial passion that you had for art or attraction has changed over your career, or is that emotion pretty much the same?

RS: I think surprisingly it's sustained itself. You know, I think it's very easy to get bored with your own work especially. But I always preach this idea of authorship with variety. Meaning, the authorship is sort of this kind of core string that runs through everything that makes your work really uniquely yours and kind of readily identifiable as yours. I'm not talking about recognition in terms of the repeatable image necessarily, but more this kind of esoteric kind of subconscious kind of way of looking at something and being able to recognize whose hand is directly attached to that is this idea of variation. Cause you don't want to just repeat the same thing over and over again because you're really just ending up sort of manufacturing things as opposed to creating them. And I would probably be very bored and lose interest in something like that pretty readily. But I think the way that I work runs counter to that kind of thing. I mean, I'm very responsive, and I react to things in the moment. So, in the absence of planning and in the absence of conclusion, a lot can happen. There's always room for surprise. There's always surprise for a kind of unknown. I don't think you could ever get bored, kind of working in that way. I mean, it's definitely more of a journey, right? I find planning things sort of takes the air out of the room a lot of times. I mean, if you go to my studio, and there's a large table in the studio that just has a pile of paints on top of it. So, I'm not even selecting or pre-selecting the kind of colors that I want to use. As a matter of fact, like, I avoid even the broadest kind of ideas. I don't look at a blank canvas and say, I want to create a red painting, or I need a blue

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painting for this particular series. I find things like that, even those kinds of broad plans, really constrict my decision making and it ends up frustrating me in the end. So, I have to keep options open constantly. So, planning or making a plan or thinking about any kind of conclusive behavior really kind of feels like walls are closing in on me. So, I'll tell you, it doesn't feel like I have anything to do with it at all, right? Because I think that decisions are made in real-time, in the moment. I can't ever remember thinking; I need to do this and this and this. I mean, I often talk about just wanting to be a thing with arms that makes stuff. I follow a very loose, basic, set of rules, which is first and foremost the handling of information the same way at each stage of the painting. And the result of that, that kind of deliberate handling of that information, produces these very surprising kinds of moments on the paintings. So, what you're seeing is not an accident, it's not happenstance, because I'm replicating it every time. 20, 30 times, I mean, in 20 paintings in this exhibition. So, there's no accidental sort of behavior there. What it is, is just a culmination of editing information and the result of that editing. And when you talk about finishing a painting, you say, well how do you know when a painting is done, or when you walk away from a painting? All my paintings finish in the same way. It literally is a small mark. It's a color here, a line of charcoal, and everything just kind of drops into place. And it always surprises me. And it's like, it's a very gratifying 5 minutes to say it just needed a little touch of pink on that left hand side, and the balance really comes into focus. So, when you're working on it, and again, in the absence of any kind of conclusion, you're not working toward anything necessarily. You're just putting work into something and then you step back, and you say, well, let's put work into this part of the painting in kind of response to what we did over here. And then you kind of build on those two ideas and they expand and expand and expand until one day after probably five weeks of working on something, you put in just a line of charcoal, and just everything sort of ends up making sense. It's about seeing, it's not about talent, and it's not about having vision or taste, it's about seeing things. It's about noticing the very smallest minutia in the detail of three or four layers of painting that you've added and scrubbed back and added and scrubbed back. But it's noticing the kind of beautiful, soft transition between one thing to another. And once you take notice of that, you expand on it, you sort of hyper-expand on it - but you have to see it - this is the thing that I keep telling people over and over again that maybe is the hardest thing to understand. It's the act of being present and noticing something immediately and taking full advantage of that. You just respond to it and allow yourself to kind of keep going. You know, in a nutshell, like if you want to just talk about the basics, it's about flooding the entire plane with small information first. And that information doesn't necessarily have to correlate with each other. It doesn't have to make a lot of sense. As a matter of fact, it really makes very little sense at that early stage. And it's about kind of populating the plane with this kind of small bits of information because you know you're going back to those things at a later date. And once you get that

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information on board, then you kind of start editing your way through it, and you start creating those small relationships, and then you build on those things, and the inevitable thing is that these pieces of composition begin to size up and size up until a point where you're really starting to cover a lot of ground with big pieces of composition. But the key thing here is the use of subtraction as a way to solve problems. Now, a lot of painters, I find, just rely on addition to kind of get them through a composition. But the reality of stripping something back and taking things out of a painting is just as important as adding. And that subtraction oftentimes is responsible for the sort of depth and velocity that I get in my compositions. And I know subtraction feels like two steps backwards, and it could really get you in a stuck posture and make you feel frustrated because you're sort of deliberately taking things out that you worked hard on. But the reality is, that you have to really look at a painting as being expendable at every level. You can't fall in love with a piece here or a piece there and expect to really build anything cohesive. Like, if you fell in love with a certain section on a composition, and you worked around it for two weeks, you're gonna have three or four different paintings on one canvas. You have to realize that even the things that you really like are expendable, at all levels. And you end up making really difficult decisions, thinking that way. But what I am is a great editor. I'm not a great starter. Because if I don't have problems to solve or something to work with, I tend to kind of drift off and by thinking, I think I just shut down. It's just emotion. I think it's just motion, honestly. Because again, my decision making really doesn't come into play in a conscious way for me. I mean, I'm not saying I'm like some Zen Buddhist where I can kind of turn off my conscious self and just sort of create things. I mean, I think that's kind of a silly way of looking at a painting. I mean, there's decision making here clearly, but I can't really, it doesn't get super deliberate with me where I think, oh, that color doesn't go with that color. It's like, things like color theory and the academic approach to painting are very passe and I kind of throw them out too. I've never learned them to begin with, so I didn't have to unlearn anything, thankfully.

EM: So, you didn't go to art school?

RS: No. no.

RS: It's just like, this sort of instinct kicks in where you end up holding on to the things that you believe in much more tightly in situations like that. And what I've always believed in was being in the studio, and it didn't matter where I was at. I could be in Cambodia or something, and I'm gonna find a place to work. And so, when I got to Los Angeles, I ended up kind of holing myself up in this very tiny cinder block studio, in a very industrial part of town. It was not pretty. And I had a very small window overlooking a car park. And it was just, it was as miserable, I

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think, as I've ever been on a personal level. And because I'm such a firm believer in the fact that you have to kind of directly connect your life to your work in order for it to really kind of talk about who you are as a person, which is the kind of goal, of I think, all art. I think my work kind of suffered in that period too. Now to have strangers look at it, or people that you even know look at it, they wouldn't tell you that that was true. They would look at those paintings from two years ago when they would think of them as being successful works to a, I think, aesthetic degree. I don't disagree with them. I think there was something good there, but I felt the torturous nature of them. And looking at those works really took me right back to say 2021, 2022, when all of these things were sort of happening. And I remember the arguments I had with them, and I remembered what happened the day I finished them. And it all was very present just in the work. I don't, you know, that doesn't make for a bad painting, but to me it just sort of, I felt it. You know what I mean? I'm not saying that's even sort of the impetus for change in my work either. What I think happened from work back then to work now is you see somebody who is much more comfortable that came out from other side of this thing. And I often talk about this 50/50 shot of coming out of tragedy and pressure. You either come back better or you come back hollow. And I've known a lot of people that have come back on the hollow side, and I didn't want to be that type of person. And so, when I got out of all of this, and when I sort of found my footing a little bit, I think my work changed.

RS: There are paintings that I've seen by de Kooning and Francis Bacon and Richard Diebenkorn that I just want to steal. I want to take them. And I'm not like, I don't have criminal intentions, I'm not that kind of person. But God, it would be wonderful to have a Francis Bacon hanging in my bedroom where I could just not tell anybody about it and just let it kind of tell its story. I love it. So, when people steal art, like when they found de Kooning in some old lady's house in New Mexico, it had been stolen years ago. It was one of his woman series paintings. And I was like, I get that. I understand why somebody did that. I mean they shouldn't have done it, but they did. And that's what I want from my work. I want it to be exciting to see, but I also want it to be lasting. I want it to have longevity. And there's not enough of that, I think in contemporary art. There's a lot of that kind of sort of ill-conceived, not very well-thought out, sort of shocking, big, crappy painting that doesn't last for more than a second. It's like sugar really.

RS: I knew I didn't want a proper job ever again. So, I thought I better figure something out. I'm not Elvis Presley, right? Like, but, you know, this was good. You could be old and ugly and alone and be a great painter if you wanted to be. I'm not saying I'm a great painter, but you could be. You don't have to be, I don't know, I don't think painters ever get plastic surgery. Do

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you know what I'm saying? It's just, like, cause you're not in the public. You could be a monster and be a successful artist. Thank god for that.