

Speaker 1: Everyone feel most welcome. And I am super excited to be interviewing Robert McPartland, a Welsh artist. And I came across his work, actually, I'm not sure how I came across his work. It came in through a video. It came in, I saw it in a few different places and it's funny how this happens. I just discover artists and I just really resonated with it and I especially resonated with the story behind it and the ideas and the thinking. Sometimes when you see people's work, you see the work as it is, but then you also understand and intuitively that there's a lot of thought behind it. And that is the case here. And I'm really excited to dive into this with, with Robert. So I'm Robert, thank you so much for beaming in, it's 6:00 AM your time right? You're up super early or...

Robert: No it's 6:00 PM.

Speaker 1: Okay.

Robert: Can you tell nick time?

Speaker 1: Oh, all right, great.

Robert: So I don't have one. Thank you so much for inviting me. I've been admiring your work for some years.

Speaker 1: Thank you.

Robert: And delighted to meet. And I've got to say one thing though, I'm actually English, so I do live in Wales, but

Speaker 1: You were born in England, not Wales?

Robert: No. I mean it's only a stones-throw from where I am, in sort of American terms and distance, but quite...

Speaker 1: Okay. All right. I just, I had in my mind Wales, like I've never talked to anyone in Wales. I've been thinking about it and.... What's interesting to me, first of all you've been a teacher for a long time. You were doing that. Tell me a little bit about where that came and then, and then you started to embark on your own work and that transition. I've done that as well and that's interesting to me.

Robert: I've watched a few of your interviews and it's fascinating how many of the people you talk to have to do other things or have chosen to do other things before they came to the painting and it's just very difficult to make a living out of. It was something I always wanted to do. And I grew up in the Northeast, I went down to London to art school. And then basically I did various jobs. It was a great time because... Rather like a New York in the 70s. There were warehouse spaces that were cheap to rent. You could get a studio but you still had to survive. So I worked in galleries.

I worked at the Tate gallery for a couple of years just sort of moving around the stuff and hanging it and that kind of thing. But I got to a point where I needed something that was a little bit more engaging and long term. So I thought, "well I'll try teaching on the side." I did a Post-grad teacher training here and started from there. The same year I was doing my training and I met my future wife and we settled down together and we wanted to have kids and families. You've got to pay the bills. So I found myself teaching in schools.

Speaker 1: Were you teaching graphic design or were you teaching painting or what were you teaching?

Robert: It was secondary education. I had to teach everything. I mean that was a painter, I studied painting, but I was interested generally in art and design, so it was cool. I did painting and did teach ceramics and some graphic designer.

Speaker 1: When you say secondary, just for people here in the US, is that kind of college level or is that beyond masters or like higher education or is it high school? I'm not sure.

Robert: It's high school.

Speaker 1: Okay. So you're turning kids on to design or ceramics or whatever?

Robert: Just trying to let them find their... what they like about art and design and giving them, offering them lots of different things really. Also, the good thing about it from my point of view was that I got some holidays as well and I wasn't going to be working a lot of weekends and evenings, that kind of thing. So it gave me time in the studio which, my wife is a painter as well and once we met, we kind of moved down to the warehouse studios and we bought a place and we've always had somewhere where we have a couple of rooms where we could paint. So we've always kept the painting going you know, through the years.

Speaker 1: That's great because in a way, when you're teaching at that level, it's nice because you're not locked into one special thing. You can just do all different kinds of things. And that appeals to me. I started teaching my own kind of workshops really because every time I wanted to teach at a bigger institution, they always put me into one box. And I felt confined by that. So I could see why you could stay with that a lot longer, you know?

Robert: It's funny because it wasn't something that I really wanted to do originally. I mean the idea was to get a part time job teaching in an art school maybe, you have a studio, then a gallery picks you up and you're sorted for life. It doesn't work like that. The main thing is just to keep painting. But the upside was, like I said, I had a freedom in my teaching. I was running the show so I wasn't answerable to anybody in terms of the art and design, so to speak. So I could devise projects that I liked and I thought would turn the kids on. I didn't have to run it through past anybody really. The downside was it was a kind of an

environment that wasn't necessarily... I mean there was some great people teaching there, but it was a very broad community. And of course somewhat had it status within that. They were quite academic schools. So you'd find yourself not really... Sometimes struggling to get yourself understood really in terms of...

Speaker 1: At what year did you just say, "I've got to just start making my own work." What year was that or how did that transition happen for you? Like where you just took the plunge?

Robert: It was 2009, 10 years ago. I got to the stage where I was... I had taken a kind of a sabbatical for a month, because I've got a one man show in a gallery in Cardiff and it went very well. And I came back out of the sabbatical but I was getting itchy there and I discovered a couple of years later that I could take my pension a bit early, so I thought, "right, well maybe I should do it." And I had another one man lined up for just about three months after I'm finished teaching. So it was nicely set up really. So I went for it and it's been fascinating. I've been doing my 10 years that most people would do in the thirties.

Speaker 1: It's a brave step and to just rely on it and to step out like that. That's great. You did it, you know?

Robert: I think it was more emotionally so than financially because we knew we could survive, which is the thing. It's very different from being in a busy community. When young people are just great. You're lively, you're bouncing around off them. There's always something interesting. But then, you're on your own in this room all day. And that took quite a lot of getting used to. I mean I'm okay with my own company, but...

Speaker 1: I liked so much of your own company. That's a really big challenge for people. How have you come to terms with that? What kind of work-arounds have you made? Do work four hours in the morning and then go for a walk? Or how do you make this work now? What are you doing that makes it possible?

Robert: Its just kind of 'very little bit', but I've tried to keep it just to office hours. I'll have a cup of coffee at eleven, have lunch at one. So I've tried to be strict in my habits. Of course it doesn't always kind of work out like that. If you want to see an exhibition in London for example, there's a great show and there's an opportunity to... there's a perfect day for it that happens to be in the week. Well you go, you do it. Also the freedom of not being so tied. But my biggest piece of luck is that my partner Stephanie is, a painter too, so we have each other. And she also was a teacher. She taught in art schools, but she retired a couple of years back. So we're both at home now and we've got each other to bounce off.

Speaker 1: That's great. And looking at your work over the last 10 years or more, you've, said that you were, I read somewhere that, you were doing mostly landscapes,

large, epic landscapes, and then you've transitioned from that into more of the still lifes that you're doing now. Were these plain air paintings or...

Robert: That's really interesting because it's quite a pivotal point. It was quite equivalent pivotal point for me because the year I left working in galleries and decided do the post-grad teaching thing they thought that my painting's abstract when I was at college. Big gestural abstraction. My tutors at college were very much into that. They were the generation that saw a big show in London in the early 60s I think it was. The abstract expressionists had a huge influence on them. By sort of instinct, I'm very drawn to abstract painting. I think a lot of the best painting that's been going on since I was a student has been non figurative. Whether these are the values of painting, if you like it, you can see those values. So that was me and I wanted to mark the change from what I was doing to my new life, so to speak. And so I went for a long distance walk through the center of England, it's called the Penning way in Lancashire. And I finished just over the border in Scotland. So it's about 260 miles. When I was doing my teacher training year, they had a studio as well. So I did this sort of series of collages. They were kind of to do with the walk. And it's big landscapes.

The pictures themselves weren't that big, but they were a kind of a record of the physical processes of the walk itself. So they were collage essentially, they were acrylic and charcoal and gouache. So they were very physical. And in structure and composition. I've always loved Richard Diebenkorn. He could draw, for me, and I think what he did with landscape. So it's always drawn me really. So you wouldn't look at them and say, "Oh, Richard Diebenkorn. Amanda maybe. Maybe there's something there." But for me, that was I sort of started from, I was living in London at the time and I got to the end of the year and I realized that if I wanted to carry on making work like that, I had to be in that kind of environment. I had to be out in the big countryside too. And I didn't want to. I knew it wasn't going to be the right move for me. I wanted to be in London. And so I knew I had... mostly it's just intuitive, you reach for something.

And so I just started drawing some simple objects in front of me. I just needed that concrete relationship with something cool. And then within a couple of years: these things, cause we got a studio together - my wife and I - these colors still alive. Kind of scaled up. And it's quite a big scale-up. And in particular I was doing these paintings and they said, "do you know what a ginger pattern is?" It's a little challenging, some shank like that. It's very simple, rough quality to it. And I'm scaling these things up so they, they look like cliff faces really. And I didn't realize at the time that I was actually painting landscapes. The top of them was bowls, they were like sort of hilltops, you know? But I was just painting these enormous, greats. So it's six foot by five foot kind of still life paintings. So that, that, that was the sort of change really.

Speaker 1: And that idea, which I love and it's pretty common actually, where you begin and you have almost too much. I mean, you have so much but then you can kind of narrow, but then you go kind of deeper but less and then it becomes bigger, right? Like that whole thing of go small to go big. And I love that idea because

your work now, what's so interesting about it is it has this monumental - could have iconic, it's metaphorical, it does have a lot of the landscape qualities in it. Were you aware you were doing that? Or do you think about that?

Robert: No. I mean, obviously. I mean I was saying things like, they were acrylic and I'd mixed plaster. I had a really heavily plasticized copolymer. No channels used.

Speaker 1: To get that texture.

Robert: Well, yeah. I mixed it with plaster.

Speaker 1: You mean you'd put the acrylic with plaster?

Robert: Sure, yeah. What I did was I would... It's just like making Jensen really, but you know when you kill plaster, you just keep adding water to it so it can't set? Pour out the water and just keep pouring off the water. And then you can mix that with a binder, which is what the acrylic is.

Speaker 1: So it is the plaster, and this is getting into a technical thing but I'm so curious because I don't know if I've ever done this, what is plaster? Is that something like we buy, like there's a sheet rock mud. That's not what you're talking about though, is it?

Robert: No, like plaster of Paris.

Speaker 1: Plaster of Paris. Interesting. Wow. I've never done that. Interesting.

Robert: It's a fine white... I think traditionally it's used for mould-making.

Speaker 1: Right. I've heard of it and yes, I understand. I just never made the distinction. I see. Cool. So you can just mix that into the paint.

Robert: Well, I didn't use it, funnily enough. No, I did not actually mix it with the paint. I just mixed it with the pure acrylic medium.

Speaker 1: Like a map medium or something? Yeah.

Robert: And laid it down as a ground so I can make it ground. And then I'd work... So it was actually a very traditional technique. It's kind of, a bit like the old renaissance....

Speaker 1: It's like Fresco a little bit maybe or?

Robert: Yeah, it gives you some of that quality. And also you can just put washers on top and because you've got a surface there, of course, if your paint is stained, it's going to seep in and if you wipe the top of it, you're going to get a really textual ground very quickly. So, it's very sort of versatile and because the copolymer

emotions very plastic, obviously you can't overload it with plastic, but if you get it right it, you can roll your pictures up. I did them on canvas. It didn't cry. Which is the big thing.

Speaker 1: Are your paintings still using that surface?

Robert: No. I kind of left that. It was so interesting what you were saying earlier about going big to go small, those small to get a bigger often because I was sort of doing these paintings but I didn't know where to go with them in them. I kind of paired it right down and I thought... But there wasn't a sort of a call and understanding of my process, to be honest. I caught that very quickly, but I didn't really understand my own process.

Speaker 1: Right. Like you recognize this has happened to me. I made a painting once, it was so strong and it happened so quickly, it took me years to understand it and I just avoided it because I felt like I was cheating or something, but I didn't yet understand it. That's so funny that you say that. I've had the exact same experience. It's like intellectually you don't get it, but intuitively you create something that's important and meaningful and powerful but then you have to catch up.

Robert: I'm made to decide, so what else am I going to do? And I did several paintings of ginger pots and after a while, you know it's not about the ginger pub, but so what else do I do? I think that the problem is compounded because there's one particular painting and it was a really big one and I got it into a big open exhibition in Eastern London, White Chapel Gallery, which is like the open show to get into and it sold. And I got a lot of interest from it. My thought, "oh this is it. Like really it's going to take off." And so this sort of following kind of four or five years or so. Things are going pretty well. It's a good time to the economy as well in the 80s.

Speaker 1: Yes. For Art. Yes.

Robert: So things were looking good, but I hadn't really got a handle on doing properly. And sort of trying other things out. And of course I was teaching by this time as well. So the amount of contact time I had with work, was lessened really. It didn't kind of quite... I knew I couldn't carry on making those paintings, they were too limited for me, and I'm constrained. And because I was teaching, I didn't have to paint those pictures. That was another freedom that I could paint what I wanted to paint. And so the way you work kind of when... I don't know, it just didn't... I guess it got a bit lost really, you know. It just couldn't maintain what I had in it.

Speaker 1: You brought in all the other elements and changed the subject matter and...

Robert: I mean it kind of stuff... It's hard getting at until I'm realizing this is, I'm saying it in that, yeah. Yeah. Actually it's a lovely thing because when I watch the videos,

it is great because I can see how intuitively you work in conversation and how freeing that is that you kind of allow space for things to occur. But I think as this work went on, because I've been such an abstract painter before, I kind of started going back to it. So the picture spaces I was using got flatter again and the color got a lot stronger. I started using these pastels, big chalk pastels, and doing large pieces on paper with these chalk pastels, which is very unhealthy.

Speaker 1: Were they dry ones or oil based?

Robert: That's right.

Speaker 1: The powdery dry ones. Yeah?

Robert: In the end I stopped doing those because it was obvious, it's not pretty good if you blow your nose, isn't it?

Speaker 1: Yeah, you get like a cadmium red on your...

Robert: Absolutely. But also, I had not really faced oil paints and I'd always worked in acrylics and then I went to the pastels. And this is nothing like oil paint. What it can do is... Because actually the newest thing ever got to it and another medium was clay from Lena. Because Clay is just the most fun. I mean it's so underrated: you can fill it down, you can pour it, you can mould it, if it hardens up a bit you can cut it, curve it you can sandal it. It's just got this huge range of usability. And of course with the oil too, you can glaze with it, you can paint on the picture with it, you can mix it on the canvas, you can...

Speaker 1: And it stays pliable a little bit longer, which I like.

Robert: I was working pastel and anyway, that's the summer we had our two children and we had to decide what we were doing. Because we were living in south London and it wasn't a great place for schools and that kind of stuff. I found a job teaching in Cardiff where we live still. When our kids were nine and six, we moved to Wales and then since I got here, I got, just by chance, got picked up by a gallery back in England. It doesn't exist anymore, but that was my kind of start really from the 80s. So the 90s were pretty quiet for me. Once we got to about 2002, then I started showing in galleries again.

Speaker 1: And by this time your work had, you after the pastel work, when did your work become sort of where the vein that you're in now? I guess it's an oil painting and it's still life.

Robert: Sure. [inaudible] I started with... I think it was I liked the small thing, using small things. I've always been interested in other art and the author I was sort of drawn to. Well, things are kind of going well in the 80s, there was this art writer, she was over from the states and she came to my studio and she was very kind and she gave me some books. And one of them was on Marandi. The thing is,

you know, I kind of looked at this stuff at the time and I just didn't get it at all. I mean, granted it was just reproductions in the book, but I just couldn't, these little gray pictures. But I kept the book and with the years, and it's interesting. Is it Mitchell...

Speaker 1: Yes. Mitchell Johnson.

Robert: Johnson, that's right. Lovely conversation about Marandi. There's something about this guy and Marandi; he doesn't come and get you, he doesn't grab you. You have to go to him.

Speaker 1: Totally. That's a great way to put it.

Robert: He sits there and these little pots and things that are just quietly being. You have to be in the right place to sort of come to them. So I think maybe something like that happened. And there were also a couple of shows of Marandi back in the late nineties in London. And one of them in particular was very impressive. Beautiful, paintings. So I just started using little things and I think that was the thing. Just little boxes, things like that. Just picking up stuff around me. Let's say during the course of the day at work, I might walk around the ground and pick up a leaf or something. There was a roll of paper from like a ticket machine that somehow we had in the art room. I'd just start playing with things that had no intrinsic value really and it kind of went from there. The thing was that these little things with regard to roles of paper, I mean, deny the picture behind me here. The arrangements were, it could be just blown by the tiniest breeze. They were not stable. So they were very ephemeral and the arrangements would be very precarious sometimes, or I'd have to prop things up with a bit of blu tack or something.

Speaker 1: Because you had it like on the table and you're painting from life. It's like you're doing a portrait of this thing or did you take photographs or, I mean how...

Robert: I took photographs because the thing was that with these very precarious ephemeral arrangements, they just wouldn't stay. But also I realized once I started taking photographs, this is the great thing about still-life, you're God. You control everything - the angle, everything. You go out into a landscape and the landscape is God. You have to deal with what it is. But because I was teaching, still life it was great because I could set something up and control it completely. And I knew that it wouldn't change dramatically, but at the same time, it also meant that if I wanted to use something that would change very easily, if I took a photograph of it again, I had it fixed. So it took awhile for me to kind of come around to thinking that was okay.

It's an awful long way from what I was told at art School really. That sort of thing. It's not good though. But even painting stuff wasn't particularly well looked on. So there was all of that to work through in a way. But by being able to have an image to work from, in some ways it kind of freed me up to do the

same because I could then play around with these images; so I could change the background, I'd put it on Photoshop and I'd spin it round so it's the other way around, I could change the sort of color values, that kind of thing. And that would be my starting point for the painting. So things would still change on the painting as well.

Really put these images through a whole process. This required a degree of discipline and it doesn't... I love the way you work and I know exactly where it's kind of coming from because it was something that was close to my heart to in my work. My wife works an awful lot more like you than I do obviously. There was a great Philip Guston quote when he said, " how great to live through a painting." Live your experience through the doing of the painting. It's much more strategic in the sense that I do.

Speaker 1: But what you're doing, and I'd love to get your head on this, it seems to me, correct me if I'm wrong, but it is the arrangement of these elements that you're saying yes or no to. Your composing and recomposing and what you present and how you show them those composition that's what elevates, to me, the work. It's how you are presenting it, removes it takes it out of the, "Oh, I found this piece of paper on the street or this is just a leaf." They become much more than that. I don't know the words or... Can you speak to that? Because that's the magic that's happening. That's where you're living through the work it seems to me. That's what's making these paintings hold together. It's how you're composing it.

Robert: Yeah. When I was a kid, my mom used to take me, my mom cleaned houses, right, and during the summer holidays I'd to go with her. I just had to amuse myself. And there were a couple of people that had these sorts of sheds in the backyard. All sorts of stuff there, you know?

Speaker 1: I totally can see that. And it would be impacting on you because it's new. It's like going through someone's drawer in there. It's impacting. It just seems to make total sense to me that that's why you would be so intrigued by these objects.

Robert: Well, it would just be kind of like everyday stuff in our house and stuff, but I would drag them out and I'd build things with it and then it would be like spaceship or whatever. And I didn't actually play with the things that much. I think that the pleasure was in actually putting these things together.

Speaker 1: But they weren't like logical. It wasn't like a toy. It was a lawn mower or a piece of hose and a bucket. I mean, right? There just random stuff you would find.

Robert: Sure. Yeah. And I tried to put things together so it looked like whatever I thought... the opportunity to make it into presented itself as. As the kids do, isn't it?

Speaker 1: Yeah. Well, it's creativity.

Robert: I was thinking of a way, I'm kind of still doing that really I'm just doing that with stuff and then projecting onto it really. And that's it. It could be a cloud, it could be the wind, and it could be a skull. It could be this, it could be that. It's a tricky line because if you kind of go over the edge, it can look very stagey and contrived and that kind of thing. Any method has it's, you know, sort of point where, you know...

Speaker 1: Yes. It can be poignant or it can just be kind of dumb, you know? Have you, I'm just curious, have you talked about that experience of your childhood, of that sort of time that you were doing in connection to your art? Because that's really interesting, I think. As the through line, you have sensitivity to arrangement and it comes out in your work. And that's what struck me about the work. It was like, "what is going on here?" And so it's just that to me, it makes sense how you're describing those early years, right?

Robert: Yeah. You see, again, you said something in one of your videos and it was an opening of your show and you said, "Well, it's great," saw this one, which is really great, "you know, you don't get to meet the people who buy the work?" And it's true because I don't actually get to have many conversations about my work. I have sort of done a few things here where I've gone and talked about my work here and there, so I've mentioned it. Local art groups and that kind of thing and that sort of stuff. But no, I don't actually get the chance to sort of engage and talk. So this is a real treat for me.

Speaker 1: Yeah. Well, it's helpful. It's helpful for me. It's helpful for everyone, I think to get mirrored back what people perceive and especially people who are making art. I think it's so interesting and my goal is that we both learn something. And if you take something new about your work from this, fantastic. But like this arrangement of things, making things. Like, have you been...when it's successful. When the work is working your best work, what's going on? And what makes the work amazing for you or balanced or you talked about all parts of it, all parts of your paintings are kind of contributing. And I love that. And then there also has to be resonance. You've, talked about that before, all of which I agree, but is there anything more that's happening that we can put words to what's going on in these compositions?

Robert: Sure. I'll try. There's something I haven't mentioned, which just kind of informed with as well is that I've, and this goes back to when I was at college. And I'll come back to exactly what you asked in the second, but along with that interest in abstract expressionism, my tutors, along with that, there was a big interest in eastern philosophy and Zen Buddhism. So Mark Toby, several other painters. Franz Kline others creepy. The graphic paintings. Although they actually weren't based on calligraphy but there was that strong sort of thread and I got interested in that and it has run through things. So I do very much like that eastern aesthetic - things being paired down. Some symmetry. And of course that the balance of form and space, of something and nothing together which is very painterly. But coming back to what you said, I have this sort of natural tendency to try and distill things down. It's just how I am, but when I'm working

on the piece, and I bet it's the same for you too, that you just get to a point where it looks back at you. And it just says, "here I am."

Speaker 1: It is hitting you on all the senses. It has this powerful presence, where all of a sudden it's not parts of a painting. It's an entire thing speaking to you in one loud voice. It's impacting.

Robert: Yeah. My favorite tutor when I was at college, who's just the most fantastic painter. And so suddenly he died young. But he was from the north, like me, from Yorkshire. And so, if he could use fewer words, he would. He didn't. He'd go on for too long, but he said, "ah, it's finished when it's the same all over." Painting has to look the same all over. Was kind of wrestling him. But I can't, I know what he means now. And he was a beautiful tunnel painter actually. So that kind of just feeling of it all being together. And there've been a lot of times when, well I do, although it looks kind of quite, I'm not going to say literal because I'm hoping they don't, but there are a lot of times when I don't really know why I'm doing the painting I'm doing. What it is about. I don't understand what it is about it, although the images are very clear. I still don't necessarily really get it. But during the process of making the painting, things can sort of come together and I get an understanding of what it's about. A conscious understanding. Maybe it's just because I'm a bit slow.

Speaker 1: Yeah. I mean, I thought that . I teach, I've taught a lot and I still have to get out like my book that I give people to help myself figure it out. You'd think I would've learned this by now. What was that? Go ahead.

Robert: Well, at least you find everything, you know. You'll have this stuff, don't you? You're in a different situation. And of course it applies, this bit of knowledge that you have, but it feels ,maybe it's something about being an artist that you know that every situation is different. And so the knowledge you bring to that is actually going to be slightly modified. So maybe it's that newness.

Speaker 1: Yeah. And it's not like you're going to wire this process and then just repeat it over and over. It wouldn't have any sense in it for you over the long haul. Right. There's something that you talk about and I see in your work which I really relate to also is you, you juxtapose different materials or different objects. The crinkliness of a leaf next to the smoothness of the paper when I'm looking behind you and you manufactured next to, and I think of my whole world that way and actually all of what I teach is based on getting more in touch with that and freeing those things that interest you. And if something you love and you want to show this, you can show it's opposite to make it even impact more in your work. But it seems to me that's a big part of what you're making.

Robert: Very much so. Yeah. I mean, they are conversations really. I mean paintings, are still real, it's relationships, isn't it? All relationships. And I think that there's this just this wonderful sort of unity, I think. Is that the right word? And unity between that and again, in a lot of eastern philosophy, in that a lot of life is about being able to deal with paradoxes, the paradoxes of life. To hold these

things together and not see them as separate or dual, but to let them come together. You're not on an elemental level. There are lots of lovely kind of games you can play with it. Like, you know, how can a piece of paper have a temperature? But if you put something lovely, cool, white sort of piece of paper next to a red hot leaf or something like that. Well there you are. You can do that. And I think it's that thing that art can do, which is just so wonderful., You can play with these and make these conversations. And it's also that, cause I've used several things over and over again in different contexts and I get a kick out of the same thing, but in a different context, it becomes something else. It takes on a new personality.

Speaker 1: Yeah. You don't show a million things, generally you show two things, two different things. What's interesting, and it's something that I love doing and think about a lot and actually teach this a lot, is this idea that when we have a whole lot of things and we're interested in showcasing some differences between things, it's difficult. It's much easier to show two things and, and have a difference emerge. If you add a third, it's way more difficult to see it. And it seems to me that you pair down your work - the subject matter, the elements in it - so the viewer really gets it. Just that leaf next to that paper. That becomes almost the subject matter. It's so powerful or a big part of the subject matter of what you're communicating. Was that something that you have thought about or is that what you're involved in? That juxtaposition to has to come across in a strong way in your work.

Robert: Yeah, you paint yourself, don't you, right? I always remember Lucian Freud, the portrait painter. You sort of see 'all these portraits, and I've seen many over the years, but they're actually like a Lucian Freud as well in that. Whatever you, this is a Buddhist thing, but whatever you talk about there are two things going on. There's what you're talking about and it's you doing the talking and that's what other people get. You're not just transferring information, you're actually giving yourself as well. And [inaudible].I have it in my nature to sort of pair things down. And often I'll do single forms as well, but for me, the relationship there obviously is between the form and the background. I've thought about this quite a lot because I'm also drawn to work like that obviously. And now I'm an only child. So I spent a lot of my time when I was young on my own like I mentioned earlier. So, maybe there's something of that in it. Perhaps if I'd had 10 brothers and sisters, maybe I'd do group pictures. Maybe I'd want to get away and not still be doing. I am very comfortable with my own company. Music actually. Because I don't know if you, listen to music when you work?

Speaker 1: Sure.

Robert: I do not all the time. And over the years, I think what I've kind of come down to is that I like the piano. So at the moment I'm listening to a lot of Bill Evans. Do you know Bill Evans, the jazz...

Speaker 1: Wow. I'm writing all these little things down. There's all this great stuff you're saying. You got to talk a lot more because there's tons of wonderful things

you're coming out on this. So that's what I'm doing when I'm looking down. I've scribbled all these quotes and everything. So you're listening to piano. That's...

Robert: Yeah. I mean, the music I like is kind of paired back. We all have our sort of... I think the great thing is, is that at some point I thought, "well, sure. I love painting. In fact I think one of the..." You're not going to shut me out now mate.

Speaker 1: No. It's good. It's good stuff.

Robert: When I was teaching we had a trip to Paris, we took the kids to Paris, big school group. And we were staying in this hotel and we had a coach driver. The bus driver who was taking us around. And this is when I was still teaching in London. And he was a real Londoner, "go blobby, Cockney" you know. And we were having a drink at the bowl and he said, "you know," he says he's a great character. Had a big long earring. This was in the early eighties. It was quite different. Lots of tattoos when people didn't have tattoos. But you know what he said, "you're all for art. It's not good." And I thought, "wow, I didn't quite get it." I mean of course, it was a curious thing to say. And there was a feeling of perception about it. And of course he was right. There are all kinds of people who love art. They love it so much, they can exclude everything else from it. And then that was particularly why I was so delighted when I came across your art to life program because you connect art to people's lives and how they are. You are what you experience, what you love. Whether it's, you know, your family or the other thing too. What you eat, where are the right places for you to be, what your emotional life is like. All these things. Yeah. It's not like that. So...

Speaker 1: Right. You can bring that awareness, that this sensitivity that we're developing, it can be applied to all your choices in a way, you know?

Robert: Yeah, I mean it is a two way conversation. And I think if you are creative you can, you can create your life. I've led a very safe life really. There's a great Matisse quote that says, "if you want to be an artist, simplify your life." But you can simplify it too much in there. You've got to have the stuff coming in. And I think once I decided I was kind of going to bring in the connections to other things that I've always felt, but bring that into the paintings, then it would become more interesting for me. So I think that's what I kind of try and do really. And Picasso said this. He said that he puts all the things he likes into his paintings and he had quite a life as well. So there's a lot to put in there. So yeah, these little bits and pieces can carry all sorts of things. Because of art. Because that's the magic. Putting one thing next to another and being responsive to it, I guess.

Speaker 1: So if you're thinking down the road, where do you feel your work's heading or what are you excited about? Where are you going to take this?

Robert: Well, life's amazing really because... There is a great saying, isn't there? It is, "Life is what happens when you're making plans." I think John Lennon was

credited with saying that, but I've not been a great one for planning and I've just kind of kept going. But I started, and without that. It doesn't sound terribly exciting, but I think my work has gotten a bit more tonal recently and I'm using more service in the work. So there was a, I didn't want this to sound pretentious in any way, but there was a lovely book I read by a physicist called Carlo Rovelli, Italian physicist. I think the book was called "Things are not as They Seem." It's still a sort of quantum mechanics and quantum field theory. He has a theory called 'quantum loop theory.' But essentially he said "the universe is granular" in there.

And I sort of read this and I could see those... Have you ever seen the Claude Monet water lilies? These fantastic trees that shoot upon Paris. And it's a field, with this rating kind of threads and things. So they're never kind of rare but they don't seem to get credited. That kind of connection doesn't seem to be made with anything that I've read about those paintings, but it just suddenly seemed quite, clear to me. And so I think in a way I'm trying to make my pictures a bit more granular in the sense. I'll never be Monet too late, but I'm still doing what I'm doing. That's kind of where I'm heading. Beyond that I don't know. I don't want to know.

Speaker 1: Right. I have to ask you one more question because I think about it and I just want to get your hit on it. You're painting realistically or where the recognizable things and you have the facility to make something look very real. But you're also deliberately flattening space and you're denying that in a beautiful way so we're reminded that it's not real but it's also very realistic. And I find that a lot of realistic painters go too far and they lose that quality that you maintained. Almost like if you take it too far, it's not as powerful in a way. Like it becomes about the things. Yours are about the things, but it's also about painting. It's also about the space. Can you just speak to that a little bit of like... Do you know that edge I'm talking about? I don't know this because I'm not a realistic painter. I'm curious.

Robert: No. But you know painting and you just said what I did. That it. Sometimes people say, "oh, how'd you make that spoon looks so realistic?" And that's not about that.

Speaker 1: Well, your paintings don't do that. That's what's so beautiful about you. You are pulling that off, which is hard to do because we glom-on to what's realistic. But you're holding back and you're doing it. I'm not even sure how you're doing and that's what's so interesting. But to me it has to do with the edges and the sharpness in the background.

Robert: Let's just get your baby to it. Let me tell you, because that's precisely where it really usually is. And with figures of painting, it's all about the edges. We went to Italy a couple of years back and I'd been when I was 18. I've been to Italy a few times, but I mean to northern Italy, Florence and Venice. I'd been when I was younger, but we went very recently and when I was younger I loved Michelangelo and the high Renaissance artist Rafael. This time it was the earlier

renaissance painters. So it was Fra Angelico and Piero della Francesca. A lot of these paintings of fresco paintings, that sort of a wash of color on the walls. The edges of the figures, let's say, well everything, but the figures in this case particularly, were quite crisp. In fact, any paintings at that time, whether they were done with temporal or jesso or oil paintings they tend to have quite crisp edges. It's pre-photography, so...

Speaker 1: Yeah. It flattens it out.

Robert: And I realized that this gave the forms a kind of clarity. I think it's something that a lot of painters respond to. I hear it again and again. I mean, Philip Guston's favorite painter was Pierre Della Francesca. Always blew my mind on already. Richard Nixon then the humanitarian index, you know. But he believed in heaven too. Those paintings do have a presence and I think it's something to do with it. So I do keep those edges quite clear because I'm aiming for clarity. Because the thing is, I don't believe in perfection because it is a bad concept and it's a concept and it's therefore not good. But I think a painting is a moment, it's a place. It's like Philip Glass said, "music is a place." When you listen to a piece, you're in a space whatever that space is and whoever it is you're listening to.

Actually if I've got a big painting to start, I always put Philip Glass higher on this Crapsey on, do you know that? It goes really slow, but then I just kind of get energy off that, you know, when you're knocking in the big things. Back to the point. So that sort of feeling of clarity and balance and space I think is something that I got from that early, that quarter century painting. But also, I said you wouldn't shut me up, I came across an image quite a few years back in an art magazine and it was a strange looking painting. It's like a mouse with a little tail but there was something about the space, the single form in this space. And it kind of stayed with me. And it was by an Italian painter called Dominica Nali. And because of the Internet now, you can go and search.

Anyway, eventually I came across more of this work and back in 1980, I painted this huge single ginger pot on its own. And here's Demonico Nali. Not only doing ginger pots, he's in the back of people's heads with the hair. He was doing bits of their shirt fronts. Cropped in. It was a tragedy he died at age 39. He just had a show at a big New York, in a Dentyne gallery. Well, I don't know. I can't remember the name of it now, but I think it was in 69. And he died shortly afterwards. He might have had one or maybe two shows, I can't remember. But I couldn't get to see these paintings until we went to Italy just the other year.

And we went into a show at the Guggenheim in Venice and it was Italian art from the 60s. And there was the more conceptual stuff. There's Mario Mertz, there's Michelangelo Pistoletto and these other various people. Then I walked into this room with Dominica Nali paintings. And the thing was, he actually did the big paintings right but the surfaces, he actually mixed sand into his paint. So he mixed with sand. So they have this kind of fresco quality. And it really sent chills down my back because I was saying that the plaster and the sea...Sent me back 20 years before. I mean, that was in the eighties maybe, but 20 years

before that he was doing stuff and I didn't even know. So those are my touchstones.

The other great moment I had was the show, Richard Diebenkorn in London a few years back, he's an artist we just don't get to see in the UK. So much of his work was acquired by public collections in the States. So it didn't travel, you know. And the last room though, there was several ocean park paintings on the wall. It was one of those moments in an exhibition. It was just fantastic. Great. But that space you know...

Speaker 1: Creating, I mean, they're in a world. That's a place. Your paintings are in a place, you know, and mine are in a place and we are attending them in this place and people come in and experience it.

Robert: And then I think the great joy is that, with the painting you get it then in a moment. I think being a painter, you're often sort of, put in a position of... It's very easy, I think, to feel inadequate because we don't, the power of what we do isn't to do with language. It's deep. But so much these days depends on language. So again, one of the things I love about what you do is you speak so intelligently and so perceptively through experience as a painter. But you use language which is so accessible and you really demystify it for everybody.

Speaker 1: Thank you.

Robert: And I think the great thing is when you look at a painting. That's fine. I think painting should be for everybody read all the texts and he searched that, went into it. I mean, I think it's great to get all the background stuff you're interested. In that you can learn such a lot from people's lives and thinking how they informed their work. But I think for it to be effective you know, you just have to give yourself to it.

Speaker 1: Yes. And I love that people can... When the work is strong people can come in with no knowledge really and they're just moved. They just get it because they're human beings. And everything we're talking about, they don't need to know that. They can just look at your painting and experience their life in a different way. I mean, feel that the papers cool and the leaf is... They just get it. That's pretty amazing.

Robert: I mean sometimes I think "music is the best." Because you're in this sort of continuous present with music. But painting is pretty good.

Speaker 1: It's a pretty good runners up for sure. Listen, Robert, I just want to thank you so much for joining us. And I thought that, often in the interviews there's little bits that I'm like, "Oh, I've got to go look this up." There's so much now I'm going to have to do too. Like go look up and get all these pictures and put things together. It's very rich and thank you. Thank you so much. It's really wonderful.