

260113_HR_ Interview @mepaintsme

1. Thank you for talking, Heidrun! I'd love to hear a bit about your background. Where did you grow up? (Just tell me a bit about your history, family, schooling, etc.)

HR: I grew up in a small town near Lake Constance in Southern Germany, with one brother. I had a relatively carefree childhood. Together with neighbour children we used to play in the nearby forest, immersed in an abundance of imagination and role plays. My parents, both scientists and teachers, practised a strong focus on their profession. I have been raised equally by my grandmother, a cheerful and loving person who lived in our house.

From early childhood I painted. My mother had told me that from the age of two I sometimes would paint 8 hours a day, usually with big brushes and water colour. She kept many of these paintings. There were plenty of art materials around as my mother had been once an art student herself. My schooling was in a local primary school and later I went to a grammar school with majors in French, German and Art. In general, I didn't enjoy school much as I rather wanted to spend all my time drawing and painting.

Later after having studied zoological illustration in Germany and having travelled extensively, I went to art school in London for six years, studying painting first at the Byam Shaw then at the Slade.

2. Your work is most often very small, which I feel amplifies their quiet depiction of intimate life, in the tradition of artists like Bonnard and Vuillard. How do you think scale affects the viewers relationship to the work?

HR: I always enjoyed working on a small scale. The size of my sketchbooks somehow predict the scale for my paintings. A friend once said: 'paint as large as you have to and as small as you can'. There are very good reasons for painting large and it can be absolutely necessary for a subject, that wouldn't work on a small scale. However, my feeling is that today there are a lot of over-scaled paintings around, may be sometimes done for commercial reasons, which I dislike.

Painting small means that every brush stroke counts. It is a fine balance between colour, transitions of colour, edges and touch. While I am painting, I am holding the panel in my hand. I like the feeling of the heavy panel and the ivory like gesso and being connected in a physical way to my paintings. Having the flexibility of turning the painting during work helps me to see the abstract patterns. Equally, imagine something will transfer to the viewers experience: an experience of having to focus, looking closely and being drawn into the pictorial realm and its atmosphere.

3. Your paintings are made in egg tempera, a medium I'm quite unfamiliar with. What initially drew you to it, and how does it behave differently from most other water-based paints?

HR: When I went to art college I developed a strong interest for egg tempera due to my love for the Sienese Quattrocento painters. My aim was and is to create luminous and finely tuned colour relationships. Egg tempera seems to be a good medium for that.

As a young student I used to study every possible medieval recipe for egg tempera and had years of experimenting, lots of trial and error. Today I sometimes use very good egg tempera paints in tubes as well. But I also make it myself using egg yolk, a particular resin, linseed oil and pigment.

Another advantage is that egg tempera dries to a satin-matt finish – the surface appears somewhere between oil and gouache. Although rather delicate to paint with, egg tempera cures over time to a durable and light-fast surface.

4. I've read that your painting practice involves a great deal of drawing, mostly from daily life—what you've described as “daily epiphanies.” What does drawing allow you to access that other forms of reference cannot? Is capturing the emotional temperature of these moments your primary goal?

HR: Yes, capturing the emotional density of a moment is my core interest in drawing. Although I may look closely where things are in relation to each other – this is never random – my drawings are usually done very fast.

Often, I draw people in a certain situation, my children or someone I feel close to, but I never want them to stay still or sit for me. This I would find arbitrary or artificial.

Drawings hold not only the placement of people and objects in space, but for me they contain a manifold memory I can re-access even after years when looking at my sketchbooks: memory of scent, wind, temperature, conversations, a particular light and mood. That is why they are to me a far richer source for my paintings than a photograph ever could be.

5. When you return to a sketch in the studio to begin a painting, colour and light are part of the original experience—elements a drawing inevitably loses. Do you make colour notations? Is it difficult to recognize when a painting has drifted too far from that initial experience?

HR: Yes, that is true, a drawing lacks the colour but looking at it, I remember the colours! I love this tension of being a step away from the original experience, painting directly from perception does not interest me. In my drawings I do make colour notations, if there is a particular exciting colour shift or combination, but otherwise I rely on my memory.

Colour in a painting does drift away from the original moment, but I don't mind that at all. In fact, I enjoy creating a parallel colour system to the one out there.

6. Do the paintings go through many iterations as you work? How do you know when a painting has reached a sense of completion?

HR: My paintings start off referring quite accurately to the initial sketch. No matter how rough a drawing is I always want to take it seriously. After a while into the painting things start shifting, getting erased and formed again. I put the drawing away and the painting follows its own path. A painting usually stops when I feel a balance of all the elements to each other. It is different for each painting.

7. Another aspect of your paintings that I love is their physicality. The supports possess a softness—even the corners have a roundness that accentuates their “objectness.” Can you talk about this aspect of the work? How do you prepare your supports?

HR: The materiality of the paints and supports I am using is vitally important to me. Inspired by Icon paintings, I have always liked working on wood. The sanding and preparing takes a long time. I work

on traditional gesso, consisting of size and chalk, painted on in several thin coats. I regard my paintings as much as physical objects as flat painted surfaces.

8. You exhibited a number of triptychs last year in which each panel represented its own time and place, and I believe the left and right panels could fold inward. How do you think this format was received? Did it operate differently from your single-panel works?

HR: The triptychs for me are a means of painting a sequence in time. The aspect of time – very specific moments of time – is important in my work. As opposed to a single panel usually referring to just a particular moment in time.

The triptychs may refer to a sequence in time. A person moving from one place to the next, an outside and an inside glimpse of a room etc. At my show in Antwerp with Gallery Sofie Van de Velde, people seemed to spend a long time looking at the triptychs. Maybe they are miniature worlds people can enter. Further I see them as a kind of “travel icons”, people can take with them when they are on the move.

9. You return repeatedly to northern countries, to dusk and dawn, and to moonlit nights at home. How do you think about light as both a physical and emotional presence in your paintings?

HR: Yes I do have an affinity to Northern countries, like Norway or Denmark. Painting moon lit nights has fascinated me over the past 30 years. I often go out at night to draw. Where I live there is no light pollution. I guess I feel drawn to the luminosity of the moon and how everything is united by this particular light.

To paint a physical light has been a great desire since I was an art student. Light is everything in my painting. I am very aware that each painting needs its own specific light, whether there is a single light source or an overall light. I want colour and light to melt together, may be that is what I mean by “physical light”.

10. Thank you so much for taking the time to talk. Do you have any current or upcoming exhibitions you’re working on?

HR: At the moment I am exhibiting at Gallery Haverkamp and Leistenschneider in Berlin. My show takes place in the gallery’s Cabinet room, the same space where Katherine Bradford had her first show with the gallery. I am very happy about that.

Currently I am working on a publication together with Gallery Sofie van de Velde, Antwerp where I will have my next solo show in Spring 2027.

Heidrun Rathgeb