

Artist Gideon Rubin on how he paints

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Gideon Rubin

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I have always painted portraits. I was into realism: the nose, eyes, every little fold. But I happened to be in New York on the day of September 11th and on my return I began painting abandoned toys that I had found. These were portraits of sorts – old dolls and toy soldiers – but they were worn out, with only traces of their facial features were left.

Gradually I began painting people again, but my painting becoming much looser and more simplified. An eye became just a shadow, then it disappeared altogether. In the last three years I have been painting anonymous portraits that I find in early 20th century photograph albums.

I'd like to think the figures in my paintings remind the viewer of certain people or evoke memories rather than portray specific identities. My works are minimal, often there's not much there. I want the viewer to look at them and focus on the process of painting and the medium itself, and to focus on certain details that I provide, such as the posture of a figure, a piece of furniture in the paintings background or a detail such as a single flower. It's a more abstract way of looking at a scene; it is impossible to directly identify with the characters in my paintings rather I want to offer alternative ways of viewing the figures, where the viewer is also involved in completing a narrative or scene.

I work from old photographs from early 20th century family photo albums or cast off books with images of Victorian and Edwardian children in them. When considering these images I look for narrative, for a scene that is open to interpretation: the more mundane and banal the image the better. I'm not interested in an individual or a specific character and, in fact, I even prefer not to know any personal details. Painting from old anonymous family photographs feels like tracing a lost past or unearthing forgotten histories. In some way I believe this obsession answers a deep need within me to replace or fill in my own family's missing albums.

My choice of colour is always down to intuition, but I am always drawn to earthy colours, such as ochre and umber, and much less to saturated colours. There are flickers of red in many of my pieces too, which I use to activate the painting, bringing objects and people to life. Red is a little like a street sign, giving directions on how to read the work. I use red sparingly to highlight a detail that initiates a relationship between the viewer and the painting. I always mix my colours with plenty of zinc white, damar varnish and linseed oil.

I like high quality stretchers and I get mine pre-made from John Jones. Before any paint is added I prime the canvas with two layers of rabbit skin glue, leaving a day in between each layer to let it dry properly. I love using the bare canvas or linen and often I leave areas entirely untouched by paint so that they become an integral part of the painting. I also love painting over old paintings too and I usually have quite a few of old canvases lying around in the studio ready to be painted on. The surface of the paintings revealing strata of previous paintings and scenes, so that the final scene is entrenched in multiple layers of paint and history.

- Gideon Rubin was born in Tel Aviv, Israel, in 1973. He is represented by Rokeby Gallery, London, Hosfelt Gallery, San Francisco, Alon Segev gallery, Tel Aviv and Karsten Greve Gallery, Paris. His forthcoming solo exhibition, 1929, will be on at Rokeby Gallery, > London from 8 October to 2 November. gideonrubin.com