

In Conversation with Rebecca Salter

Lily-Rose Morris-Zumin

Rebecca Salter is a painter. She is President of the Royal Academy of Arts, the first woman in the role. She has a strong interest in Japanese woodblock prints.

Past and present leaders of the Royal Academy of Arts come together here to discuss the role and power of art in today's world, and the difficulties and responsibilities of running an institution seen as the country's cultural trendsetter. These conversations raise questions of ethics, artistic merit, and political compromise.

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CJLPA: What do you think about the current state of the world, and art's part in it?

Rebecca Salter: I think for quite some years the art world has been becoming increasingly global and increasingly aware of its carbon footprint. It is predicated on massive growth and prices going up and up. I think what will happen now may change that—it will be more difficult for art sellers, probably for a while. So I think the money circus will slow down slightly. I hope it's a good time to reassess.

CJLPA: Do you think that the pandemic will increase people's interest in seeing art in person?

RS: I think so, partly because it will increase people's interest in actually making, housing the made, and the whole process. Because people have had a huge amount of time on their hands, many have found themselves doing things which they never thought they would—making things. So I think there will be more of an interest in the physical object, and also that we will be so fed up with online by the end of the pandemic that we will just want to see the real thing.

I think we have realised there is a difference in seeing an object online. It's a substitute for now, but nothing can beat the actual experiences of the object. In the object, you can feel the traces of the artist's hand and as a result of that you can, to some extent, enter their head. I think we lose a lot of that when we look at things online.

There's a Japanese term which translates to 'your eyes sit'. It describes the difference between actively looking, on the one hand, and seeing, on the other. Your eyes relax so much that you almost disappear into the artwork because you're no longer actively scanning it, you're just 'being' with it.

CJLPA: Arts funding: a public or a private affair?

RS: As President of the Royal Academy—which of course gets no government funding—I think it's a combination. We're quite lucky in this country as we have a mixed model, wherein some places get government funding and are topped up with private funding. What's going to happen after this I don't know, because the government will be looking to reduce its support in all sorts of areas of life. One worries about the arts, because people always make the argument that they are not important and we don't need them in the way we need roads and hospitals. I would argue that a country without any kind of cultural sector would be so impoverished it wouldn't be worth living in.

CJLPA: The arts make life worth living in lots of ways.

RS: Exactly. But when you've got very difficult decisions to make, it's not easy to make the case for arts funding when you've got schools, and hospitals, and paying back all this money we've borrowed over the pandemic. That's going to be the crunch. Being more optimistic about it, I think that—again, during lockdown—people have recognised the value of the arts sector. So many arts organisations, including the Royal Academy, put stuff online very, very quickly. You could argue that by doing that—and by doing that for free—all the arts organisations contributed to the mental wellbeing of the country.

Nobody has figured out how to monetise the online offerings, because we've been effectively just giving them away for free. Just asking people to donate? But if more of what you do goes online at some point—and this is a question that comes up the whole time—how do you monetise art? I'm not sure anybody's got the answer yet, but I also think that people who are fairly wealthy and are able to support the arts have, again, realised the importance of the arts during lockdown. One can start to have confident conversations with philanthropists, or potential philanthropists, about how they could support the arts. Because people during lockdown look to values in life and in organisation more closely than they might have done before, they want to support organisations that have values they agree with and they think are important.

CJLPA: In a revolution, statues tumble. Are we witnessing a revolution?

RS: I'm not sure whether I'd call it a revolution, but I think it's always helpful to look at things again and reassess things. There are some truly egregious examples where statues should be tumbled, but in many cases I think it is much more important to have really good conversation about objects and their interpretation. I think if you're not careful, the tumbling doesn't actually achieve very much, except for taking something away. What you really want to do is add to the quality of the debate.

Look at how history has been interpreted. The Artemisia Gentileschi exhibition that has just opened at the National Gallery is incredibly interesting. For a long time, Gentileschi was sidelined almost completely in art history. There were some concerns that she was being exhibited at the National Gallery as a sort of token woman. But there is no way you could go around that exhibition and think she is a token woman. Her painting is unbelievably powerful, and by rights should have been in the canon right from the beginning. The exhibition wasn't just run because she was a woman. She's at last taken her rightful place.

CJLPA: How do you feel, being a woman in the art world? I know it's a lot better recently, but I saw in Tate the posters of the Guerrilla Girls, and I thought about how they were making art not so long ago. I was always into art and drama. They are always labelled as very feminine subjects, whereas men are put towards maths and sciences. Some things have changed, but the art world is still quite male-dominated, for example in terms of salaries.

RS: There still are some very uncomfortable statistics about the art world. All the highest-paid contemporary artists are male. When I was at art school the gender split may have been close to 50–50, but I was never taught by a woman. All the teachers were men, and this applied to my cohort too. Courses with predominantly women are emerging, but there are still fewer women teaching, fewer women as career artists, and the statistics are very odd.

I fear it's going to get worse. You need to spend some part of your week working for money, and then you need to find time to work on your art. The real pinch point is when you introduce children into that mix. Then, it becomes almost impossible, unless you've got an other half who is doing half the work. Quite a few of us older women Academicians don't have children. Some of the younger ones do but it's quite a struggle.

CJLPA: Planning your time is quite difficult as an artist, because you have to be immersed in what you're doing.

RS: Yes, it's tricky and time consuming. You can't shortcut it and say, 'I've only got an hour'. But there are more women, and we've elected more women at the Royal Academy in the last ten or so years, so the balance is changing.

CJLPA: You were the first female President. Congratulations!

RS: Thank you! It only took 252 years, but we got there in the end. Shockingly, the Royal Academy had two female members when it was founded in 1768, but then the next woman was elected in 1936. That tells you what the nature is of the organisation. Of course, the irony is that—as so often happens—it's a woman in post when all the sweeping up has to happen, which of course is what's happening with the pandemic. I get to do all the hard work.

CJLPA: Institutions such as the Royal Academy are the shapers of taste. How did you view this responsibility during your time as President?

RS: I think the Royal Academy might be flattered to think it is a shaper of taste, really! The wonderful thing about the Royal Academy is that it is independent and can do what it wants, money permitting. So even though it has 'Royal' over the door, and is in a rather grand place on Piccadilly, there is room to be radical. But I think taste is probably shaped virtually now. I suspect the real world just piggybacks on.

CJLPA: Surely the Royal Academy has a big influence?

RS: Well, it depends on which bit of the Royal Academy. Is it the exhibition we just had on Picasso, or is it the Summer Exhibition? They are very different: one is a scholarly, curated exhibition and the other is really a celebration of creativity. I don't think the Summer Exhibition shapes taste in any meaningful way now. I think it used to. There's a hilarious film on YouTube of the Summer Exhibition in 1976—everybody is chain smoking, the women are wearing hats and pearls, and the men are all dressed up in tweeds. But a few hundred yards away you've got the Sex Pistols. The Royal Academy really lost touch around this time. But I would argue we've moved a long way since then. You can look at the most recent artists we've elected, people like Isaac Julien, John Akomfrah, and David Adjaye. It's a very different place.

CJLPA: So do you think it has become more 'with the times'?

RS: Yes. One of the tricky bits was that when you're elected as an academician, you're elected in a category: painting, sculpture, printmaking, or architecture. For an awfully long time, people were saying, 'Well, what do we do with photographers?', or, 'We can't have photographers because we don't know where to put them.' But now Isaac Julien can get elected as a Painter. It's just a label.

CJLPA: In 1863, the Paris Salon rejected the works of Courbet, Manet, Pissarro, Jongkind, and Whistler. Today's great art contests, such as the RA Summer Show, are sometimes viewed not as competitions but as lotteries. Do you think there is a risk of great works falling through the cracks? And might there be scope, as there was in 1863, for a Salon des Refusés?

RS: I think the nature of the Summer Exhibition has changed slightly. Back in the old days, there was a consensus about what should be hanging in the Royal Academy, but now for the last six years, maybe more, there's been a curator coordinator. We've had Michael Craig-Martin and Grayson Perry, and this year it was Jane and Louise Wilson. Every year now the Exhibition has a slightly different vision, because the coordinator and committee are different each year. It's just a reflection of the particular angle of that year's committee, so it's not quite as black and white as 'in' or 'out' and those 'out' are cast into darkness. It just means, 'Not this year but maybe next year.' Before I was elected, I submitted to the Royal Academy and never got in once.

CJLPA: Was it the same when you applied—that they were still changing curators?

RS: When I was putting in work, I think it was possibly still with a fixed academy view, but it just goes to show that not getting into the Royal Academy doesn't mean very much if you end up as the president! So it is very different, it's not really a shaper of any great

taste as it was in the past. Being refused I think is really just 'try again next year' when it's a different committee.

In the year that Grayson Perry did it, which was our anniversary year, the fact that he was the coordinator shaped the kind of work that was submitted. A huge number of people painted portraits of him, which of course the next year wouldn't get in at all. Whereas Grayson took them all in because it was quite entertaining to have a wall full of portraits of Grayson. So it's a much more complex relationship than it was before, because everybody looks at the committee and thinks, 'OK, I might get in this year because they like the kind of work I do.' It's shaped by the committee that we put together, really. It's not monolithic as it was before.

CJLPA: How do you view your place in the discourse of contemporary art?

RS: I'm in a slightly odd position. When I left art school, I went and did my postgraduate in Japan. This was considered very eccentric in 1979 because everybody wanted to go to New York. I've never regretted going to Japan. It was extraordinarily valuable to look back at your own culture, and European culture, through the eyes of a very different culture. It taught me many lessons about one's narrow assumptions and interpretation of the world. Western perspective, for example, is just the way we choose in the West to represent the world on a flat surface. In Japan and China, they do it in a completely different way. These different visions of the world have been hugely enriching for me.

I was always fascinated by Japan and just wanted to go, though I'm not quite sure why. I got a scholarship and went. Japanese art was what I was drawn to, but I didn't know much else about Japan, because in those days you didn't really. Partly it was that things were economically really bad here in the early eighties, whereas Japan was booming. Also, by then I'd learned the language, and once you've done that it seems like a waste not to go back! I spent six years there in the end, two in university, and I go back as often as I can.

CJLPA: Has Japan inspired your art?

RS: Yes. When I was there I thought about my work in Japanese, because I lived with Japanese people and had mostly Japanese friends. This was really powerful, and I still do it sometimes. For much of my stay I hardly spoke English at all. When I came back to England, I couldn't really talk or think about my work in English because it had been 'created' in Japanese. It's like I've got two circuits in my head: every now and again when I'm working, I think about the work in Japanese because it can unlock things. My experience in Japan was very valuable indeed.

Lily-Rose Morris-Zumin is a first-year undergraduate in English at Wolfson College, Cambridge. She was a scholarship student at Ashbourne College, London, and received the CIFE Academic Award in Humanities in 2018. In spring 2021 she appeared in two online University theatre productions, *A Blown Job* and *The Medea*. Next term she will appear in a radio play *Life before the Line* and will be a creative collaborator in the theatre production *Public House 4*. She is a Senior Art Editor at *CJLPA*.
