

I met Robert Szot in New York City recently. I brought a friend with me, who I had shown his work. She, being an art advisor, thought his paintings are fantastic like I do.

We all know on a screen, art can be perceived quite differently than in real life. I was not prepared for how much more I was going to be taken with Rob's work, considering I liked it so much to start.

Each painting he would present thoughtfully, hanging one after the next as I would ask to see, and with each one, it just seemed to get better and better.

He, on the other hand, was quite humble about it all and promised me he wouldn't get a big head. So, let me delineate for a moment on his beautiful work.

The Anita Rogers Gallery is a splendid space. Light floods in, and as your heels create an echo between the wood floor and high ceilings; it hushes your tone as you begin appreciating what is displayed before you on the walls.

Somehow, the balance of the colors Robert presents in his works group to form a robust familial association. There is a caprice to the story he unfolds on a canvas. It is considerate. His paintings are striking, cradling complexion, and embody a gregarious nature, much like Robert himself. They seem to change moods, splendidly harmonizing within the environment elaborately put together.

Just getting his rhythm and rhyme of his craft, he shares with us what he has learned and how his art is evolving.

ROBERT SZOT

An abstract painting by Robert Szot, featuring a complex composition of overlapping, torn paper-like shapes in various colors including black, white, grey, orange, red, blue, and yellow. The forms are irregular and layered, creating a sense of depth and movement. The overall style is gestural and expressive, with visible textures and sharp edges.

ROBERT SZOT

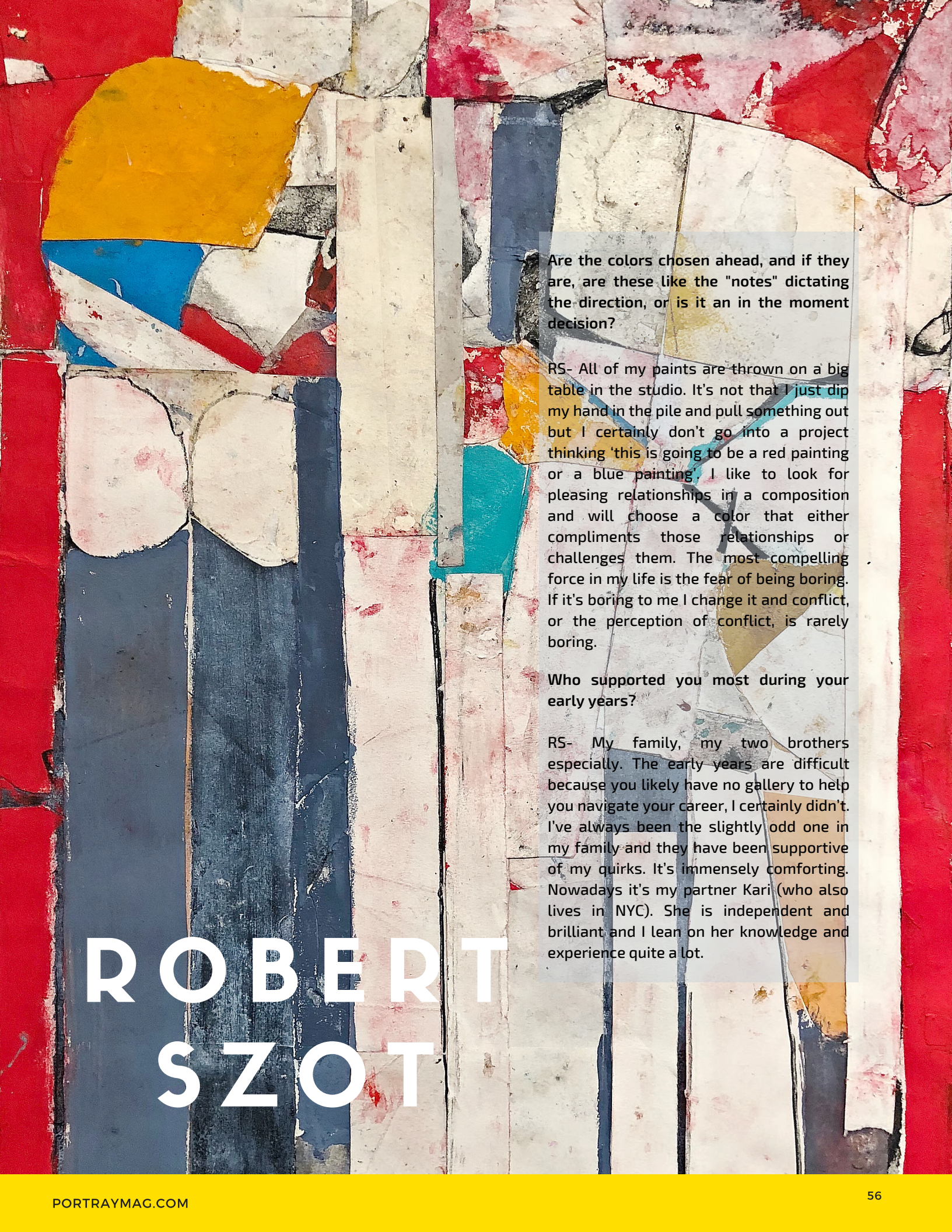
Are you emotionally exhausted after feeling like you have worked it all out?

RS- Just the opposite actually. I get quite charged up when I feel like a painting has reached a suitable conclusion. So much tension gets bottled up during the process that finishing a work is a great relief, a euphoric feeling that compels me into the next project. I definitely feel it at the end of the work day though, no question I wear myself out.

When do you know you have concluded a painting?

RS- This is a real problem for me because I can't say for sure if a painting is ever really finished. I think I know WHY I feel like that. I have always liked the idea that my paintings could communicate who I am to people who maybe never even had a conversation with me. So I think as I change, the ideas of my work change also. The result is a painting that can never feel finished to me because I am not the same person I was when I made it and my instinct is to want to change it, update it.

Photos courtesy of: Robert Szot



Are the colors chosen ahead, and if they are, are these like the "notes" dictating the direction, or is it an in the moment decision?

RS- All of my paints are thrown on a big table in the studio. It's not that I just dip my hand in the pile and pull something out but I certainly don't go into a project thinking 'this is going to be a red painting or a blue painting'. I like to look for pleasing relationships in a composition and will choose a color that either compliments those relationships or challenges them. The most compelling force in my life is the fear of being boring. If it's boring to me I change it and conflict, or the perception of conflict, is rarely boring.

Who supported you most during your early years?

RS- My family, my two brothers especially. The early years are difficult because you likely have no gallery to help you navigate your career, I certainly didn't. I've always been the slightly odd one in my family and they have been supportive of my quirks. It's immensely comforting. Nowadays it's my partner Kari (who also lives in NYC). She is independent and brilliant and I lean on her knowledge and experience quite a lot.

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When did you begin to paint, do you remember the very first canvas you painted?

RS- I began painting in earnest when I was 23 years old. I had just returned from a trip to Florence, Italy and during that trip I had encountered the work of Egon Schiele for the first time. I remember thinking that here was a person who seemed to be able to express so much emotion with what I perceived to be a very small vocabulary. Frankly I could not wrap my head around it. How could a single line or a seemingly simple application of gouache say such tremendous things? How could something talk about ecstasy and pain and beauty and yet feel so effortless? So my first canvases were my attempts to understand what I had seen mostly through replicating, quite poorly of course, Schiele's most famous works.

What led to the next?

RS- I think the next real step was during my birthday that same year when I received a book on the work of Mark Rothko as a present from a friend. Once again I was faced with the same dilemma as when confronted with Schiele but this time it was an artist using an even more economic language. I became fascinated with abstraction and determined that was the direction I was going to take my paintings. So for the next year I essentially made bad copies of Mark Rothko paintings. Mind you I never tried to pass any of these paintings off as my own. I didn't pursue exhibition opportunities or try to sell this work. I was exploring, and that I had time in a studio to search out my answers was enough for me during this period. It's odd thinking about those early days and looking at my work now, which I see as being overly complex at times. Considering the genesis of my interest in painting came out of the drama I felt viewing what looked like simple application of color and line, I feel miles away from it when I am working. I'm still in love with those artists and they both show up in the corners and cracks if you look hard enough at one of my paintings.



How do you defrag after a good paint session?

RS-I have this stray cat that comes and goes in my backyard. She is really overweight so I think she shows up to eat a second dinner with me. She's noisy and a bit insistent but I like having her visit.



"The most compelling force in my life is the fear of being boring."

When did you know you had real talent?

RS- I don't trust that kind of sentiment really. I don't look at my work in terms of being 'good' or 'bad' or myself as having 'talent'. I recently had a discussion with a visitor at my latest exhibition and we were talking about the difficulties of continuing to work in the face of adversity. She was telling me about an artist she knew that had recently quit painting because he felt his work wasn't fitting in with what the art buying public was interested in. I protested, of course. I told her that I felt an artist would never give up their practice because the motivation to create isn't about public consumption, but rather an artist makes art because it HAS to be made regardless of circumstance or obstacle. So you see it isn't about me at all, or if I have talent or an eye for color and composition. I paint because I feel I have to. It's a compulsion more than anything. These paintings are questions and their results are answers and like all unanswered questions they haunt me if I ignore them.

I enjoy the act of discovery and can't imagine having someone, a teacher for example, looking over my shoulder telling me I was doing something wrong. Even if I was doing something wrong', I would rather discover that fact for myself, and instead of correcting the error. I want the opportunity to make the error useful to the work. Errors are often the most interesting parts of a painting's composition if you are able to take advantage of them. I don't know what they can teach you in art school outside of material usage.

I'm sure the sense of community is useful to some people but that setting was never for me. Like touching a hot stove, the most lasting lessons are the ones you teach yourself.

Tell me about your internal dialogue as you create, frustrate, and then conclude (from what I have gotten researching you and your process)... In the end, is it a small victory/ relief for you?

RS- I am not an 'idea' painter. What I mean is: I avoid putting any messages or preconceived notions into my work. The result of this approach to painting is not having any real place to start and very little direction as the work moves forward. My internal dialogue normally kicks in when I've successfully covered an entire canvas in paint and I can start solving the compositional problems I had just created. I'm not very forgiving when it comes to self-criticism. Even when a work is finished I often kick myself for one thing or another. I'm especially difficult on myself when I am in process and I run into a problem I know I have faced before in 50 other paintings but for some reason I can't remember how I solved it in past works.




NYC

"This city is like a quiet voice in the room that informs all of my work and I am not convinced my work would be the same without its influence." Robert Szot

Tell me about how your work reflects NY and how living in NY has reflected on your work?

I moved to New York City because I wanted to have a shared experience with the painters that spend their formative years here, painters I love but never had the opportunity to meet. It was important to me to have access to a place they effortlessly incorporated into the work they made. So that's why I came. I stay here because I feel I am at a point in my career where I can add back to New York City, just as these other painters did before me. This city is like a quiet voice in the room that informs all of my work and I am not convinced my work would be the same without its influence. It is difficult to explain but if you've ever tried to do something important in a place like this you know what I am talking about.



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Having no formal training in art, how do you think this has benefitted you and your work?

RS-Maybe it has something to do with the fact these are all singularities and, as such, all have problems and solutions individual to themselves. I don't know, but this frustration often leads me to do things like putting the painting in jeopardy by intentionally making a very counter-intuitive move. Some damn black line cutting the canvas in half or some such nonsense. I'm now forced to deal with this damage and the result, if everything goes as planned, is a much more interesting direction for the work. My little battles give a painting real velocity and a bit of mystery. This goes on, in that order, until I feel like a conclusion is reached. It's a big victory for me and for a few moments I do celebrate. I'm uncomfortable staying in that celebratory mindset for too long and will often move on to the next work before I pat myself on the back so hard I fall over.

If you lined up all of your works together, is there a common theme or thread that says, "That is a Szot for sure!"?

RS-I think so. All of my editing, all of my scrubbing and re-layering, these are all very distinct physical elements. I want all the work to do the same thing. I want it unfold over time for the viewer and to tell its story slowly and deliberately. I want that story to always be interesting. Perhaps that is a quality people will come to recognize in my work.