

# Dialogue with important spaces helps to celebrate Batley's Bacon

## ROOMS WITH A VIEW

Robert Priseman is the third artist given free rein of Huddersfield Art Gallery as part of a Dialogues series of exhibitions. Arts reporter **Nick Ahad** found out what he did with the access.

IN 1946, The Contemporary Art Society bought a Francis Bacon painting – and had no idea what to do with it.

So the painting, *Figure Study II*, ended up in storage. That was until 1952 when *Figure Study II* was given to Batley Art Gallery, where it became known locally, affectionately, as the Batley Bacon.

Then, in 1974, the Local Government Association created the area of Kirklees and suddenly the Batley Bacon was owned by a much wider ranging body. It was decided that the painting ought to hang, when brought out of storage, at Huddersfield Art Gallery. It's not quite the Elgin Marbles, but the issue of the painting going from Batley Art Gallery to Huddersfield is sensitive enough that the painting is still referred to as the Batley Bacon – even in the Huddersfield Art Gallery.

Artist Robert Priseman doesn't mind too much where the Bacon painting is. The Derbyshire-born artist is just pleased to be able to show his work alongside that of one of the 20th century's most important artists.

Priseman is the third artist invited by Huddersfield Art Gallery to stage his own work at the venue in response to its collection. The Dialogues series, funded by the Arts Council, began with photographer Simon Warner in April. Then in June sculptor Sheila Gaffney displayed some of her work and this current series comes to an end with Priseman's work.

Primarily a portrait painter, Priseman was previously a book designer, he began painting seriously in the Nineties and quickly built a reputation. His portraits have included The Dalai Lama and Cardinal Basil Hume, and work from this period is held in public and private collections including the Royal Collection.

In 2002, Priseman had an epiphany and decided to give

up portraiture to concentrate on interiors.

"I spent 11 years painting portraits and I see that time now as a long apprenticeship working towards what I really wanted to do, which was paint spaces," says Priseman.

"It was cemented for me at an exhibition at the Fitzwilliam Museum in Cambridge, *Holbein and the Court of Henry VIII*. The encounter with so many Holbein drawings in one place had a great effect on me. It was like seeing a gallery of ghosts. I loved the sensitivity of his line and his ability to capture the essence of a sitter's very being with a minimum of information.

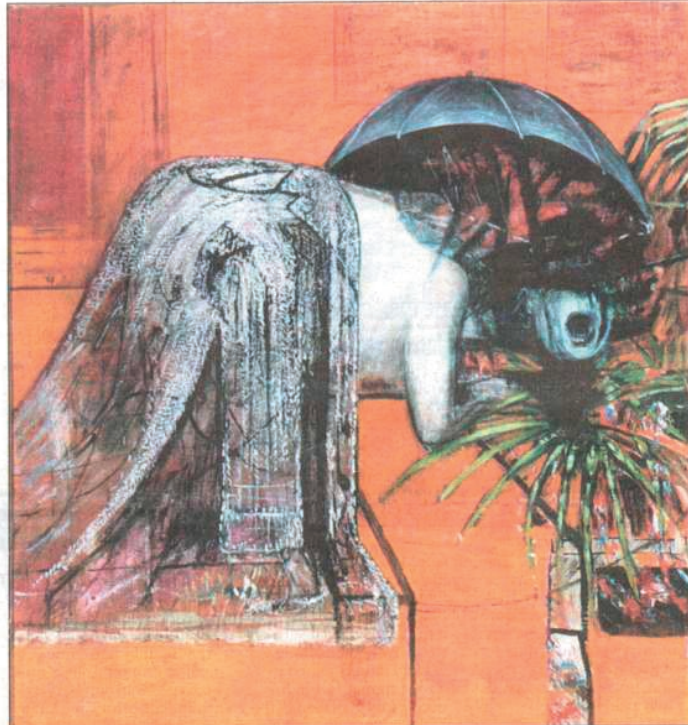
"I realised that as a portrait painter I could never reach that level and it made me think about what I wanted to achieve with my painting."

The answer was to explore portraiture from a different angle – from the position of rooms which are given power by the absence of people. Priseman's work since has included a series on gas chambers in Germany and rooms where executions have taken place in America. It also allowed him to focus on an artist whose work had been a long time obsession – Francis Bacon.

"I moved to Wivenhoe in



**SETTING THE SCENE:** Robert Priseman's *7 Reece Mews* is just one of the paintings of spaces used by Francis Bacon.



**STARTING POINT:** Francis Bacon's *Figure Study II* (1984) is central to Robert Priseman's exhibition.

**Painting the rooms gives an interesting depth to the understanding of him as an artist...**

Essex, where Bacon kept a cottage," says Priseman.

"Every day I pass by his studio and was able to paint it a couple of years ago."

The small studio room fired his imagination and he went on to spend 12 months travelling to places which were significant to Bacon.

"I travelled to the hospital in Madrid where he died and was able to paint the room he died in. I went to Paris to the hotel where his lover George Dyer committed suicide. The work added up to what I thought of as a negative portrait. A collection of the places which were important to Bacon, which made up significant parts of him, but none features him.

"One of the fascinating things I found was that all these rooms were quite small and modest. He chose to live and work in rooms which had low ceilings and which seemed to be around 12ft by 16ft. Painting the rooms gives an interesting depth to the understanding of him as an artist."

The paintings which

resulted from this year-long odyssey, were first shown at the University of Essex and go on show tomorrow at the Huddersfield Art Gallery, alongside the one Bacon painting, which in the last year has been displayed in Milan, Tate Britain, Madrid and New York.

Priseman says: "I decided to spread the exhibition over two rooms, with Bacon's piece in one room alongside some of his contemporaries such as Graham Sutherland, Lucian Freud, Richard Hamilton and Frank Auerbach.

"I wanted to display my work in a different room – firstly because I think it gives the exhibition plenty of space to breathe, but also because I'm not sure that I would want to have my work in the room up against Bacon's and Auerbach's."

■ The exhibition runs to Nov 7. Huddersfield Art Gallery is open Monday to Friday, 10am-5pm, Saturday 10am-4pm, closed Sundays. Go to [www.kirklees.gov.uk/art](http://www.kirklees.gov.uk/art) or telephone 01484 221964.

## BRIEFLY



### Chance to see artists at work

Batley schools and community groups are being encouraged to get involved in a series of workshops at the town centre gallery throughout October.

The sessions have been funded by Batley Area Committee, and are free of charge. The workshops will run alongside an exhibition of work showcasing artists who are taking part in HOST, an annual open studio event. Visitors can join the trail to see artists at work in their studios. ■ Contact Mark Milnes on 01924 326021, or at [mark.milnes@kirklees.gov.uk](mailto:mark.milnes@kirklees.gov.uk)

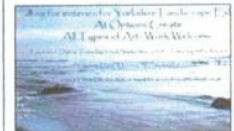


### A room full of wonder

A "Wunderkammer" – a room full of extraordinary and eccentric objects – is to be on display at The Gallery in Ripon where artist Ed Kluz is showing new works.

Inspired by 18th-century collections of oddities and curiosities, Ed Kluz has produced prints, paintings and collages of architecture, as well as paper structures under Victorian glass domes, maquettes and silhouettes.

The exhibition runs until September 20.



### Make your mark on the landscape

Options Create Gallery in Dewsbury is calling for entries for a Yorkshire Landscape Exhibition.

Options Create, which opened in July this year, is run by the charity PHAB – the physically handicapped and able-bodied working together – and Serendipity Art. The charity works with physically disabled, able-bodied and special needs adults.

■ For information on the exhibition, which runs Sept 22 to Oct 6, call 01924 466844.