

Fame is Ordinary

Born in Derbyshire, Robert Priseman studied Aesthetics and Art Theory at the University of Essex in the 1980s. After a short stint as a graphic designer, Priseman spent several years training as an observational artist, painting landscapes and commissioned portraits. Having mastered the techniques of realist painting he developed an interest in man-made spaces, particularly ones that have bared witness to human trauma and extreme alienation, where life and death are inextricably intertwined: execution chambers, a room someone has committed suicide in, hospital environments, homes of child abductors and murderers. Though empty of any actual human presence, all of Priseman's interior paintings contain an affecting trace of someone's existence, a haunted presence. The latest series on iconoclasm represents a certain synthesis in Priseman's work insofar as it unifies his interests in portraiture, intense emotion, the human condition, and spirituality. It also signifies his reputation as an artist who is a rising star in his own right.

Of course, fame comes and goes in many forms and with changing fashions. In the case of Britain, for centuries, the famous tended to be traditional elites, distinguished individuals, people to look up to, the great and the good: kings and queens, admirals and generals, saints and martyrs, inventors and explorers, artists and composers, novelists and poets. Personage was attained through dint of birth and lineage, office and achievement, glorification and commemoration, creative genius and cultural authority. And it was a mostly retrospective process, growing in significance as renown passed from one generation to the next via common folklore and the eventual canonisation of the national history, '1066 and all that'. Even then, public recognition brought honour not so much to the individual as it did one's country and faith—revering great Britons became a way of celebrating Great Britain and protestant pietism, a means of uniting a socially fragmented population around a nucleus of cultural identities that fostered a sense of national belonging.

The arrival of tabloid journalism and a concomitant demand for sensational news and trivia in the late-nineteenth century, closely followed by the emergence of radio, film and televisual entertainment in the mid-twentieth century, marked the rise of an increasingly commercialised and mass-mediated popular culture. With it came a proliferation in media personalities, publicists and no-holds-barred paparazzi, ever more international and participatory communication technologies, and the gradual celebrification of everyday life. Though pejorative and superficial expressions, being famous for being famous, famous for nothing, or mere notoriety, best encapsulate the way in which celebrity culture has become a widespread phenomenon. Nowadays, the celebrated includes not only actors, comedians, athletes and pop stars, but also more ephemeral personalities, such as gardeners, footballers' wives, chefs, television show hosts, supermodels, reality television contestants, bloggers, lifestyle gurus, criminals, gossip columnists, and many others.

In spite of the customary pessimism, high-minded laments, and snobbish condescension surrounding the (alleged) displacement of the once dominant bourgeois culture of high society with the uncultured philistinism of the hoi polloi, that today's cult of the personality consists of ordinary people and acts of extraordinary-ordinariness is plainly democratising. On the one hand, gone are the days when the general public are expected to defer to the cultural tastes and expertise of their social betters. But also, the demotic turn in media culture, of or for the common people, provides unprecedented opportunities for popular access to a public sphere premised upon a diversity of cultural values and practices. Such arguments should not be mistaken for an inane celebration of unprincipled populism or difference for differences sake. They are about wanting to imagine notions of publicness and subjectivity that, if properly balanced with other progressive social institutions and processes, may well facilitate a more representative and pluralist civil society.

What is especially revealing in Robert Priseman's over-painting auctioned relics of Christian icons with twentieth-century personalities is the tendency in modern societies, both East and West, to conflate the sacred and profane. The demand for official religion may have diminished, but many people still relate to ritual actions organised around hero worship, cult objects, para-social interactions and veneration of the transcendental. The adoration for Diana, Princess of Wales, the bewildering reaction to her death, and commercial exploitation of memorabilia, is one such example. Priseman's paintings also demonstrate how, notwithstanding the Decalogue's prohibition of idolatry, most Christian denominations have long used religious symbolism (the crucifix, the sacraments, scriptures, the Jesus fish, the Good Shepherd) as media of grace, to encourage popular devotion and reverence. Perhaps celebrity culture represents not so much a loss of spiritual belief, as it is a simultaneous deritualising and remooring of religiosity, albeit one that is far removed from pew and pulpit.

This brings us to the dramatis personæ of Priseman's *Fame* series: each of his personalities lived troubled and reckless lives that ended in suicide or premature death. Reading their biographies, one is struck by the fragile boundaries between conviviality and loneliness, hedonism and addiction, charisma and narcissism, happiness and depression, life and mortality, the material and divine, damnation and redemption. Priseman's use of religious iconography also reminds us that, in the same way that Adam and Eve were banished from the Garden for tasting fruit from the forbidden tree, or just as Jesus was plotted against by the Pharisees and betrayed by one of his apostles, the perils of celebrity idolisation are that the famous can end up submitting to temptation and entrapment, or becoming victims of hypocrisy and treachery. Above all, Priseman's miniatures invite us to confront our own beliefs, compulsions, fantasies, personal vanities and, ultimately, matters concerning death and eternity.

Michael Bailey, 2013