

Robert Priseman's *Fame*

In the future everyone will be famous for fifteen minutes. Andy Warhol's throwaway prediction identified democracy as the ideological meme at the heart of celebrity culture. The future dominance of celebrity would depend on the existence of a supportive and compliant political economy. The word "everyone" provides the centre of gravity in Warhol's aphorism. He understood that a celebrity culture in which "everyone" could theoretically participate was much more than the superficial invention of a decadent media. Celebrity, in all its abject cultural poverty, was the fully developed expression of the democratic experiment.

In Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*, the character, Malvolio, reading from a letter, proposes three categories of greatness: "In my stars I am above thee; but be not afraid of greatness: some are born great, some achieve greatness, and some have greatness thrust upon 'em." The audience attending the first performance of the play in 1602 at Middle Temple would have got the joke immediately. "Greatness" was determined by a heroic action or a moral/religious character and the puritan, Malvolio, so lacking in self-awareness, was not even on a short list as a candidate for greatness.

In the popular imagination, the "great" were exotic deviants who existed in a superior realm of being. Different ontological categories appeared to apply to them. Heroes were divinely ordained, the "greatness" of their actions and attitudes emanating not from themselves but from a divine power. The meaning of the hero was found, ultimately, outside him or herself. Conduits of the divine, these men and women harnessed the energies of the universe which would, in the words of Hector in *The Illiad*, make them "immortal, ageless all my days and revered like Athena and Apollo."

However, the emergence of new democracies led to the suspicion that the traditional presentation of the hero was a bourgeois corruption. An anti-democratic orthodoxy that relegated the majority in society to the role of passive spectators before a glamorous cabal of wing-heeled heroes was challenged. Hero worship was the opium of the people. Thus, over time, the feudal borders that separated the "great and the good" from the general public were systematically dismantled, and in their place, an intricate network of democratic highways, routes of inclusivity and cultural mobility, was mapped out.

Democracy promised the emancipation of the masses from servile obedience and the false consciousness of living under the sign of "the hero". Our heroes would no longer stand above or apart from us like those from antiquity. Instead, they would become the work of our hands, synthetic luminaries, created in our image and likeness in order to embody our desires and

aspirations. We, as the principal agents of their creation, would name this new breed: “celebrities”. The title would give an etymological nod to its Latin root, *celebritas*, with its connotations of both “fame” and “multitude”.

Celebrities would not reveal God’s purposes to us, they would reveal our own. Their international role as the main exporters of secularism was assured. In his book *Celebrity and Power*, the Canadian media theorist, David Marshall, writes:

“The celebrity, in this sense, is not distant but attainable – touchable by the multitude. The greatness of the celebrity is something that can be shared and, in essence, celebrated loudly and with a touch of vulgar pride. It is the ideal representation of the triumph of the masses.”

The democratic principle would ensure that nobody was disenfranchised due to a lack of talent, heroism or virtue. The artificially manufactured “celebrity” would usurp the role of the “hero”; or the terms, proving so semantically slippery, would come to be used interchangeably. Fame, based on achievement or character, would fuse with fame fabricated by agents and advertising agencies, skilled in the dark arts of market saturation. Now everyone who was willing to package and prostitute their identities could claim their place in the Hall of Fame. If the culturally indolent considered that too much of an effort, they could live their lives vicariously through their hand-picked celebrity avatars.

A new dispensation was established as the idea of celebrity took hold, one that Warhol championed and his many followers sucked up. “If you want to know all about Andy Warhol,” the artist told a journalist, “just look at the surface of my films and my paintings and me, and there I am. There’s nothing behind it.” Warhol contends that once the protecting veneers are peeled away, our true state is exposed and we are found to be soulless, metaphysically destitute. The new celebrity dispensation proves to be a seductive emptiness.

Daniel Boorstin articulates this position in his influential study, *The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-Events in America* (1961):

“[Celebrities] chief claim to fame is their fame itself. They are notorious for their notoriety. If this is puzzling or fantastic, if this is mere tautology, it is no more puzzling or fantastic or tautologous than much of the rest of our experience. Our experience tends more and more to become tautology – needless repetition of the same in different words and images. Perhaps what ails us is not so much a vice as a “nothingness”.”

Surfaces and their visual layering are integral to Robert Priseman’s latest work, *Fame* (2013). This complex project began with the artist compiling a list of people who would be regarded as famous for some achievement or activity. Drawn from a wide social and cultural ambit, a representative pool of fifty men and fifty women was chosen. Figures such as Mark Rothko,

Sylvia Plath and Robert Enke made it on to the list. Beneath the surface connection of their common celebrity status lay a darker, existential bond: they had all committed suicide.

In tandem with his list of celebrities, Priseman purchased a hundred traditional religious icons from the less-than-traditional auction site, eBay. Flat wooden panels of varying sizes, painted or, more accurately “written” with images of Jesus, Mary, angels and the Cross began to arrive in the post. They wore the patina of their own devotional history. These were not blank canvases but images already possessing an aesthetic truth, and porous to the glosses of prayer and faith. Describing the purpose of an icon, St Basil the Great said “The honour shown the image passes over to the archetype.” Priseman would use his eBay purchases as sacred ready-mades.

Each icon was carefully primed by gently sanding the picture plane. The famous men and women were arranged alphabetically to avoid any hierarchy or preferential treatment. Then, from a photographic image, Priseman systematically began to paint the portrait of a subject onto each icon, thus introducing a new visual layer. In the process, the religious iconography was vandalised and colonised by these celebrity miniatures. The remaining fragments of the original icon, partially visible beneath the freshly painted surface, created a spectral nimbus around these modern idols, an absence framing a presence. The clarity of the religious vision, though defaced and difficult to decipher, continued to form a resilient backdrop against which the anxieties and concerns of our secular age might be interpreted.

Priseman’s surfaces are not superficial or static. Stripped of the default idiom of irony, they speak with an unvarnished directness and intellectual honesty. His visual surfaces combine to form a particular lens with which the viewer can explore, among other things, the relationships between fame and celebrity, identity and mortality, the religious and the secular, the ephemeral and the eternal. It would be impossible to describe these surfaces as skin deep with a Warholian nothingness behind them. Priseman’s icons are alive with multiple meanings, reciprocities and intellectual associations. They are ecstatic sounding boards, articulating truths and raising questions about the culture the human person is inhabited by and inhabits.

“Fame,” wrote Milton about a drowned friend in the poem, *Lycidas*, “is the spur the clear spirit doth raise...Fame is no plant that grows on mortal soil.” For the poet, fame and greatness of achievement or character were intimately related. By their heroic actions or virtue, the famous achieved a kind of transcendence that placed them outside the limits of time. These men and women joined the ranks of the immortals in the collective consciousness of society.

This process of “canonisation” was achieved by the stories of their heroism and moral nobility being told and tested before socially diverse audiences. Over a long period of time,

some of these stories became lodged in the imaginative store of humanity. History's job was to sift the lives of candidates for the gold of greatness.

Fame was not conferred by a panel of judges. It was time that anointed the chosen few with the oil of fame. "Thus great men, like famous men," writes Daniel Boorstin, "came into a nation's consciousness only slowly. The processes by which their fame was made were as mysterious as those by which God ruled the generations." With industrialisation and, what Boorstin terms, "the Graphic Revolution", these principles and processes were eroded. Men and women could become famous overnight. The power to ordain lay in the hands of media publicists and commercial sponsors. They would decide who to promote as the latest "stars" of an increasingly crowded commercial firmament.

Celebrities were manufactured commodities designed to be easily consumed by a hungry public. Every detail of their public identity was prescribed, from the way they dressed to the things they could say. Assisted by advisors, the celebrity selected the component parts of their pseudo-identity with respect to their particular audience. Aided by high production values, a facile repertoire of narcissistic tropes and mimetic tics could prove lucrative. The pinnacle of success was achieved when the celebrity morphed into a brand and began to shift *eau de toilette*.

The celebrity became familiar to the public through their photos, interviews, product endorsements and media profile. Familiarity bred public devotion and, in turn, made individuals famous even if only for fifteen minutes. As a commercial mechanism, celebrity had a simple and effective internal logic. Suddenly, it was not the quality of character that mattered, it was the quality of the image because this was what could be sold and purchased. Artifice rather than authenticity became the new order. The achievements of individuals became indistinguishable from their market potential. "I am my own industry," Elizabeth Taylor declared, "I am my own commodity." A complex celebrity eco system emerged where scouts, managers, agents and publicists, together with the media and the "star" fed off each other in order to secure effective management and growth. In this way, celebrity, that most adaptable of cultural forms, spread like fungal matter.

It is significant that Priseman has called his new work, *Fame*. The word no longer has a univocal sense, but is used as an accumulation of shifting meanings that present themselves to us in various states of historical or moral decay. Greatness-Heroism-Fame-Celebrity all share a familial resemblance, that of a family in cultural distress. Priseman's icons image this for us. In colour, they lay bare the spectrum of different meanings. Priseman introduces his work to the viewer by means of an upmarket parlour game. Let's call it Celebrity Squares or Name the Dead Celebrity. Priseman asks "Of the hundred portraits of the famous in front of you, how many can you actually name?" At one level, it's an invitation to some interactive gallery

fun, a celebrity Sudoku to fire the mental synapses. But, it also has a more serious purpose: the transformation of the viewer into a participant.

It is impossible to critique celebrity culture at one remove, from the outside or from a position of ironic distance. A precondition for understanding celebrity in all its bizarre and toxic forms is that you participate in it – you have to experience the fleeting pleasures, sensuous glitter and finite consolations it offers to those who find themselves alone in an absurd universe that has no care for them and, for whom, the celebrity answers their need for redemption.

In Priseman's celebrity identity parade, some images are immediately recognisable: Marilyn Monroe, Kurt Cobain, Judy Garland. But as your eye trips from one icon to the next, the matching of names to celebrity image becomes more difficult and frustrating. We know these people are famous, but we are defeated by the task of providing the most basic information about them: their names. Apart from the few A-list celebrities, the majority of portraits cannot be identified. They have become the unnameable. Recognition depends, in large part, on the age of the viewer and how *au fait* he is with trends in popular culture. The greater the temporal and cultural distance between the viewer and the famous subject, the less likely he will be able to name them.

Priseman's *Fame* game suggests that the majority of celebrities are undone by the passage of time. The ageing process does not serve them well. It robs them of the semiotic freight that anchored their celebrity status. With that gone, they are cut free, adrift, and have no option but to return to their pre-celebrity state, that of being anonymous. From hero to zero. From someone to no one.

The traditional hero matured with age. The repeated telling of their mighty deeds and strength of character enhanced rather than diminished their significance. There was no urgency to tell the hero's story, no publisher's deadline to meet, but the story was told because it had an inherent value that needed to be protected and handed on. The story evolved organically, insinuating itself into the cultural vernacular of a people.

Only after a long gestation period in the womb of Tradition did the famous emerge as giants of humanity, super heroes, upon whose shoulders the rest of us might dream of standing. With few if any reliable visual representations of these heroes, their image was an imaginary construct and, therefore, secondary to their greatness. They were identified, not by their image, but by an examination of their earthly lives. In turn this account was read from an eschatological perspective of their final, heavenly destination. Their greatness on earth was a foretaste of the glory with which they would be rewarded by the gods or God. They would ride on chariots of fire.

In contrast, Daniel Boorstin observes:

“The celebrity, on the contrary, is always a contemporary. The hero is made by folklore, sacred texts, and history books, but the celebrity is the creature of gossip, of public opinion, of magazines, newspapers, and the ephemeral images of movie and television screen. The passage of time, which creates and establishes the hero, destroys the celebrity. One is made, the other unmade, by repetition. The celebrity is born in the daily papers and never loses the mark of his fleeting origin.”

The celebrity must constantly reproduce himself in order to satisfy the consumption needs of their audience. One of the most effective tools for achieving this is the photograph, itself a light sensitive surface that captures an idiosyncratic representation of an individual and can replicate it on an industrial scale.

Priseman worked from photographs - the grainy snaps, publicity stills and paparazzi shots of the famous. His job was to lift surgically the image from the photograph and graft it onto the icon. In doing so, he is articulating the truth that the celebrity image is unstable, moving from one surface to another, from one reality to another. It is controlled by a nomadic desire that drives it towards new, fertile territories where it can flourish and multiply.

Priseman’s access to his chosen celebrities was through an image that existed somewhere on the frontier between reality and fantasy. As Stewart Ewan explains in *All-Consuming Images: The Politics of Style in Contemporary Culture* (1988): “As Oliver Wendell Holmes had observed, the power of the disembodied image is that it can free itself from encumbrances posed by material reality and still lay claim to that reality. At the same time that the image appeals to transcendent desires, it locates those desires within a visual grammar which is palpable, which *looks real*, which invites identification by the spectator, and which people tend to trust. According to John Everard, one of the pioneers of commercial photography, it is this trust that makes photography so forceful as an advertising medium.”

We trust Priseman’s celebrity images as true representations because of their photographic provenance. And because they are painted portraits, we want to believe that they are more than a mere physical “likeness” of the subject. Fine art purports to be capable of revealing some, previously hidden, interior truth about a person. But, Priseman asks “How trustworthy are these representations? In celebrity culture, are we not all susceptible to manipulation?” In her work, *On Photography*, Susan Sontag, describes the dilemma:

“In the past, a discontent with reality expressed itself as a longing for *another* world. In modern society, a discontent with reality expresses itself forcefully and most hauntingly by the longing to reproduce *this* one. As if only by looking at reality in the form of an object – through the fix of the photograph – it is really real, that is, surreal.”

Primitive religions were convinced that the photograph had the power to steal the soul of a person and hold it, forever, in the rectangle of the photo frame. The photograph was a shallow, paper-thin grave. In 1837, the *Leipzig City Advertiser* would condemn the taking of photos of the human form as an act of sacrilege: “The very desire to do so is blasphemy. Man is created in the image of God and God’s image cannot be captured by any human machine.” Drawing on these ideas, Priseman’s work suggests that every pap shot, every selfie, distorts the way we view ourselves and how we are viewed by others. As prisoners to the illusory image, we have become fixated with the reprographic presentation of our best side. For celebrities, whose identity is so bound up with the visual image, living the dualism of the public persona and the private self, robs them of the possibility of any authentic integrity. The celebrity survives as a fictionalised version of himself – a kind of living death.

In *Camera Lucida* (1980), Roland Barthes famously described photography as the place where death migrated to when religion lost faith in it: “For Death must be somewhere in a society; if it is no longer (or less intensely) in religion, it must be elsewhere; perhaps in this image which produces Death while trying to preserve life. Contemporary with the withdrawal of rites, Photography may correspond to the intrusion, in our modern society, of an asymbolic Death, outside of religion, outside of ritual, a kind of abrupt dive into literal death.”

Is it possible, Priseman’s work speculates, to imagine an “asymbolic death, outside of religion, outside of ritual”? Or does the religious or ritual sense, even in its most deteriorated form, still retain the power to authenticate our experience of death and render its symbolic meaning to us in a comprehensible fashion? The addictive, self-destructive behaviour of many celebrities is well documented. The celebrity world is littered with casualties and fatalities. We are familiar with the litany of dead celebrities. “I wonder if Edie will commit suicide?” Warhol casually enquired about his “superstar” muse, Edie Sedgwick, “I hope she lets me know so I can film it.” Not an atom of a celebrity’s life or death exists in the private sphere. The celebrity functions as a public object, an operatic spectacle, and the desire for privacy, even in death, is anathema. Celebrities learn to appease their public by spending themselves and, if their commitment to their celebrity persona climaxes in a car crash finale, then their memory is more assured. The dissemination on an industrial scale of the final image will help to ensure that the celebrity’s memory sticks.

Priseman’s visual engagement with his famous suicides is neither sensational nor voyeuristic. There is no attempt to patronise his subjects by aestheticising their personal tragedies. Instead, he handles each image as a human relic of irrefutable pathos. For him, questions of cause and effect are the concern of social commentators, not of the artist. Nor is his work a study of despair, a psychological autopsy of the suicide’s state of mind. Instead, Priseman’s gaze focuses elsewhere, on the philosophical *chiaroscuro* that surrounds the idea of suicide.

In contemporary literature, the philosophical rationale for “logical suicide” is forcefully argued by the character, Meursault, the anti-hero of Albert Camus’s *The Outsider*. Waiting for the death sentence, the incarcerated Meursault is visited by a prison chaplain who tries to persuade him that his imminent death can be understood against the horizon of an eternal hope. Meursault rounds on the priest with his personal credo:

“I am bound to express my unbelief...No higher idea that there is no God exists for me...All man did was to invent God so as to live without killing himself. That’s the essence of universal history till now. I am the only man in universal history who for the first time refused to invent God.”

The Kantian notion of the “primacy of the will” is the philosophical DNA running through Meursault’s profession of unbelief. When the order of faith cannot be spoken of because it cannot be verified by the senses, then the relationship with the supernatural order is severed. There is nothing beyond man, or higher than him. He must make of himself, a god, and assert his self-sufficiency. After Kant, Man is trapped within the epistemological aspect of his own subjective thought processes. With only the Neanderthal implement of “the will” to hand, he must scratch some moral meaning from a morally indifferent universe. Ethos supersedes Logos in the Kantian view. Suicide, as Wittgenstein pointed out in an entry in his *Notebooks 1914-16*, is the supreme assertion of the human will and the acute point in the construction of any ethical system:

“If suicide is allowed then everything is allowed.

If anything is not allowed then suicide is not allowed.

This throws a light on the nature of ethics, for suicide is, so to speak, the elementary sin. And when one investigates it is like investigating mercury vapour in order to comprehend the nature of vapours.

Or is even suicide in itself neither good nor evil.”

Thus, the existential project man faces, consists in channelling the psychological, physical and political forces available to us in order that we might bring to birth our utopian dreams. This total dependence on the human will, involves the shrinking of eternal vistas to quotidian, temporal concerns. Truth does not exist in itself, as an independent value, but is reduced to the thin gruel of a conviction based on subjective experience, feeling and a fundamentalist belief in progress. When faced with death, our response is not to understand it, but to deny its significance and to drain it of meaning.

Priseman’s work resonates with these philosophical attitudes, the aftershocks of that seismic shift from a world in which a supernatural order was embedded in the cultural narrative to one where it has become largely extinct and self-will is the basis of new secular hegemony. Fame in its present celebrity manifestation is the epitome of this. Using dense, layered images,

Priseman's icons picture, what the philosopher, Charles Taylor, calls "a disenchanted universe".

However, conceptual and exegetical concerns are not the focus of Priseman's work. Nor is he aiming to present a polished critique of rival philosophical schools of thought. The *Fame* icons are not illustrations of sophisticated ideas raised to the level of a fine art Powerpoint presentation. Beauty as an expression of truth is the main concern of these hundred icons. With the artist's eye, Priseman tests beauty's ability to hold in tension multiple narratives and those contradictory positions that stand on the cusp of meaning or annihilation. *Fame* poses the perilous question that all serious art poses: can beauty be a source of truth?

The *Fame* icons are objects of beauty. Their attractiveness derives not from ornamentation or accomplished technical execution, but from the quality of artistic feeling that imbues them. Created in the crucible of deep feeling and serious thought, the *Fame* icons achieve that rarest of things, a symbolic unity. The visual syntax, Priseman commands, gives fluency to the work. Mastering an aesthetic grammar founded on nuance, subtlety and shade allows Priseman to communicate the work's essential form without any trace of artistic paternalism. Priseman's purpose is not to lecture us, but to enchant us. His images, so spiritually vivid and dyspeptically sad, bring us to our knees in contemplation of the Truth. *Pulchritudo est splendor veritatis*. Beauty is the splendour of truth, as the ancient scholastic maxim would have it.

In the first place, Priseman's work is committed to truth. He possesses an unflinching gaze, one trained on the essential, interior truth at the heart of things, the truth that needs to be made visible if we are to be freed from the tyranny of disgust. Such a profoundly unfashionable perspective gives his paintings real vitality and intellectual grip. "Truth does not mean lifeless accuracy of comprehension," writes Romano Guardini in *The Spirit of the Liturgy*, "but the right and appropriate regulation of life, a vital spiritual essence; it means the intrinsic value of existence in all its force and fullness. And beauty is the triumphant splendour which breaks forth when the hidden truth is revealed, when the external phenomenon is at all points the perfect expression of the inner essence."

The creation of a distinctive aesthetic, a trademark style, has little appeal to Priseman. For him, that would be to create a mannered art form, and mannerism has no content, no truth beyond the surface. It is not an elegant or civil engagement with reality that he desires, what he is spoiling for is a bare knuckled encounter with reality, that is, one where the content and truth of reality are expressed without dishonest effects or the intrusion of personal vanity. Priseman's images puncture surface appearances. He plumbs uncharted depths in order to bring to light the truth in all its phosphorescent brightness. Working amid the murky, disorientating gloom of the human predicament is not for the faint-hearted. The *Fame* icons

are a significant addition to his growing body of work and further evidence of the courage of this artist.

Warhol's prediction has turned sceptic. Thanks to social media, the latest vehicle of democratisation, everyone and no one can be famous, and the fifteen minutes goes on and on. However, Priseman predicts an alternative future, one where our infantile expectations are abandoned, surface treatments are exposed as commercial illusions and we have an opportunity to live in truth and beauty.

Martin Boland, 2013