

Looking Back without Anger: Robert Priseman's places of gentle trauma

A piece, such as Robert Priseman's *Threshold*, takes on a maternal role, holding the viewer in the presence of terror, whilst offering comfort with an order constructed on the edge of total life changing chaos and destruction.

Holding one's breath in front of the image, allowing the emptiness to persist, it is possible to enter Priseman's work without falling into the trap of prejudice against his subjects – bland spaces of little evocation and, contrarily, spaces of unnerving indifference. Pausing before entering the morgue, the operating theatre or utilitarian corridor, the viewer is able to get a glimpse of a different position, suggested by the careful rendering of delicate brush strokes, the angelic halo of an electric light, the openness and humility of perspective, which allows us to wander with ease around the achingly empty and lonely spaces depicted. The success of Priseman's painting lies within the contradictions of opposites – fragility with assurance, detail with minimalism, life with death, overflowing meaning with emptiness. There is an absence, however, of the melodrama and tragedy of Edward Hopper or Paul Winstanley and certainly Richter's imprisoned sense of the past is absent. But there is a relationship there with all three artists, especially in the use of the photograph to cool the emotional heat, to detach to a state of sublime concentration. There is also a great sense of stage-management, which has the feeling of gravity present in the detail of a Jeff Wall composition. The objects have been moved, the colours gently altered, writing erased, so one scene becomes a more universal metaphor, as in *The Death of George Dyer*; this is the place where George Dyer died, but it is also the most ordinary bathroom you can imagine. It is the care lavished on the scene, the almost caressing brush marks, which tell us that we must attach to this place a greater importance; an historic significance of almost epic proportions.

Priseman felt compelled to make a shift in his work as an artist – surprisingly moving from his previous profession as portrait painter to the exploration of 'empty' spaces. Such a marked shift, forces us to take notice. Even if we are unaware of this biographical detail the specific and intense contemplation of unlikely spaces also demands attention. We cannot help but ask why? This is underscored by the poised care in which the works are constructed and by their imposing scale. It is this poise and consideration, almost admiration, which marks them out, say, against the large, but gut-wrenchingly bland images of Luc Tuymans – whose relationship with the photograph is one of post-apocalyptic ambivalence, absurdity and confusion. Priseman is coming at his subjects

from an almost diametrically opposed position. Whereas the shady, starved and painful environments of the Nazi regime and the holocaust act as potential contextual background for Tuyman's work, Priseman's relationship with the hospital and the generic non-space is one of awe, safety, fragility, magnitude and comfort – all at once. These works chart a style and architecture of an almost forgotten ideology; that of the post-war welfare state. At one time all would have been able to read such starkly lit and uniform spaces as the sign of progress, whereas we, as the jaded inheritors of a broken dream, have now become uncomfortable with a societal simplicity represented by such an aesthetic.

The tension between knowing and not knowing is played out in the work as a battle between minimalism and illustration. The influence of Dan Flavin is clear in Priseman's homage to tube lighting, but it is also present in the simplification of the colour field and the accentuation of that which is naturally minimal. A hospital door becomes an archetype of plastic monolithic form. A patterned floor becomes a field for infinite expansion. However, Priseman, also has a gift for narrative and at times breathes a narrative life into an empty space. There is a stylistic shifting in the work dependent on the subject matter, which plays out this fine balance between intentions. The minimal style comes into play within the institutionalised settings of Priseman's hospitals, corridors, waiting rooms, and transient spaces, with the more illustrative style emerging within the personal and particular spaces of studios, bathrooms, and hallways. This suggests the strange contradiction in the work; there is a beauty within the secure and organised spaces of an institution, but that minimal perfection comes at a cost, and no personal life or story can pervade its sterile and polished walls. In contradistinction, the porous spaces of dated hotel rooms, and long deserted studios still seem to hold the echoes of personal tragedy. This dichotomy that exists within the different positionings of Priseman's objects of study suggests his particular relationship to painting. He allows a non-premeditated stylistic device to emerge from within the therapeutic and confessional relationship of artist and image, hence the subtle shifting between the illustrative and the minimal from canvas to canvas.

The choice of hospitals as subject matter is not so surprising, as Priseman has had personal experience of places of medical care. Regardless of this the ambiguity of these environments, which can give life and mediate death, are of obvious pertinence to Priseman's use of painting as a site of ambivalent, quiet and sustained enquiry. His most recent series, however, is at first a more perplexing choice. In his series of pieces relating to the life of Francis Bacon, Priseman seems to show that homage can take many forms, as can painterly truth. Concerned with detailing spaces which have no intrinsic meaning unless accompanied by knowledge of Bacon's life and loves, Priseman diligently obtained permission to photograph Parisian hotel rooms and Spanish hospitals. The result is a strange and elusive series of work which avoids narrative simplification, but is replete with pregnant pauses and lingering, meaningful glances. The illustrative style

employed here works in reverse to the minimal style used elsewhere. The lack of narrative detail within the scenes, as Priseman found them, left him with the task of making personal that which was profoundly cleansed of any significance. One of the most intriguing pieces in this series is Bacon's studio as recreated behind the glass of a museum exhibit at the Hugh Lane Gallery, Dublin. Rather than entering this false space as a real one and making the most of the fullness of information there, Priseman chooses to cast a view of the studio at a distance, the generic corridor with high shine floor taking up the majority of the canvas. The result is an image at once laden with suggestive significance, with the goal of full autobiographical knowledge tantalisingly out of reach. The historical is left undone, we are imprisoned on this side of the temporal glass, with this most enigmatic, and charismatic of twentieth century figures lost on his side. Both sides of Priseman's paintings, therefore, seem to draw the same conclusion; that the painting of an image is like the tracing of ones fingers over a cold stone death mask in the darkness of church – it leaves one with a sense of presentness and profound loss at the same time.

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