

# Robert Priseman

## The Aesthetics of De-Personalization

Robert Priseman's paintings present us with 'a strange new beauty'. This resonant phrase is Mallarmé's -- a poet who favored a depersonalized way of writing that valued the intrinsically poetic domain of language. Mallarmé wrote an appreciative account of Manet, praising the way his hand became "an impersonal abstraction... The artist's personal feeling, his particular tastes are, for the time being, absorbed, ignored." Manet is determined to paint "entirely without himself."<sup>1</sup> Searching for a way to accomplish this feat, Manet looked to the Dutch and Flemish artists, famous for their patient, self-less observation of the world, and to an artist who had absorbed their lessons -- Velasquez. This aesthetic of de-personalization is fundamentally about displacing one's own agency, cutting through habitual stereotypes and sentiment, so that something other can surface.

There is a long tradition of art-making that aims at depersonalization. Although it is not possible to achieve, what is desired is the elocutionary disappearance of the artist. As a result, his work lacks all trace of emotional involvement and expressive gesture. Of course, that does not mean that the work is devoid of emotion. On the contrary, it may mean that quite violent emotion is only just held in check.

Roland Barthes gave the name 'writing degree zero' to a kind of prose first identified by Sartre in a review of Camus's *The Stranger*, where he described the prose as neutral or colorless --écriture blanche. Barthes, alluding mainly to Robbe-Grillet, compared this style of prose to a journalist's writing, but only in so far as the journalist refrains from emotive language. The idea, he suggests, 'was to go beyond Literature by entrusting one's fate to a sort of basic speech', without style. Many contemporary artists also aspire to a neutral, flat quasi-journalistic style -- a sort of zero degree of image making. The work of the German painter Gerhard Richter is a good example.

Robert Priseman's paintings have something in common with Richter's. First, and most obviously, there is the evident use of photography as an intermediary, distancing device. It would seem that for many artists, painting is only possible today given the mediation of photography. Photography's "objective" vision of the world has often been celebrated; mechanization is understood not only as a way of cutting through the carapace of our habitual, interest-laden perceptions, but also as a way of circumventing the weight of artistic convention. Richter's remarks suggest that, for him, the photograph is capable of a more objective, direct or neutral

vision than painting from a model. He was drawn to ordinary snap shots without pretension and 'devoid of style.' – the basic speech of visual representation.<sup>2</sup> For him, photography avoids the distortion of style and the weight of artistic convention. The all-over blurring of the painted image is also a means of neutralization. This blurring has a counterpart in Priseman's systematic elimination of detail. In this, there is also a link with Edward Hopper whose paintings derive their intensity and curious sense of alienation from the elimination of all distracting, inessential material. A more recent prominent artist who comes to mind in this connection is Thomas Demand who photographs elaborately constructed paper models of interiors which often have a ghastly aura of some past atrocity about them.

The highly technical, craftsmanly nature of Priseman's painting is another way of mediating or distancing the image. The photographic source is elaborated by drawing painstaking perspectival projections. He has commented on his admiration for Vermeer's painting and the way his use of perspective seems to contain or control his sensitivity to the world. Vermeer's light is another source of inspiration for Priseman who is clearly fascinated by the play of light, both natural and, increasingly, artificial. Recently he has even been painting sources of light, like the large lighting fixture in a Jubilee Line Station.

Richter's search for visual indifference is at odds with the nature of many of his subjects: family snapshots, death and recent German history. And this is another point of contact with Priseman. The subjects of the paintings are haunted by violence and death. The hospital interiors convey a sense of foreboding precisely because they are drained of life. The visible world is pinned like a dead butterfly to the surface of the canvas where one can inspect it. It is striking that this non-expressionist artist should be attracted to the work of Francis Bacon, apparently at the very opposite end of the artistic spectrum to Priseman. However, as is well known, Bacon worked from photographic material as well. Priseman pays homage to Bacon in pristine interiors of his former house in Wivenhoe, Essex, *68 Queens Road*, but also in his *The Death of George Dyer* – a depiction of the bathroom in which Bacon's petty criminal, violent lover met his death from an overdose. Bacon's painting of the same incident, *Triptych May-June 1973*, shows a figure in a simplified architectural space, seen at three moments, culminating in a figure slumped, dead, on the toilet. Priseman's version of the event is devoid of figures, but the toilet itself seems to crouch in the corner of an otherwise empty space. The title and the emptiness prompt the imagination to supply the narrative. As Barthes said, the death of the author, brings about the birth of the reader or, in this case, the spectator.

Margaret Iversen, 2008

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<sup>1</sup> Mallarmé, “The Impressionists and Edouard Manet,” 17. See my note 8.

<sup>2</sup> Daily Practice, p.31.