

Turning the Key

It is little known even amongst many locals, that artist Francis Bacon, the creative genius of one of the most compellingly expressive bodies of work in the twentieth century, kept a studio in the village of Wivenhoe in Essex. Today this studio at 68 Queen's Road looks as it did when he left it: a narrow unassuming Victorian terraced cottage, which sits without distinction on a village road between family homes. Peering through the front window on tiptoe, any curious passer-by can see the sage green walls, a colour which Bacon used for all the spaces he inhabited, a naked light bulb, and the dawbs of paint he made by the fire place. The space sits like an empty box; a silent contained space, but for those who know of Bacon's life, full of the suggestion of his recent presence.

Painter Robert Priseman who lives and works in Wivenhoe often walks by this studio and is inspired by its presence. A huge admirer of Bacon, for Priseman it is important that Wivenhoe is part of Bacon's story. Priseman has a love of painting and a fascination with narrative; he is also intrigued by the 'impression which a life lived can make on a room'.ⁱ This interest led Priseman to make a recent shift in his practice, moving from portraiture to the exploration of 'empty' interior spaces. His particular interest in the interiors connected with Bacon's life was generated further, when in 2005 after completing a painting of a critical care bed, he saw a BBC Arena documentary on Bacon which featured the hospital room in which the artist died. Priseman then saw that in the subjects of the Wivenhoe studio and the Clinica Ruber hospital bed, he had the beginnings of a series.

Priseman's artistic journey intersects with Bacon's in the village of Wivenhoe. The first painting he completed was *68 Queen's Road*, and Priseman admits that this is the most lovingly executed of the series, and that he approached the space with 'reverence'. His journey to the interior spaces of Bacon's life forms a type of pilgrimage and homage. The route to each painting involved long consideration and painstaking research as Priseman visited and photographed each of the selected spaces. To gain access to each of these he sought permission from the Parisian Hotel where Bacon's lover George Dyer committed suicide; Bacon's friend Denis Wirth-Miller for the Wivenhoe studio; and the Sisters of the Handmaids of Maria who nursed Bacon in his final days at the Clinica Ruber in Madrid.

Priseman's non-expressionist work occupies the very opposite end of the artistic spectrum to Bacon.ⁱⁱ In acknowledgement of this Priseman has said that it is precisely because his work is so different from Bacon's that he felt he could attempt this challenge. He says, 'I threw a gauntlet down to myself...Pitting yourself against someone, really throws up exactly what you are as an artist.'ⁱⁱⁱ As Priseman suggests comparisons and distinctions are revealing: Martin Harrison notes that Bacon acknowledged some of his works were 'very influenced by places

– by the ‘atmosphere of a room’, and that, ‘places I live in, or like living in, are like an autobiography’.^{iv}

However, Priseman’s interiors are not autobiographical – in the sense that they are not illustration and do not offer specific detail. Instead Priseman offers spaces that are apparently empty and indifferent to the lives that once inhabited them. Indeed it is Priseman’s intention to ‘present the viewer with a void’,^v where life becomes transient and where a moment is stilled. In common with Priseman’s other works which include paintings of corridors, medical environments and waiting rooms, the spaces in the Bacon series are also ones which have been or will be ‘passed through’: the hospital bed, hotel corridor, hotel bathroom, art gallery. These spaces are the passing places and turning points on a journey. The void in these paintings offers space for two journeys: Bacon’s and that of the viewer. These are people-less indifferent places, and the void may be filled with the vivid narrative of Bacon’s life or a consideration of your own.

As Margaret Iversen has pointed out the subjects of these paintings are ‘haunted by violence and death’ and contain a ‘sense of foreboding because they are drained of life’.^{vi} The subjects of *Room 417*, *Clinica Ruber* and *The Death of George Dyer* are places of ‘passing’ where death did take place. However, Priseman also offers some hope in these paintings. In the *The Death of George Dyer* the open door suggests an alternative ending to the closure of death, and the luminous light at the window offers hope. Similarly in *Room 417 Clinica Ruber*, Priseman sets a scene which is both comforting and terrifying. This bed is a place of caring; and the crucifix above the bed is a symbol of resurrection. Bacon famously painted crucifixion scenes, and it is ironic that he lay in his final hours at the foot of a cross.

There is a considerable contrast between this painting and Bacon’s crucifixion scenes. Here Priseman’s ‘contained’ stage managed scene and close palette of colour suggests a place of peace, where perhaps the world’s chaos can be kept at bay, but like Bacon he doesn’t offer simplification or certainty. Bacon’s aim, when he declared his intention to paint ‘the history of Europe in my lifetime’, was ‘to distil a world in which traditional certainties no longer applied’,^{vii} and his debut painting ‘Three Studies for Figures at the Base of A Crucifixion’ (1944) was an ‘expression of isolation and despair’.^{viii} Perhaps isolation and despair is also expressed also in *Room 417 Clinica Ruber?* In its detached photorealist precision this painting appears to lack expressive gesture which serves only to heighten its ‘emotive power’.^{ix} The effect of Priseman’s de-personalized aesthetic is to offer the suggestion that violent emotion is ‘only just held in check’.^x In the tight perspective framework allied with the precision of his brushstrokes there is an acknowledgement, which Priseman shares with Bacon, of the uncontrollability of the world, of an ever-impending chaos. It is in the heightened moments of life, and in our final moments, that the agonising tensions between hope and despair, order and chaos are played out. But Priseman’s painting suggests that there is always a choice. The

‘photographic’ distance he gives these paintings means that he is not prescriptive and that final conclusions must be made by the viewer.

The Turn of the Key further develops Priseman’s consideration of ‘choice’ and is an illumination of a heightened moment of transition. This painting is based on the central panel of Bacon’s 1971 triptych *In Memory of George Dyer*. It is a painting of the staircase in the Hotel Saints-Peres, Paris, which leads to the room where Dyer was staying when he died. Priseman’s title *The Turn of the Key* is taken from T.S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land*, and it has been suggested that Bacon was thinking of this poem during the painting of his triptych. In Bacon’s panel a silhouetted figure (Dyer) inserts a key in the door, suggesting these lines from *The Waste Land* 1922:

‘I have heard the key
Turn in the door once and turn once only
We think of the key, each in his prison
Thinking of the key, each confirms a prison’

At the moment he inserts the key in the door, Bacon implies that Dyer is crossing a threshold, he is ‘in transition’ between life and death. For Bacon, once the key is turned, Dyer’s life is imprisoned in death. Priseman’s painting offers a place of transition also, and the curve of the staircase implies a turning point. But there is an open-ness of space and a luminosity which is not prison-like. The strip of golden light on the left, offers not a threatening shadow, but a doorway; and another choice.

Priseman began this series with Bacon’s studio at 68 Queen’s Road and ends it with a painting entitled *7 Reece Mews*, which was Bacon’s London studio. At first sight this painting is confusing, as it appears to have no reference to a studio at all. Priseman has painted the interior of the Hugh Lane Gallery in Dublin where Bacon’s London studio was transferred piece by piece after his death. Significantly he paints the studio space as an enclosure, which is hidden and barely visible. There is irony here; Bacon lived his life uncompromisingly and openly, and his work maintained a sustained expressive power, now he appears to be imprisoned and controlled, as Priseman has suggested, like a ‘ghost in a box’.^{xi} But Priseman honours the continued power of Bacon’s work, shares with him a concern for ‘the inner realities of people confined in rooms’^{xii} and finally, reflects on what remains.

Ann Marie Boyle, 2007

ⁱ from a conversation with the artist, 19 October 2007.

ⁱⁱ Iversen, Margaret, ‘Robert Priseman: the Aesthetics of De-Personalization’, 2007. www.robertpriseman.com

ⁱⁱⁱ from a conversation with the artist, 19 October 2007.

^{iv} Harrison, Martin, *In Camera: Francis Bacon: Photography, Film and the Practice of Painting*, Thames & Hudson, London, 2005, 113

^v Priseman, Robert, 'Into the Void', 2007. www.robertpriseman.com

^{vi} Iversen, Margaret, 'Robert Priseman: the Aesthetics of De-Personalization', 2007. www.robertpriseman.com

^{vii} Harrison, Martin, *In Camera: Francis Bacon: Photography, Film and the Practice of Painting*, Thames & Hudson, London, 2005, 7

^{viii} Ibid.

^{ix} Cranfield, Ben, 'Looking Back without Anger: Robert Priseman's places of gentle trauma', 2007.

www.robertpriseman.com

^x Iversen, Margaret, 'Robert Priseman: the Aesthetics of De-Personalization', 2007. www.robertpriseman.com

^{xi} from a conversation with the artist, 19 October 2007.

^{xii} Harrison, Martin, *In Camera: Francis Bacon: Photography, Film and the Practice of Painting*, Thames & Hudson, London, 2005, 113