

## Interview with Robert Priseman of 'Fame'

The Crypt, St. Marylebone Church, London

1 - 27 February 2014

Reviewed by: [Austin Macfadden](#) »

Walking into The Crypt in St Marylebone Church, in London, I am surrounded by celebrity faces. In Robert Priseman's latest work he has painted the faces onto antique religious items. The near one hundred portraits of 20<sup>th</sup> century celebrities who died of suicide or another self-destructive means surround us as we speak. His show is entitled 'Fame' and his subjects vary from Kurt Cobain to Virginia Woolf, to Billie Holiday, to Ernest Hemmingway. His work resembles fresco as the faces are painted over religious figures. The portraits themselves are about the size of a postcard. Many of them looking around and out blankly into The Crypt's confined space.

We sit in an arranged quadrangle in the middle of the Crypt's open area. Priseman, is well-mannered. Having offered me a tea or coffee upon first introductions, he holds his cup close to his chest as he sits. I readjust my weight on the seat and I notice the portrait of Jimi Hendrix peering just above Priseman's left shoulder.

Clearing my throat, I ask him if he would consider the subjects of his work geniuses in some way.

Priseman responds, 'Their pursuit of fame is a way of rationalizing something inside them they don't understand. And in a way, is a particular kind of genius. But I don't think it's something that's considered.' He pushes his black glasses up the bridge of his nose.

'I do think all creative people are outsiders. What they are doing is analyzing society and reflecting it back. Artists are in effect whether their musicians or writers they're mirrors. They are social mirrors. And defining yourself as an outsider is fundamental to that creative process.'

'Is there any difference in the pursuit of celebrity now than when his subjects had achieved it?'

Priseman thinks for a moment and says, 'I think compartmentalizing your life is actually an important thing. It's an important part of what makes us human.' He takes a breath. 'With the advent of Facebook and the Internet, I think that we've blurred all those lines, and [celebrity] is different.' He crosses, and then uncrosses his legs.

'Do you think that art needs to exist in a wider social context or can it be appreciated without it?' I ask him, leaning closer towards the edge of the chair.

'All art has to fit inside its social context. In a way, it distills and sums up its time and place. What is interesting about the arts-- whether you're talking about music or poetry; or literature, or painting, or film making--at the time

your experiencing it, certain things can seem important.' I nod and Priseman becomes more animated. He shifts his position, leaning closer as if to impart a secret between friends.

'But those things often fade away. Then what's really important emerges later.'

Writer detail:

Austin is a freelance writer living in Brighton. He was born and raised in America but immigrated to the UK in late 2012. Follow him on twitter @big\_amac

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Venue detail:

The Crypt, St. Marylebone Church

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