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No Human Way to Kill: Paintings, Etchings, and a New Book by Robert Priseman

Exhibition and Book Launch

March 16 – March 30, 2010

Book Signing and Talks: Tuesday, March 23, 7:00 – 9:00 pm – Reception begins at 6:00 pm

This March, White Box in association with Firstsite Contemporary Art, UK is hosting a landmark exhibition of paintings and drawings of execution chambers in the USA by the critically acclaimed artist Robert Priseman.

White Box is also pleased to present a launch of *No Human Way to Kill*, an extraordinarily challenging book on capital punishment published by Robert Priseman in conjunction with the Human Rights Centre at University of Essex and Amnesty International and promoted by Human Rights Watch. The book signing and talks with the artist Robert Priseman, Professor Sir Nigel Rodley and Rev. Cathy Harrington will take place on Tuesday, March 23rd, 7:00 – 9:00pm.

The exhibition is a part of Robert Priseman's extended *Modern Means of Execution* project, which has been four years in the making. It was initially inspired by Nick Broomfield's television documentary on the execution of serial killer Aileen Wuornos. *"I was working on paintings of hospital interiors when I saw the documentary, and I became aware of similarities between the iconography of execution facilities and those of medical institutions,"* explains Priseman. The works are based on years of research to uncover rare images of execution rooms in America, most of which forbid any photography or visits by the uninvited.

Originally shown at the Dazed Gallery in London, the book was launched in London and Paris in October with the support of Firstsite Contemporary Art, UK. It opens with an account from Rev. Cathy Harrington whose daughter Leslie Ann Mazzara was lost to murder. Cathy negotiated a life sentence for her daughter's murderer, Eric Cople, who had potentially been facing the death sentence. This is followed by a view of life from inside death row at San Quentin by PEN winner Anthony Ross who was a former Crips gang member alongside Stanley 'Tookie' Williams. Then former Texas prison Warden and Peabody recipient, Jim Willett, who oversaw 89 executions gives a detailed description of how an execution is carried out.

A visit to see Robert Priseman's paintings and etchings of American execution chambers is no easy experience. Standing in front of the almost life-size paintings, you, as the visitor, are the only person in the painting and therefore the execution 'room'. There is no escaping from a full-on confrontation with the cruelty of the death penalty and the reality of your own mortality.

"I wanted to explore the strangeness of execution as I see it," says Priseman. *"I discovered that all the different equipment contains its own inherent peculiarities. When executing someone, why would you go to the trouble of placing a mattress on a gurney, or leather padding on an electric chair? These details reveal a disquiet felt by those engaged in the process of putting someone to death. The inventiveness in the variety of methods employed to kill people also troubles me – they seem to indicate a process of ritual, which in turn distances those involved from the act."*

As the choice of the word 'Modern' in the project title suggests, Priseman's works look at how the design of contemporary execution chambers interpret the aesthetics of modernity. In the US, they are designed as pseudo medical consultation rooms with a clean minimal, "modern" appearance. They appear as places of healing rather than death. You could almost expect a doctor to enter the room rather than an executioner.

Dazed described their show of Priseman's work – ROBERT PRISEMAN: AMERICAN EXECUTION: "The acclaimed cutting-edge painter took over the gallery with his searing and terrifying meditations on the various execution methods still on the statute books in the United States. This had to be one of the Dazed Gallery's most talked about shows and is one we are proud to have exhibited."

Robert Priseman's last exhibition series, *The Francis Bacon Interiors* received high critical success. An

interview with Robert Priseman by art historian Michael Peppiatt, Bacon's biographer, was published in September. The paintings were exhibited at the Huddersfield Art Gallery, 5th September– 7th November 2009 along with works by Francis Bacon, Richard Hamilton, Graham Sutherland, Lucian Freud, Leon Kossof and Frank Auerbach.

Robert Priseman is a highly acclaimed artist. Works by the artist are held in The Royal Collection, Windsor Castle, Corpus Christi College, Cambridge, Sheffield Hallam University The University of Kent, Cambridge University Library, Queen's Lancashire Regiment and the University of Hull. An interview with Priseman by art historian Michael Peppiatt, Francis Bacon's biographer, was published in September 2008. His series of paintings, The Francis Bacon Interiors was exhibited at Huddersfield Art Gallery 2009 along with works by Francis Bacon, Richard Hamilton, Graham Sutherland, Lucian Freud, Leon Kossof and Frank Auerbach. He has held solo exhibitions at the European Commission, Curwen Gallery, Addison Ross Gallery London, the University of Essex, Derby Museum and Art Gallery. His latest show 'Gas Chambers' opens at COCA in Christchurch New Zealand this March.

Further quotes:

"Distanced and deadly factual, Robert Priseman's etchings reveal a world we know exists in our midst but steadfastly avoid thinking about. These sinister spaces are host to the most deadly concepts of time. Between the snap of a neck and actual extinction lie some twenty minutes of throttled half-life. Even a severed head, its eyelids still opening and closing, lingers on. By appearing to gloss over the barbarity of official killing, Priseman's images allow its full horror to seep more vividly and more memorably through."

Art Historian, Michael Peppiatt

"Robert Priseman's twelve etchings are beautiful and strange: airless depictions of the spaces in which and the objects by which healthy human beings have been, and still are, put to death under law. Some of the devices are disturbingly homely, even comic-looking – the eager inventor's over-elaborate handiwork – and soon nearly all appear this way. The would-be scientificity of the lethal-injection gurney and the gas chamber is punctured, that is, not only by their place in the series alongside the garrotting chair, but by the artist's evenly precise and dispassionate attention to perspective and texture, to straps and bolts and curtains. The graphic technique lets us address visually a major theme of the texts in this collection, and notably of Priseman's own Afterword. The complication of the machines, like that of the entire juridical process of execution, is a kind of hangman's hood, to shield an individual from responsibility for the act."

Christine Stevenson, the Courtauld Institute of Art

"In 'No Human Way to Kill', Robert Priseman has brought together different voices to create an important and compelling new overview of the death penalty as it exists in the world today."

Helen Prejean, C.S.J.

"'No Human Way to Kill' presents a graphic account of the death penalty. The etchings and accounts offer up a strange and original contemplation on a subject, which stretches back far, far too long. It is time for the death penalty to end; this book helps us to see why."

– Clive Stafford Smith, Reprieve

"Beautiful and memorable work"

Alain de Botton

"Robert Priseman's painting should be viewed within the tradition of liberating the unconscious and haunted self."

Art Historian, John Finlay

Notes to Editors:

American Use of Death Penalty – Notable dates:

August 6th 1890: First use of the electric chair

September 12th 2007: Last Electrocutation in USA (to date)

January 25th 1996: Last hanging in USA (to date)

January 26th 1996: Last use of firing squad in USA (Utah) (to date)

February 8th 1924: First use of Gas Chamber in USA (Nevada)

March 3rd 1999: Last use of Gas Chamber in USA (to date)

January 17th 1977: Capital Punishment

Facts:

- America joins China, Iran, Iraq and Pakistan in accounting for over 90% of executions in the world today.
- There are currently over 3200 prisoners on death row in the US.

LINKS

Images of the etchings <<http://www.flickr.com/groups/nohumanway/>>

Amazon link for reviews and purchase of No Human Way to Kill book <http://www.amazon.com/Human-Way-Kill-Robert-Priseman/dp/095620824X/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&s=books&qid=1265291356&sr=1-1>

Dazed and Confused recent feature

<http://www.dazeddigital.com/ArtsAndCulture/article/5412/1/Gas_Chambers__Robert_Priseman>

Facebook <<http://www.facebook.com/%21/pages/No-Human-Way-To-Kill/270724271834>>

Amnesty International's Abolish the Death Penalty Campaign

<<http://www.amnesty.org.uk/content.asp?CategoryID=78>>

Interviews: Robert Priseman and Rev. Cathy Harrington are available for interview.

Special thanks to Kath Wood, Director of Firstsite, UK and the Human Rights Centre, University of Essex.

For more information, please contact: Susie Lim of White Box at 212-714-2347 or susie@whiteboxny.org, or visit www.whiteboxny.org.

White Box, 329 Broome Street, New York. Hours: Wednesday – Friday, 11 to 7 pm, Saturday – Sunday, 12 to 6 pm.



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