

Witnessing and Trauma in Robert Priseman's *SUMAC*

by

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Five paintings in all: each small painting, completed by the artist Robert Priseman in oils and ornamentally framed, depicts a landscape. Perhaps, to utter the generic term “landscape” here is almost too much in this context, calling to mind, for instance, the haunting expansive works of Caspar David Friedrich or the more socialized paintings of John Constable. Instead, two of the paintings present us with small streams—one of these, designated *S*, appears to be a wooded area, while *U* offers a view of the banks but provides no further visual information; the two paintings entitled *M* and *A* are road scenes set amid trees, thus suggesting that the environs to be that of the countryside rather than the town; finally, somewhat separate from the rest is *C*, which shows two trees shorn of their leaves—indicating a wintery time of year—silhouetted against an orange sky. All five paintings, then, are, at first glance, indefinite regarding their location. Their smallness and concentration upon small details, moreover, seemingly restricts their narrative dimension, as does the absence of people. If anything, they resemble details—or indeed, fragments—of a larger, more encompassing landscape painting or series of landscape paintings, rather than landscape paintings in themselves.

If the paintings are coy about revealing their specific locale (or if they even have one), the single letters that comprise their titles is more forthcoming. Read in the correct order, the letters spell out *SUMAC*, which serves as the collective noun of this series, and references a police investigation—Operation Sumac—carried out over half a decade ago. In late 2006, a series of murders were perpetrated in the county of Suffolk. The five victims were young women, all of whom were working as prostitutes in the area, a fact which, for some, served as sufficient justification for drawing their deaths as a “natural corollary” (albeit tragic) of their dangerous, illegal occupations. The ensuing police investigation uncovered a local taxi driver and former merchant navel sailor, Steve Wright, as the murderer. The victims died as the result of asphyxiation and their bodies were left naked (there was no evidence of sexual molestation, however), leading to Wright becoming dubbed “The Suffolk Strangler” in the rural locations now depicted in Priseman’s paintings.

Insofar as these miniatures depicting landscapes relate to the brutal murders perpetrated by Steve Wright, then we are compelled to ask whether such an aesthetic strategy is adequate to the trauma it represents through a specific act of pictorial displacement. Staging the critical question, however, in terms of adequacy is surely insufficient—doing so risks making the decisive issue merely a technical or formal matter. Rather, there are further questions that demand to be brought to

the fore: questions of the particular responsibilities that should be borne by the artist in the face of the wanton murder of others and of the representability of trauma *tout court*. Thus, then, not only or simply a question of “is this the most appropriate way to document a tragic series of events?” but also “*should* the artist engage in these kinds of issues?” and “is it possible to represent trauma at all?” (responding that artists have often freely sought to engage such weighty subjects is not evidence that they should or, more pertinently, that they can).

The artistic strategy under discussion here is less common within painting. Rather, the field of photography has been much more commonly associated with traumatic representation—whether we are speaking of collective or personal trauma—than painting has. On this score we can’t sidestep the massive influence of Walter Benjamin’s “Little History of Photography” and Roland Barthes *Camera Lucida* upon theories of trauma within photographic discourse. These texts have been repeatedly and extensively analysed, but it bears mentioning in this context Benjamin’s famous commentary upon the Dauthendey portrait photograph in which he writes: “No matter how artful the photographer, no matter how carefully posed the subject, the beholder feels an irresistible urge to search a picture for the tiny spark of contingency, of the here and now, with which reality has (so to speak) seared the subject, to find the inconspicuous spot where in the immediacy of that long-forgotten moment the future nests so eloquently that we, looking back, may rediscover it.”ⁱ Similarly projecting future death as something implicit but determinative within the photograph, Barthes argued that these frozen images contained a temporality marked my mortality. As he famously wrote, the photograph of the manacled Lewis Payne—awaiting execution for his attempted murder of W. H. Seward, the US Secretary of State in 1865—evinces a peculiar conjunction with time and mortality: “He is dead and he is going to die” Rather than seeing this conjunction as distinct to this image alone, Barthes comments that it is shared by all photographs: “In front of the photograph of my mother as a child, I tell myself: she is going to die: I shudder, like Winnicott’s psychotic patient, over a catastrophe which has already occurred. Whether or not the subject is already dead, every photograph is this catastrophe.”ⁱⁱ

Photography’s peculiar historicity, its indexical connection to a particular time and place, combined with the sheer contingency and transitoriness of that time and place, allows it to become a medium that is indelibly traumatic. In his book *Spectral Evidence*, Ulrich Baer examines two photographs taken by two different photographers. Both *Sobibór* (1995) by Dirk Reinartz from his photo-book *Deathly Still: Pictures of Former Concentration Camps* and an untitled image from Mikael Levin’s *War Story* (1997) which depict markedly similar scenes: overgrown clearings, completely unpopulated with no extant architecture, plain overcast skies rendered starkly in black and white.ⁱⁱⁱ That these two photographs show former concentration camp locations isn’t immediately obvious. Instead, their usage of landscape pictorial traditions and the lack of visual

clues displace their documentary evidence. Although *knowing* here might rely upon contextual historicist awareness—that is to say, an extra-visual knowledge—Baer’s interest stems from perceiving the power of these works as emanating from an altogether source. For Baer, their evidentiary power coincides not with contextual reconstruction but from the very *absence* of visual historical markers. At stake here isn’t the “banality of evil” as metaphorically replicated by the quotidian ordinariness of the landscape in the photographs; rather, it is the emptiness of the landscape, its refusal to represent, that testifies to the sheer unrepresentability of the Holocaust. Thus, that which evades representation and the negation of representation becomes paradoxically the most adequate representation of historical trauma.

While the correspondences between these photographs and Priseman’s SUMAC paintings are plain, various factors disclose that we shouldn’t erase their specific differences without further analysis. Firstly, there is a question of medium. For Benjamin, Barthes, and Baer, the traumatic kernel is the outcome of qualities peculiar to the photographic medium even though they foreground different temporalities (so that Benjamin and Barthes project the *future* trauma from the present of the photograph, whereas Baer uncovers the *historical* trauma from the present). It would appear on that basis, then, that painting doesn’t possess the same intrinsic relation to the traumatic event. Secondly, there is an awkward question of the scale of tragedy: can we straightforwardly equate the millions that were brutalized and executed in the Nazi camps with the deaths of five women at the hands of one killer? To ask such questions of Priseman’s *SUMAC* isn’t to do these works a disservice by demanding a near-impossible historical and ethical standard. On the contrary, it might be argued that Priseman’s oeuvre has regularly compelled such questions as we can tell from his various suites of pictures such as *No Human Way to Kill* (2007-2008) and his Holocaust-addressing *Nazi Gas Chambers: From Memory to History* (2008-2009).

And indeed, through looking at these other paintings we quickly notice how concerned Priseman is to generate typologies of space. Eschewing any self-consciously expressive brushwork, Priseman seems both to depict spaces in a manner that refuses traces of subjectivity as a means of highlighting the objectivity of quasi-photographic visual qualities in his painting, on the one hand, and to allow himself to be drawn to spaces that possess some degree of psychological disturbance. Taken together, the two aspects reveal a dynamic of “witnessing” in Priseman’s paintings that seeks to uncover the invisible stain of trauma. But if we are to speak of witnessing, then we must necessarily ask who is the witness here and what responsibility of testimony befalls them. Presenting us with views of rural Suffolk, the obvious art-historical predecessor to *SUMAC* would be the paintings of John Constable. To that extent, we might assume that part of Priseman’s fascination with these crime scenes resides within the perversion of what is locally known as “Constable Country” which proposes a rather different twist to what John Barrell referred to as “the

dark side of the landscape” vis-a-vis the rural scenes depicted by Constable, Thomas Gainsborough, and George Morland.^{iv} It is as if Constable’s pictures are now haunted by the murders to happen later on. Yet while Barrell illuminated the plight of the rural poor in these paintings, thereby establishing their evidentiary status, to my mind we need to look across the channel for a body of work that corresponds more proximately with the model of witnessing that I’m suggesting is present in Priseman’s oeuvre in general and *SUMAC* in particular. That is to say, we must turn to the example of Caspar David Friedrich.

As Joseph Leo Koerner argues in his perceptive study of Friedrich, the significance of his paintings relates to the recurrent thematization of looking and experiential cognition that underscored his pictorialized Romanticism. Unlike Constable, arguably, Friedrich is less directly concerned with mimetically recreating through paint the landscape than he is with recording his experience of the landscape, especially that experience when confronted with specific sensory limit conditions answerable to Immanuel Kant’s formulation of the sublime. Such thematic treatment of looking is evident through the frequent presence of single figures and very small groups of people in the foreground of the canvas. Nearly always seen from behind, the *Rückenfigur* (the name given to Friedrich’s turned away figures) is explicitly gazing at the scene before him or her. But if the people depicted in Friedrich’s paintings stage looking, then it’s important to remark that they actively *prefigure* the act of looking the viewer carries out in beholding the painting. With their backs turned towards us, they look more or less at the same sublime landscape as we do. Their concentrated act of looking that we “see-in” thus becomes an invitation for us, as beholders of the painting and the world itself, to contemplate our own acts of looking. Referring to Friedrich’s *The Monk by the Sea*, Koerner writes concerning the *Rückenfigur* of the monk: “[the monk] does not explain or mediate the picture’s meaning, but only repeats the picture’s essential deferment of meaning; or that he emblemizes the subject *of* landscape as the subject *in* landscape; or that he is a mirror of myself, who is at once forced and unable to constitute the picture’s true subject.”^v

We might contend, then, that Friedrich’s paintings and the manner that they thematize subjective experience serves as an historical analogue of Priseman’s paintings and his call to witnessing. And indeed, these two artists complement one another suitably: Friedrich apprehends within the genre of landscape after Kant’s revolution in philosophy the necessity of dealing with the near unrepresentability of the sublime, whilst Priseman apprehends within the genre of landscape after the Holocaust and the necessity of the near unrepresentability of traumatic historical experience. The proposed comparison with Friedrich’s paintings, however, may ring as somewhat misleading. After all, there is no *Rückenfigur* here for us to synchronize our looking with. Moreover, if the boundlessness of the sublime was the ultimate test of experience for the Romantics, then the partial views offered by *SUMAC* point in a very different direction. Instead of

the immensity of earth and sky, the mountains breathtakingly shrouded in mist, or the sea transformed into sheets of ice, Priseman offers us a view of a stream seen as if from too close a distance. There are hints of Friedrich in *SUMAC*, but the transition from Friedrich to Priseman is tantamount to a transition from the landscape to the detail.

But this is very much to the point. The small scale of the *SUMAC* pieces engenders a very different relationship to the beholder not just by setting aside notions of the sublime that are prevalent in Romanticism and in landscape painting more generally but also use that smallness to draw the beholder physically closer to each canvas. While our tendency is to initially step back from a Friedrich painting in order to encompass it within our field of vision, the deliberate smallness of Priseman's *SUMAC* compels the viewer to reduce their distance between themselves and the painting so as to inspect them with the care required. To that extent, our inspection surely resembles on some level the exceptionally close scrutiny carried out by the police and forensic teams after the discovery of each victim. Seeing from close-up, we are effectively searching for the telltale traces of murder even if the bodies or signs of the Wright's presence—footprints, broken twigs, for example—are not present within the landscape scene. The smallness of each painting, moreover, means that they could potentially be held in the hand, brought close to the eyes, turned this way and that, thereby facilitating an extremely high degree of forensic examination. And therefore, we find our own looking thematized, albeit in manner very different to that of Friedrich, and to very different ends. There are no subjects *in* Priseman's *SUMAC* landscapes, but we are nonetheless the subject *of* those landscapes.

That would perhaps be a good place to end if it weren't for the ethically problematic issue of seeing ourselves as the subjects *of* Priseman's *SUMAC*. Surely, we might worry, it is the victims—Tania Nicol, Gemma Adams, Anneli Alderton, Annette Nicholls, and Paula Clennell—that are the subjects *of* these Suffolk landscapes, not us. And worse, is there not the danger that in comprehending ourselves as the subjects *of* those landscapes we deny the victims' personal histories, their tragic fates, thus metaphorically killing them a second time? But this would be, to my mind, to misconstrue our role in this. Through becoming the subject *of* these landscapes we do not replace the subjecthood of the victims, rather we are called forth as witnesses of their deaths, to remember when the physical traces have eroded and memory has faded. And if our ethical responsibility as beholders is one of empathy for the victims that has been triggered by how Priseman thematizes looking and witnessing of a trauma that is not represented—that cannot be represented—through documentary evidence, then the stake of these paintings *as* landscape paintings is rather different from what we normally expect. As I have contended, despite their geographical proximity to “Constable Country,” it is the works of Friedrich rather than Constable that provide the more accurate predecessor to Priseman's enterprise within the landscape tradition

insofar as Friedrich's landscapes correspondingly emphasize the constitutive role of experience, thereby consequentially rendering his landscape paintings studies of subjectivity. And yet, it seems possible to make a stronger although potentially counterintuitive claim. Out of all the genres within the history of art it is portraiture that is most commonly taken to emblemize subjectivity. Given that, as we have seen, Prisman problematizes mimetic representation, it strikes me that we can plausibly argue that *SUMAC* is not simply a series of landscape paintings that thematize witnessing. On the contrary, they are non-mimetic portraits of the five victims, and, *as* portraits, we are enjoined to become witnesses of those victims as person to person.

ⁱ Walter Benjamin, “A Little History of Photography” in *Selected Writings, Volume 2: 1927 – 1934*, ed. by Michael W. Jennings et al, trans. by Rodney Livingstone et al (Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London, England: Belknap Press/Harvard University Press, 1999), p. 510

ⁱⁱ Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, trans. Richard Howard (London: Vintage Classics, 2000 [1983]), p. 96.

ⁱⁱⁱ For a fuller discussion of these photographs that is germane to Priseman’s artistic practice, see Ulrich Baer, *Spectral Evidence: The Photography of Trauma* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London, England: MIT Press, 2002).

^{iv} See John Barrell, *The Dark Side of the Landscape: The Rural Poor in English Painting 1730-1840* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980).

^v Joseph Leo Koerner, *Caspar David Friedrich and the Subject of Landscape*, 2nd edition (London: Reaktion Books, 2009 [1990]), p. 250.