

THE TABLET

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SETTLEMENT OR REFORM?

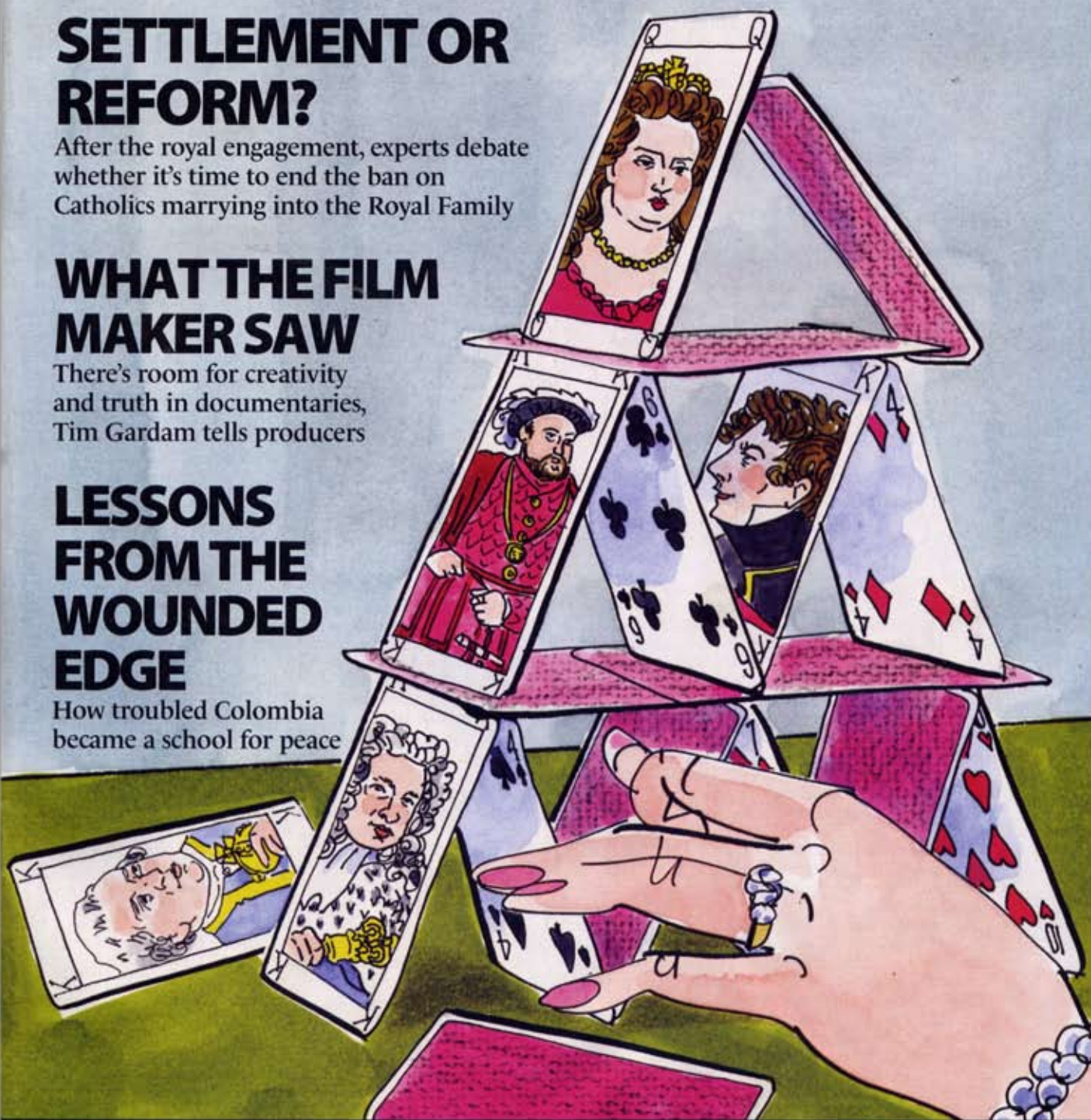
After the royal engagement, experts debate whether it's time to end the ban on Catholics marrying into the Royal Family

WHAT THE FILM MAKER SAW

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LESSONS FROM THE WOUNDED EDGE

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MARTIN BOLAND

A FLICKER IN THE ASHES

Francis Bacon's bleak canvases depict a world sunk in despair. But the artist Robert Priseman finds there the traces of hope

The dyspeptic vision of Francis Bacon is unmistakable: screaming Popes; the savage couplings of loveless sex; the abattoirs of industrial violence. It is a vision that has stamped its violent mark on contemporary art.

As a young man, Bacon was asthmatic, which made him unfit for active service in the Second World War. Instead, he worked in a rescue unit, recovering the dead and injured from the ruins of a devastated London. The experience nourished his intellectual interests. He read Aeschylus' *Oresteia* with its royal family devouring itself in a pitiless cycle of revenge and murder. T.S. Eliot's poetry, too, was a source of inspiration with its view of a crooked age, populated by lost souls scrabbling for meaning. Alienation and brutality were the ideas that Bacon translated, with complete artistic confidence, onto canvas.

A recent series of large-scale paintings by the English artist Robert Priseman attempt to engage with Bacon's nihilistic world view and to suggest that elemental traces of hope, beauty and faith might be found in his blasted landscape of moral dereliction. Born in 1965, Robert Priseman began his artistic career as a portrait painter. His works are held in many public collections, including the Royal Collection. For five years he painted landscapes which, he has noted, "became increasingly empty and I became interested in the idea that they could become the threshold to a journey. Then I started painting interiors as they seemed to do the job better." Priseman's artistic journey coincided with his religious one. Two years ago he became a Catholic.

Priseman maps the fragile boundaries between matter and spirit, despair and hope, death and resurrection. His meticulously observed interiors invite the viewer to stand on the fault line between the temporal and the transcendental. The hospital corridor, the mortuary and the waiting room are among the haunted interiors that Priseman has surveyed. These are places of subliminal dread where all human traffic will, at some time, pass. Priseman strips them of extraneous detail and distracting company. The viewer becomes their

sole inhabitant, left to experience the existence of an ineffable reality that surrounds, saturates and seeps into the temporal. By avoiding ersatz religious iconography, Priseman's interiors become meditations, both unsettling and profound, on the presence in absence of the divine, the *Deus absconditus*, and our passing over from mortal existence into his mysterious life.

Priseman recognises Bacon as "a master" and admires his uncompromising honesty. The five paintings that form Priseman's "Francis Bacon Interiors" are more than hagiography. They include Bacon's studio in Wivenhoe, Essex, and the Hugh Lane Gallery in Dublin where Bacon's London studio was reconstructed. These sites are secular reliquaries, artificial attempts to commune with the dead artist by reverencing the ghostly patina of the material world. But, as with religious relics, viewers are awakened to their own being and what the Welsh poet R.S. Thomas describes as "the compulsiveness of the mind's/stare into the lenses' furious interiors."

The artists have some approaches in common - their use of photographic sources; an interest in sealed spaces and the interplay between the presence or absence of the divine and the human. But there are differences. If Bacon is the godfather of futility, Priseman is preoccupied with hope. Bacon claimed that "one's basic nature is totally without hope, and yet one's nervous system is made out of optimistic stuff." Priseman's work is, in part, a response to such a claim. "I believe in hope. For me, nothingness is what I fear most - I think it is because you are then faced with yourself and the reality of how far short you have fallen from what God created. But also, there is something about finding God in nothingness, that when everything else has fallen away you can sense the presence of God there."

The staircase to the room in the Hotel des Saints-Pères, Paris, where Bacon's lover committed suicide, forms the central panel of his 1971 triptych *In Memory of George Dyer*. Captured slipping a key into his room door, the



The Turn of the Key by Robert Priseman

figure of Dyer, lit by a naked light bulb, melts into an annihilating void. Priseman returns to the scene of this tragedy in his work *The Turn of the Key*. The title, taken from T.S. Eliot's *The*

Waste Land, incorporates Priseman's intuition "that the body is a prison for the soul". But in Priseman's painting the staircase feels benign, exorcised of trauma. "By warping the perspective," he writes, "I gained a sense of bodily detachment, of almost floating up the stairs ... Also the light at the top and darkness at the bottom adds to a feeling of ascent or descent." Bacon's "quietism of despair" is challenged as grains of hope are uncovered and teased free.

In April 1992 Francis Bacon died of a heart attack at the Catholic hospital, Clinica Ruber, in Madrid. He died in the presence of two nuns from the Servants of Mary and although an atheist, was buried with a crucifix. Time has drained this deathbed scene of its high drama, leaving Priseman to perform a visual autopsy on the room: a chair, laundered sheets, the tubular frame of a bed and, above it, a small crucifix. Beginning his career with *Three Studies for Figures at the Base of the Crucifixion* (1944), Priseman reminds us that Bacon ended his life's journey at that same base. What this means for Bacon - and for us - is left open.

Priseman trains his eye on the formidable darkness of existence, our bestial impulses and the pathology of our loneliness. He reports back that, in spite of the horror, hope survives. This is a hope that cannot be manufactured or predicted but is as shocking as a dead man quietly stepping from his tomb.

■ Fr Martin Boland is chaplain at the University of Essex, where Robert Priseman's Francis Bacon Interiors will be on exhibition 15 November to 12 December (www.robertpriseman.com)