

Francis Bacon

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FRANCIS BACON

By Dorota Kozinska



THIS VAST RETROSPECTIVE OF THE WORK OF ONE OF BRITAIN'S GREATEST CONTEMPORARY ARTISTS, FRANCIS BACON (1909 – 1992) IS A MAJOR CELEBRATION HERALDING THE CENTENARY OF HIS BIRTH, AND A COMPREHENSIVE AND EXHAUSTIVE DOCUMENT OF HIS PROLIFIC CAREER.

Born in Dublin of English parents, Bacon first worked as an interior designer. He started painting around 1928, but destroyed most of his early work. He revealed his talent as a major artist in 1945 with an instantly unforgettable and shocking work titled *Three Studies for Figures at the Base of a Crucifixion*.

This was the start of one of the most controversial and disturbing careers in the history of modern art. Bacon's demoralizing philosophy that man is simply another animal in a godless world, subject to the same natural urges towards violence, lust and fear, was at times in contrast with his paintings infused as much with unbearable emotional anguish, as with love. They are often extremely beautiful despite their gut-wrenching subject matter.

This, the first UK retrospective of Bacon's work since 1985, is a form of re-assessment of his oeuvre, afforded by new research that has emerged since the revelation of his studio and its contents following the artist's death. One of the rooms in the exhibition, *Archive*, offers a glance into the inner sanctum of the artist, revealing to what extent he relied on photography, and how he manipulated photographic imagery. The imagery itself, like Bacon's paintings for that matter is often brutal, on the theme of violence and conflict, but also focused on works of art, including stills from old films.

Bacon's preoccupation with the human body and its suffering, is the central theme of all of his works. He developed a unique way of depicting the physical and emotional torment racking the body, by twisting and deforming it, reducing it to a fleshy mass emitting a silent scream of pain.

His flamboyant homosexuality and personal transgressions only added to his mythical stature, and are an intrinsic element of his work.

The Tate retrospective brings together many famous paintings and triptychs including *Study after Velazquez's Portrait of Pope Innocent X* (1953), *In Memory of George Dyer* (1971), and *Two Figures in the Grass* (1954).

This, however, is but the tip of the iceberg. The exhibition is chock full of recognizable paintings, but that is perhaps due to Bacon's unmistakable style.

It is divided into ten sections, or rooms, starting with *Animal*, showing works done in the 1940s and reflecting the artist's original theory of man as an animal in a world without redemption. The bestial depiction of the human form is at times combined with specific references to the horrors of the Second World War. It is in this room that we are first introduced to one of the early variations on the theme of the Velazquez painting, which became an obsession with the painter, *Head VI* (1949). All it really is, is a screaming face, featureless except for the gaping mouth.

Room 2, *Zone*, focuses on Bacon's experiments with pictorial space, and the interaction between subject and setting. In most of his works, the figure is solitary, isolated, yet placed centrally, almost on a stage, therefore exposed to public scrutiny in all its vulnerability. This visual formula weaves throughout his career, and is symbolic of the artist's sense of being alone in his suffering.

Room 3 is under the heading *Apprehension*, and the sense of dread permeating the works in this section is of a very unusual kind. The *Man in Blue* reigns in this hall, a haunting, looming figure behind an enormous desk, a sinister, shadowy presence exuding a particularly personal menace. This series refers to the continued illegality of homosexuality, and on a personal level, to Bacon's sometimes violent affair with Peter Lacy. This room also holds the *Chimpanzee* (1955), a terrifying depiction of confinement and cruelty.

Through *Crucifixion*, *Crisis*, and *Portrait*, to *Epic*, *Memorial* and *Late*, each



Three Studies for a Self-Portrait
(middle panel of triptych), May-June 1973
Private Collection
Switzerland © Estate of Francis Bacon.
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section is a world onto itself, a mini exhibition within the framework of a large one.

Portraits is like a burst of colour in the otherwise sombre palette that predominates in Bacon's oeuvre. Gone is the cage-like grid holding the figure, the space is infused with light, ochres and greens. His lover and most frequent model, George Dyer, is seen in many of the works, like *Three Figures in a Room* (1964), in which he is represented with a mixture of pathos and affection.

But it is in the room titled *Memorial* that one finds perhaps the most accomplished, and the most painful of Bacon's works. The room is entirely dedicated to Dyer, who was

the artist's closest companion as of 1963, and who committed suicide in 1971, two days before Bacon's major exhibition at the Grand Palais in Paris. Racked by loss and pain, Bacon created a series of works in the memory of Dyer, that speaks a subtly different visual language. The lines are cleaner, the imagery less raw, the setting staged, as if the horror of the event was too much to bear and had to be presented in a theatrical, detached manner.

The figure, as always, is placed centre stage, exposed in all its physical degradation and beauty, terribly human in its vulnerability and helplessness.

Presented in triptychs – Bacon's way of fulfilling his longing for cinematic expression – it shows Dyer slumped on a toilet

seat, dying, a giant black shadow spilling from the central image like a great pool of blood.

Bacon was legendary for his resigned defiance in the face of mortality, but the death of his friend was devastating.

"Death is the only absolute certainty," he told a friend. "Artists know that they can't defeat it, but I think that most artists are very aware of their annihilation – it follows them around like their shadow."

For someone wrestling with such overwhelming forces, Bacon exhibited an impressive discipline at work, pouring his torment onto the canvas with an unconscious, or perhaps very deliberate, sense of it being his only salvation.

In the last room of this magnificent exhibition, we come face to face with the artist so to speak. A series of wonderful self-portraits reveal the man behind the easel; a profound, deeply thinking, complex personality. In *Three Studies for a Self-Portrait* (1979-80), the face is a twisting, undulating patchwork of colour against a dark background. The features are typically contorted, but what draws the attention are the eyes that see, and look back at us.

What strikes one when contemplating the expanse of Bacon's prolific production, is how very consistent he was in his style and subject matter, and yet at the same time how endlessly, surprisingly fresh each of his painting is to this day. Despite the scatological, eviscerating nature of his work, the viewer is instantly immersed in its story, often unaware of, oblivious to the fabulous calibre of the art. The two go hand in hand in Bacon's paintings, the horror and the beauty, life and art, united by the indomitable creative spirit that helped him survive and fed his talent. □

EXHIBITION

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