

Not only rage

The foreign melody in the paintings of Francis Bacon

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Bacon at the Tate, 1985

► **B**ack for the first time since the major retrospective of 1985, Francis Bacon is showing at Tate Britain. He didn't ever really leave – one of his most famous triptychs, [c.1944] has been there all the while, sitting at odds with its neighbour canvases like some chimeric black sheep in a family photograph that the eye almost drifts past, but not quite. Some certainties about this show: yes it has been everywhere in the press and yes it is always wearying to scrum around one as popular as this and it *is* popular and yes it is worth seeing and yes it validates the place of painting in the world. It isn't just another 'blockbuster' retrospective, then, and while a common complaint levelled at such smorgasbords is that there is too much material massed and too little curatorial discretion exercised, this is not the case here. What is interesting is how subtly different the work becomes when you see it neither reproduced, nor in the flesh but alone, nor perhaps twinned; but *en famille* – the whole family of freaks massed

before the viewfinder, churning in their pink soups and oils, glaring out at you. Indeed, one realises that with Bacon, he was not simply about rage and horror. There is something else at play.

Everybody knows that Bacon was an angry man, a homosexual sadomasochist, a gambler and a drinker. Not everyone knows that he was Anglo-Irish and was born to an unlovely military family two streets from St. Stephen's Green, because the English claimed him, as they claim all successes of the former Union who live within their borders. Bacon lived out most of his life in a little flat in South Kensington and he used to get the Piccadilly line 'tube' into Leicester Square on most evenings to meet his fellows in and around Soho. He frequented the Colony Rooms Club with Frank Auerbach, John Deakin and Lucian Freud. This stygian dive-bar is now threatened with closure, just as Bacon's flat, or to be precise his painting studio, is no longer to be found in South Kensington but in the Hugh Lane Gallery in Dublin. There it stands, a relictuary of some former atrocity reclaimed by the town that birthed its former occupant. So Bacon is now part of history, part of the 20th century that is now nearly a decade away. Yet we are close and old enough to remember, most of us, why he painted what he did because we saw the same things on television and in newspapers in that century. We saw war, genocide and the noblest conception of humanity flayed for a lampshade. Bacon saw these things with the morality of the greatest 19th century novelists, as he also saw his own irredeemable soul.

Many of his paintings are deliberately banal in their casual observation of horror. They were borne of this tough, old-fashioned man looking into the maw of history, into the consequences of things done, and finding no meaning, no God and no salvation. A good Bacon painting is ever looking out at us even when the figures are not making eye contact with the viewer. There is rudimentary spatiality so you don't ever forget the message, being distracted by the craft. One is 'thrown' off the image. This itself expresses the aggression that was innate to most of Bacon's relationships and consequently his relationship with the art world. Just look at his scabrous paintings of the besuited men from the counting houses, caught like his screaming Popes in gilded birdcages swung out over an abyssal dark. There is no consolation even in gold.

The keystone of this exhibition is the room labeled, 'Archive', which lays out a select body of material from the painting studio to show what he drew upon for his work. The mainly photographic source imagery that the painter favoured ran from atrocity to disfigurement, to human form in motion [e.g. wrestling], to sex and Velasquez. Many of the paintings are hung

within glass frames and given their surface quality, this should never have happened regardless of their huge financial value – they become almost unreadable due to one being able only to see oneself in the glass. This is a particular problem with the dark, heavily asphalted work of the late 1940s to mid-1950s, before the palette brightened considerably, the paint smoothed out and the sardonic seaside-in-hell pinks took hold. This is a flaw to the show which other clearly visible work makes one forgive. For example, to walk up towards *Three Studies for a Crucifixion* [1962], is to approach a restaurant of veal-coloured walls and trick dimensions within which some fascist gay orgy of cannibalism is taking place. Bacon opens the door and looks into your eyes in that way that only a *Maitre-D'* who has been working really far too long in Soho can. He makes us see those consequences of things in us and we see them somehow [and here is part of his genius] as possessing the plain inscrutability of fact. We know Bacon because we all of us feel or have felt something of what he did. We just didn't know what it looked like until we saw one of his paintings.

Despite his constantly drawing upon the nihilism of Greek tragedy, he isn't speaking Greek to us – we also live in his world of violence, excreta, wrestling, sex and toilet bowls. His utterly weary bathos is familiar and as democratic as a television soap opera, if more rewarding and odd. The neck of the toilet is often mirrored in crouched forms and small arrows recur, functioning as compositional cues or

Three Studies for a Crucifixion



joins. They are strangely trite, somehow, and he got yet stranger in his later years, painting cantaloupe heads [see *Triptych* [1976]] and cricketers [*Figure in Movement* [1985]]. He even parodied David Hockney's famous *Splash* with his *Jet of Water* [1988] but by this point his strength was ebbing and the last room in the show, of very late work, is unrewarding. He died in Madrid in 1992.

Separately, the paintings are as we all know very strong and being very stylized or graphic they reproduce amazingly well, whilst never, miraculously, dying that death of ubiquity that almost makes one forget just how good Van Gogh was. They shock, they offend, they occasionally make one gasp [really] and though we have seen them before and oft they still seem very bold and rewarding. See rooms and rooms of them, though, and one begins to see them as being much more quietly personal than one might have thought at first. For they track his involvements with lovers, friends and other art world people. The more time that one spends with him the more the gore and Big Themes of the abattoir lounge fall away and more apparent grows his unspeakable sympathy for, if not the masses, then certainly his friends. He wasn't just an angry, sclerotic animal



Figure in Movement

painting animals rutting and/or killing themselves. Well, he was, but he also allowed himself the expression of care, remorse and grief regarding George Dyer, Peter Lacey and co. Paintings [mainly epic triptychs] of Dyer gets a whole room here and full of dread as they are, *Triptych, May-June 1973* [1973], a eulogy made after Dyer's drugs overdose / suicide, doesn't roar or scream. It is instead sparse, remote and shows a life ending, '[N]ot with a bang, but with a whimper'.

This Bacon retrospective actually lets us in on his relationships in a way that nothing else has. We knew that he was a good friend and generous to his lovers. With Dyer he was kind to a fault and bore part of the blame for the inevitable suicide, as he supplied all the drink and drugs that helped Dyer into his grave. We knew that Bacon was a great figure in painting. What we did not know was that when you have enough of his work gathered together, there is to be found in it a song of strangled love that in individual pieces is drowned out by the screaming. It is a foreign melody to those heard nowadays in the plastic money-hall of Britart and as it makes this show a must it also enriches our understanding of Bacon, perhaps even doing that one thing which one could not have imagined before: making his work an argument for pity; even love. ■

