

FRANCIS BACON: LATE PAINTINGS

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Francis Bacon (1909–1992) was the most galvanic figure of British art in the twentieth century: celebrated, scandalous, and profoundly influential. He found in the human form a vessel for beauty and tragedy, often celebrating the body's corporeal physicality. At the same time he stripped his subjects to their most basic features, laying bare their existential and psychological truths.

Born in Ireland, raised in rural England, Bacon lived in Berlin and Paris before he rose to prominence on the London art scene in the late 1930s. With the outbreak of World War II in 1939 he witnessed the city's fire-bombing and briefly served as a civil defense volunteer. As the war drew to a close, his *Three Studies for Figures at the Base of a Crucifixion*, 1944 (now in the collection of the Tate, London), established him at the forefront of a new generation of artists committed to expressive figuration.

Francis Bacon: Late Paintings surveys Bacon's achievements in the final decades of his career. Revisiting key themes and branching into new territory, he produced his sparest canvases during these years, reducing his compositions to their most essential expression. In a 1989 interview he revealed, "In a way, it becomes more difficult [to paint]. . . . What is called 'reality' becomes so much more acute. The few things that matter become so much more concentrated and can be summed up with so much less."

FRANCIS BACON, GEORGE DYER, AND TRAGEDY

In 1963 Francis Bacon met George Dyer, who became his lover and principle model. Bacon was first drawn to Dyer by his virility, naiveté, and working class background. By 1971, however, their relationship had soured. As Bacon was preparing for a major exhibition at the Grand Palais in Paris, he sought out new companions and subjects. Two days before the opening, Dyer deliberately overdosed on barbiturates in their Paris hotel room. His death, together with the retrospective nature of the Grand Palais exhibition, propelled Bacon to reassess his work and life. "I am determined to get started on the painting of my autobiography," he stated. "I hope by means of this series to crystallize time, in the same way as Proust did in his novels."

Dyer was to remain Bacon's most powerful and troubling muse over the following decade, ultimately personifying the Eumenides, the avenging furies who seek retribution in the *Oresteia*, Aeschylus' classic tragedy of murder and revenge. However, this was not the first time Bacon embraced this theme; he had incorporated figures representing the Eumenides in his *Three Studies for Figures at the Base of a Crucifixion* (1944) and aspects of these shrieking creatures can also be seen in his ongoing series of sepulchral pontiffs from the late 1940s and 1950s.

FRANCIS BACON: BOOKS AND PAINTING

Francis Bacon was a profound reader, conversant with Greek tragedy, Western philosophy and literature, and the writers of his time. He drew inspiration from the dramas of Aeschylus, Euripides, and William Shakespeare, as well as the writings of Vincent van Gogh, Joseph Conrad, and Friedrich Nietzsche among many others. His personal library numbered over 1200 volumes, and is preserved at the Hugh Lane Gallery in Dublin.

T.S. Eliot was among the authors Bacon venerated. In 1939, he attended several performances of Eliot's *The Family Reunion*, which recast Aeschylus' *Oresteia* as a contemporary satire, and he admired Eliot's *Sweeney Agonistes* (1926-27) as well. The classical subjects and sardonic tone of both verse dramas are echoed in Bacon's late paintings.

Bacon described his particular appreciation of Eliot's epic poem *The Waste Land* (1922) in several interviews. "I always feel I've been influenced by Eliot," he commented. "But I've hardly ever done things directly inspired by particular lines or poems. I admire them, and they excite me and they goad me to try and work much more. . . . It's the whole atmosphere of it that affects one."

FRANCIS BACON: FILM AND PHOTOGRAPHY

Unlike most British artists of his generation, Francis Bacon never received the type of traditional academic training which included rigorous courses in drawing and anatomy. Instead, he voraciously absorbed the lessons in painting offered by the works of Rembrandt van Rijn, Diego Velázquez, and Pablo Picasso among others. Cinema and photography were equally powerful sources of inspiration. A film still of a screaming woman from Sergei Eisenstein's *Battleship Potemkin* (1926) provided the impetus for a number of his paintings, as did Eadweard Muybridge's sequential images of wrestlers and nudes, published in *Animal Locomotion* (1887).

In the early and mid-1960s, Bacon commissioned John Deakin, a portrait photographer known for his uncompromising eye, to photograph his friends and models, including George Dyer and Henrietta Moraes. Rather than treating the resulting prints with care, Bacon allowed them to become creased, paint splattered, and torn. In one of his last interviews in 1991 he commented: "You see here in my studio, there are these photographs scattered about the floor, all damaged. I've used them to paint portraits of friends, and then kept them. It's easier for me to work from these records than from the people themselves, that way I can work alone and feel much freer. When I work, I don't want to see anyone, not even models. These photographs were my *aide-memoire*, they helped me to convey certain features, certain details."

Francis Bacon: Late Paintings

Selected works

Self-Portrait, 1971

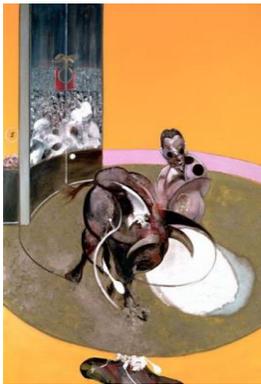
Centre Pompidou, Musée national d'art moderne, Paris, gift of Louise and Michel Leiris, 1984



Francis Bacon's superb talent for combining realist details with painterly brushwork is distilled in this self-portrait created after his return to London following a major retrospective at the Grand Palais in Paris. The exhibition, which should have been cause for celebration, was overshadowed by the death of his companion George Dyer, who killed himself two days before the opening. Pain and regret fueled much of Bacon's work over the subsequent decade, prompting a number of tributes to Dyer, as well as an extended campaign of self-portraits as Bacon claimed that he had "nobody else left to paint but myself."

Study for Bullfight No. 2, 1969

Musée des Beaux-Arts de Lyon, Lyon



Like Pablo Picasso, Francis Bacon drew inspiration from the ritualized violence of bullfights, an interest encouraged by the poet Michel Leiris. In 1966 Leiris gave Bacon a copy of his seminal essay on "The Bullfight as Mirror," in which he described the bullfight as a "tragic art [that holds] the very image of our emotion." Bacon responded with three paintings on the theme, basing his compositions on photographs as well as first-hand observation of bullfights in Spain and Southern France. He returned to the theme in 1991 in his final painting, on view in the last room of this exhibition.

Portrait of George Dyer in a Mirror, 1968

Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza, Madrid



Francis Bacon's photographic sources are particularly evident in this portrait of George Dyer. The figure is split, as if the original photograph had been folded or cut and reassembled, and the face is the mirror is even more tellingly disjointed. Bacon's biographer Daniel Farson recalled, "There was an innocence about George, even a sweetness, which was touching; but his hopelessness made him dangerous. . . . Wearing excellent, soberly cut suits paid for by Francis, he could have been a City businessman until you heard his strangled East End accent."

In Memory of George Dyer, 1971

Foundation Beyeler, Beyeler Collection, Riehen/Basel



In Memory of George Dyer unspools with a narrative directness unusual in Francis Bacon's work. The left canvas depicts Dyer's death throes, which Bacon modeled on photographs of wrestlers. On the right Bacon enshrined Dyer's youth and virile beauty with complementary mirror images. Bacon identified T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* as a source for the central canvas, which shows Dyer with key raised in one hand, about to enter the room where he ended his life. Eliot had written: "We think of the key, each in his prison / Thinking of the key, each confirms a prison."

Self-Portrait, 1973

Private collection



Francis Bacon pointedly refers to mortality in this telling self-portrait. The newspaper on the floor suggests the ephemerality of daily events; the prominent gold wristwatch marks time's passage; and the light switch on the wall indicates that light can give way to darkness, a dichotomy also implied by the black band that hovers over the left quadrant of the painting.

Triptych 1974–77, 1977

Lewis Art Collection



Triptych 1974-77 is the last of Francis Bacon's monumental triptychs painted in tribute to George Dyer. Initially created for a retrospective exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York in 1974, Bacon returned to this painting three years later, eliminating a figure that occupied the lower left of the central canvas. The two portrait heads were based on photographs of the conservative politicians Sir Austen Chamberlain and Raymond Poincaré. They hover over Dyer's kneeling figure like George Orwell's Big Brother, transforming the surrounding seascape into a mysterious and threatening environment.

Carcass of Meat and Bird of Prey, 1980

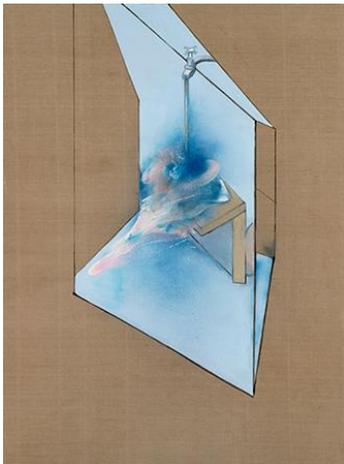
Musée de Beaux-Arts de Lyon, Lyon



In 1933 Francis Bacon created his first signature painting, a Crucifixion in which Christ appears to be a flayed figure, with flesh pared away to reveal a skeletal structure. This fascination with the physical fact of corporeal form persisted as his work matured. Here Bacon depicts a hanging slab of beef with a graceful economy, adding a bird of prey to the foreground to underscore the horrific subject. Bacon commented: “Well, of course, we are meat, we are potential carcasses. If I go into a butcher's shop I always think it’s surprising that I wasn't there instead of the animal.”

Water from a Running Tap, 1982

Private collection



On reading Friedrich Nietzsche’s *Birth of Tragedy* (1872), Francis Bacon became fascinated by the complementary aspects of Apollonian and Dionysian principles (order versus chaos), here indicated by the exact structure of the faucet and basin versus the uncontained flow of water. In a 1984 interview with David Sylvester, Bacon claimed that *Water from a Running Tap* was his most accomplished painting. He described it as “immaculate,” referring not so much to its clean execution as its resolution of these two opposing values.

Study from the Human Body, 1986

Marlborough International Fine Art



Francis Bacon's fascination with the body and its dissolution is vividly distilled in *Study from the Human Body*. Here Bacon powerfully renders the lower half of the torso and legs, while the upper half is only a shadowy segment. The composition mirrors Bacon's *Study for Bullfight No. 2* (1969), on view in the first gallery of this exhibition, with the bright yellow background consuming many of the narrative details seen in the earlier work. Instead of confronting a bull, this anonymous figure only faces a ghostly reflection of himself.

Street Scene (with Car in Distance), 1984

Private collection



Francis Bacon was fascinated by crimes and accidents, seeing in a single bloodstain the essence of tragic existence. *Street Scene (with Car in Distance)* was loosely based on a 1980 photograph documenting “London in Crisis,” published in the *Illustrated London News*. Unusual in its cinematic theatricality, the painting is also shocking in its tilted perspective and vivid red palette, reflecting the blood on the pavement. Commenting on his own encounters of such accident scenes, Bacon stated: “The first thing you think of is the strange beauty—the vision of it, before you think of trying to do anything.”

***Triptych*, 1991**

Museum of Modern Art, New York



This painting is Francis Bacon's last, completed triptych, and despite its strict formality, it is strongly autobiographical as well. He portrayed José Capelo, who was to become his heir, as well as himself, flanking a pair of lovers. In a telling detail, the younger Capelo seems to step forward from the shadows, while Bacon appears ready to step back into darkness. A year later Bacon flew to Madrid to visit Capelo, against the advice of his doctor and friends. He collapsed shortly after his arrival and died on April 28, 1992.

***Study of a Bull*, 1991**

Private collection



Study of a Bull is Francis Bacon's final painting. In failing health at age eighty-two, he presented a spectral bull standing at the entrance of an arena where it is doomed to meet its fate. Proclaiming his own awareness of mortality, Bacon cast off his skin, and the bull became his valediction and surrogate. As he had in several earlier paintings, Bacon gathered up dust from the floor of his studio and rubbed it into the canvas. "Dust seems to be eternal . . . the one thing that lasts forever," he stated. "We all return to dust."