



Bacon, Francis (1909-1992)

by Andres Mario Zervigon

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Francis Bacon is widely recognized as Britain's most important twentieth-century painter. Through beautifully composed works featuring screaming faces and beaten bodies, Bacon marked the violent trauma characterizing Europe's past century. On this basis his painting was celebrated in Britain's post-World War II society.

As well as reflecting a universal preoccupation with violence, however, Bacon's paintings draw from the artist's own fascination with gay male masochism and the manner with which such desire can be represented.

An openly gay man who refused to censor his art, Bacon produced one of the few bodies of work characterized by radical sexuality, yet praised by a broad and largely conservative art public.

Bacon was born on October 28, 1909 in Dublin, Ireland, the son of a British horse breeder and trainer. He passed a relatively happy youth disturbed only by the outbreak of Ireland's civil war, a conflict in which Irish rebels perceived all English, including Bacon's family, as the enemy. He later claimed that this experience initiated his fascination with violence.

At the age of sixteen in 1927, Bacon was evicted from his family home for sleeping with his father's horse grooms. Bag in hand, he resolved to travel in Europe. After nearly two years in Paris and Berlin, Bacon eventually settled in London, where he realized his plans to become a furniture and interior designer. He quickly found success in 1930 with his widely published, Bauhaus-inspired interiors. Bacon's memory of Picasso's work in Paris, however, inspired him to become a painter.

In a patron-apprentice arrangement quite common at the time, Bacon moved in with an older established painter named Roy de Maistre and became the elder's student and lover. Bacon concentrated his efforts on semi-abstracted crucifixions through the 1930s, before finally arriving, in 1944, at his *Three Figures at the Base of a Crucifixion*, the painting that initiated his brilliant career as an artist.

Soon thereafter he introduced the themes for which he is most noted: screaming Popes (e.g., *Study after Velázquez's Portrait of Pope Innocent X* [1953]), bleeding figures surrounded by sides of beef (*Painting* 1946 [1946]), and bludgeoned men in blue business suits (*Three Studies of the Human Head* [1953]).

In 1953 he exposed the sexual desire behind these works with his *Two Figures*, a painting featuring photographer Eadweard Muybridge's famous wrestlers taken from the mat to the bed. The result was an unmistakable representation of one man raping another.

Remarkably, post-war Britain acclaimed this work and others as profound reflections on the century's trauma. Bacon's work was touted as England's enlightened alternative to American Abstract Expressionism.

Bacon continued to paint openly from his gay desire. He made his lover George Dyer his favorite subject

throughout the 1960s and early 1970s, including most movingly *Tryptich May-June 1973* (1973). In these paintings and others featuring friends, Bacon characteristically smudged his subjects' faces nearly beyond recognition, using his fine skill with paint both to represent and to deform his subjects.

Although the violence of this work bears a clear sexual significance, particularly when used to represent sex between men or to render portraits of Dyer, Bacon deemphasized this linkage. Instead, he stressed the more abstract nature of his fascination with violence.

Bacon provocatively declared his need to paint from photographs rather than perform a deforming representation before sitting models. Similarly, he also exclaimed his ecstatic inspiration from slaughter houses and medical books on diseases without actually discussing the radical gay desire that inspired these works.

Critics also found it difficult to discuss the almost unspeakable same-sex violence of Bacon's painting, choosing instead to focus inordinate attention on his studio, where a fantastic mess seemed the more appropriate signifier for the artist's disturbing painted content.

Bacon was offered both a knighthood and the Order of Merit, but refused them. At the end of a long and productive life, Bacon died on April 28, 1992 in Madrid, in the arms of a Spanish banker with whom he had been having an affair.

Bacon's turbulent relationship with Dyer, which ended with the latter's suicide in 1971, is the subject of John Mayberry's film, *Love Is the Devil* (1998).

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