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Bacon's theater of the absurd

by [David Yezzi](#)

On Francis Bacon at the Tate Britain, London.

High-priced meat-under-glass has been a staple of British art for the better part of a century, long before Damien Hirst's fashionable sharks and calves appeared on the scene. Witness the current career retrospective of paintings by Francis Bacon (surely the ultimate *nom de charcuterie*), timed in accordance with the artist's centenary in 2009.^[1] Bacon's take on the human condition was simple: "We are meat," he liked to say. His paintings of sixty years, from *Crucifixion* (1933) to *Triptych* (1991) in the Tate show, rarely stray off message, recapitulating his dark matter in image after traumatic image. (From the mid-1960s on, Bacon displayed most of his sanguinary subjects behind glass, placed in gilded frames.) It is worth noting that the exhibition originates at Tate Britain, not at Tate Modern, as I initially assumed—a far better venue for staking Bacon's claim as the greatest British painter since Turner (and, in the eyes of many, as one Tate press release has it, Britain's greatest painter period!). But Bacon's ubiquity and collectability, abetted by his famously theatrical subjects and bravura technique, mainly confirm his star status, not his mastery.

Certainly, anyone possessed of a glancing acquaintance with modern art knows what a Bacon looks like: arrays of distended viscera, steaming sides of beef, screaming Popes in "space-frames," crucifixions, menacing dogs, swirled faces, contorted nudes decomposing on divans, Muybridge-esque figures recast in blurs of paint. Brutal, bloody stuff. It's also attention-grabbing stuff, both pictorially and commercially. Even those who couldn't give a fig for art will have noticed Bacon's recent record-breaking outing in the marketplace: *Triptych* (1976) sold in May at Sotheby's for over \$86 million, the highest price ever paid at auction for a contemporary art work. Last month, *Study for Self-Portrait* (1964), estimated at \$40 million, sat on the block at Christie's without a bid, but one assumes this was due more to our economy's recent resemblance to a Bacon painting than to any decline in Bacon's blue-chip stock.

Only Bacon's friend Lucian Freud, among the London School painters, comes close to rivaling his celebrity and mystique. Bacon worried that his biography would over-weight viewers' interpretations of his work, and not without reason; his was a colorful life tinged with tragedy. One needn't scratch the surface very deeply before biographical details emerge, particularly in the portraits and late paintings. Bacon's reputed drinking, gambling, and masochism (he fled one severe beating clothed only in fishnet stockings) fueled his image as a *peintre maudit*. His greatest subject was ultimately Francis Bacon.

A darling of the bohemian intelligentsia, Bacon spent his bad-boy early years in London commuting "between the gutter and the Ritz" (as he put it): dodging rents, committing petty crimes, and living off of patrons and friends. He took pride in the fact that he never received formal training as a

painter. Born in Ireland to English parents, he fled a violent homelife in which his horse-trainer father oversaw regular whippings of his son by the grooms. In 1927, Bacon traveled to Germany with Cecil Harcourt-Smith, a family friend (with whom he wound up in bed). He found Berlin in the Twenties much as Auden described it at that time—"a bugger's daydream." It was seeing Picasso's work in Paris, where he traveled after Berlin, that set him on the road to becoming a painter.

Bacon's earliest painting in the Tate exhibition is his spindly, Picasso-inflected *Crucifixion* (1933). Crucifixions became a signature motif for the artist. Among his most well-known images are *Three Studies for Figures at the Base of a Crucifixion* (1944), his first major triptych, and *Painting* (1946), a splayed cow carcass and bloody-mouthed figure arranged as an abattoir-altarpiece, which Alfred Barr acquired for the Museum of Modern Art. Bacon followed these with a series of Popes, beginning with *Head VI* (1949) and culminating in the streaked and gilded bombast of *Study after Velázquez's Portrait of Pope Innocent X* (1953). The Popes were one of a number of motifs Bacon would come back to later in his career with diminishing returns. (Bacon was extremely self-critical and destroyed a great deal of work, but by the time he came to repent the Popes presumably it was too late to get his hands on them.)

Bacon often equivocated when asked questions about his influences and the significance of his work, but certain things were repeated often enough to be believed: 1) that he was an Nietzschean atheist, 2) that Picasso had meant a great deal to him, 3) that he intended no religious meaning with his crosses and Popes, and 4) that his greatest guiding principle as a painter was the Surrealist notion of chance. According to Michael Peppiatt in his recently updated biography, [2] what Bacon most wanted was to "excite" himself, to stir emotion ruthlessly, to "remove veils" from experience, to provide direct access to the valves of feeling. His means: bloody mouths, bones, flesh, screaming heads. Peppiatt once claimed, in the September 1984 issue of *Connoisseur*, that "even his detractors would agree that there is nothing of the easy chair about the work of Francis Bacon. Far from ease, it offers extreme disquiet." I can't say that I'm convinced. A kind of bathos dogs Bacon's work, arising from the fact that his disquiet is, so to speak, always in an "easy chair," swathed in gorgeous magenta and crimson and served up with a Sargent-like facility of the brush.

Bacon's seductive paint handling is the first thing that viewers notice after the carnage. His methods of applying paint were as idiosyncratic as they were versatile. Hugh Davies and Sally Yard describe his everything-but-the-kitchen-sink approach, in which his materials ranged from

Brillo pads to cashmere sweaters, as brushes are joined by rags, cotton wool, sponges, scrub brushes, garbage-can lids, paint-tube caps, the artist's hands, and whatever else he can find in the studio for the application and shaping of painterly passages... . Thick impasto coexists with thinned washes of pigment and raw canvas, sand and dust are occasionally used to give texture to the paint. A few works of the 1980s are veiled in the haze produced by applying paint with an aerosol spray.

Reviewing Bacon's show at the Malborough-Gerson gallery in 1968, Hilton Kramer found him "one of the most dazzling pictorial technicians on the current scene." Why, then, he asks, does the work "strike me as being clever rather than profound—brilliant rather than authentic?" Kramer ends with a recognition of "exactly how safe an artist Mr. Bacon really is."

Safe and also stagey. Bacon's characteristic space is theatrical, suggesting operating theaters, thrust stages, wrestling rings, circus rings, bull rings, throne rooms, closets, altars—all playing areas in Bacon's theater of the absurd. Beckett is a name that tends to come up when considering Bacon's vision, but it's closer to Genet (whose plays he recommended to friends). Think of the bishop in *Le Balcon*, who is in fact a man in costume acting out a ritualistic sexual fantasy in a brothel that the madame calls a "house of illusions." In the critic Martin Esslin's description, absurdist theater portrays "a world that functions mysteriously outside our conscious control... . It no longer has

religious or historical purpose; it has ceased to make sense.” This is Bacon’s world, in which the artist rejects both narrative and didactic purpose and attempts to confront, in Esslin’s phrase, “the spectator with the harsh facts of a cruel world and his own isolation.”

This sense of chance and of confrontation is a key element of Bacon’s most touted images, such as *Painting* (1946), with its absurdist illogic and raw imagery. Yet the “safety” that Kramer perceived in the late Sixties already exists here in the picture’s pink and mauve symmetrical background. Bacon’s paint handling is so delicious, it’s like a mountain of crème Chantilly—far from horrified by it, you want to eat it with a spoon. Bacon is continually betrayed by his beginnings as an interior designer, no where more so in *Three Studies for Figures at the Base of a Crucifixion*. As Peppiatt notes of the background color of *Studies*, “It is worth recalling that cadmium orange, which had become *the* fashionable color in avant-garde interior design in the 1930s, remained Bacon’s favorite color.” Bacon’s fashion colors and mod furniture come off as frivolously elegant.

Frivolity is, of course, the last thing most people associate with Bacon’s work. As Bacon’s Soho crony and (unauthorized) biographer Daniel Farson writes: “To appreciate Bacon’s work, it helps to see him as a deeply moral artist.” This strikes me as exactly what Bacon is not, so much so that I wonder if Farson could really believe it himself. Elsewhere he says that Bacon repeatedly told him that he believed in “*nothing*.” John Richardson, the biographer of Picasso, repeats the error: “By holding a mirror up to our degenerate times Bacon proves himself to be one of the most moral artists of the day. Far from titillating us, he castigates us.” But Bacon does no such thing. Firstly, he is not concerned with our “times” in any historical sense, except in so far as he personally embodies them. For Bacon, images from news photographs and films—the screaming nurse on the Odessa steps in *Potemkin* or a Nazi armband, for example—have little to say about “our degenerate times” and volumes to say about Bacon’s roiling inner life. When a television commentator suggested that Bacon’s work was a condemnation of man’s inhumanity to man, Bacon retorted: “That’s the last thing I think of.”

It is not Bacon’s stark subject matter that disqualifies him as a “moral artist”; it is his aestheticization of the horror depicted. As the critic Yvor Winters explains, the moral artist does not shy from exploring the extremes of human experience, but he portrays evil as evil and makes us know it as evil. This is not the case with Bacon, either in his professed world view or in his practice:

In all the motor accidents I’ve seen, people strewn across the road, the first thing you think of is the strange beauty—the vision of it, before you think of trying to do anything. . . .

There’s no one more unnatural than myself, and, after all, I’ve worked on myself to be as unnatural as I can. I can’t really talk about painting because I only work for myself and just by chance it happens that for some reason I’ve been lucky enough to be able to live by something that obsesses me, but I haven’t got any morals to preach. . . . I just work as closely to my nerves as I can.

One leaves the Bacon show at the Tate feeling beaten up by images of the dying George Dyer (Bacon’s tragic lover) vomiting into a sink, the gaping wounds, the twisted flesh. Bacon sought to transmit emotion as immediately as possible, which in a sense he did, but it’s not emotion he transmits so much as sensation. Shock lends Bacon’s work its edge, but it diminishes it as well. The paintings register like a trauma on the spinal column, without ever reaching the more complex centers of the brain. Later in Bacon’s career, when shock gave way to chic, the game was lost.

Second Version of Triptych 1944, his reworking of *Three Studies for Figures at the Base of a Crucifixion*, replaces the brushy energy of the earlier work with a spray-painted softness that makes Bacon’s phallic Furies look like tchotchkas in a Madison Avenue boutique. His *Innocent X* of 1965

replaces the pontiff's rictus with the taffy-pull features of the later portraits. Bacon became convinced that he could have done the Popes better than he had, but this is no proof. Nor is the reworking of *Painting* from the 1960s (not included in the Tate show), which dresses the macabre scene up with a sunny yellow background and what look like paper garlands—a travesty of Gauguin's *Yellow Christ* (1889). Bacon detested illustration, but in the end he failed to escape it, and the portraits moved him even further in this direction.

The Peppiatt book contains a revealing quotation: “When I was young, I needed extreme subject matter for my paintings... . Then as I grew older I began to find my subject matter in my own life. During the 1960s the Furies, the dictators and screaming Popes, the anonymous figures trapped in darkened rooms gave way to portraits of living identified beings.” And here is the disconnect: Bacon reviled abstraction because for him it was all design, empty aesthetics. Bacon relied on his figures to ground his work in reality, to lend his paintings the force and horror of the real world. But the triptychs and portraits of the Sixties and later marinate in the very aesthetic stew he had hoped to avoid. Bacon's contortions of angst become so pretty, so tasteful. The large squares of pink and orange (orange is the new pink, or is it the other way around?), the natty black suits, the distinctive chaises and tables make the lot seem very “safe” indeed.

The selection of works for the exhibition is judicious, suggesting more variety in the work than is really there. After the monotony of the Bacon treatment—floating central figures against disconnected flat colors—sets in, the decline is steady: the final paintings are his least interesting. As David Sylvester prophesied in 1955, “many of the things that make [Bacon] exciting today may render him laughable for future generations.” The colored arrows pointing to newspapers and wounds and bodies on toilets; the globs of thrown white paint; the increased staginess—all seem like precious, empty gestures. The Tate retrospective carefully elucidates Bacon's photographic sources; it includes BBC footage of Bacon in conversation with David Sylvester that highlights his considerable charm, but the work itself seems no different that it did at the MOMA retrospective in 1990—except that it has grown a little more tired with the passage of time.

Bacon's paintings, ostensibly transmitting high-pitched emotion, are cut off from emotion. He never flinched from working on a grand scale, from putting his feet up against the masters—Grünewald, Titian, Vélazquez—but in the end his almost mechanical serialism and cool shocks bring him closer to Warhol, whose films Bacon admired even as he turned his nose up at the paintings. Rather than being the greatest British painter since Turner, Bacon may better be seen as the great precursor to the soullessness of Damien Hirst, whose shark is currently on view at the Met. When “Francis Bacon” arrives in New York next summer, viewers will have a chance to consider the two artists under one roof.

Notes

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1. “Francis Bacon” opened at Tate Britain, London, on September 11, 2008 and remains on view through January 4, 2009. The exhibition will travel to the Museo Nacional del Prado, Madrid (February 3–April 19, 2009) and the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (May 18–August 19, 2009). A catalogue edited by Matthew Gale and Chris Stephens, with essays by Martin Harrison, David Alan Mellor, Simon Ofield, Gary Tinterow, and Victoria Walsh, has been printed by Tate Publishing (288 pages, £24.99 paper). [Go back to the text.](#)
2. *Francis Bacon: Anatomy of an Enigma*, by Michael Peppiatt; Constable, 456 pages, £12.99 paper. [Go back to the text.](#)

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