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Survey of Modern and Contemporary Painting

May 12, 2022

### Francis Bacon: An Early Evolution

When Francis Bacon first put brush to canvas, he unleashed an interior world which has elicited fascination, horror, love, and beauty for generations. His studies of the human figure, especially those of his early works, are some of the most intriguing and brutal works of art of the 20th century. The paintings he created in the 1920s, 30s, and 40s are beyond imagining, and full of a structured chaos which explodes onto the canvas.

Francis Bacon was born on October 28, 1909, in Dublin, Ireland. Both of his parents were English, and he spent his childhood shuttling between Ireland and England. (He has been classified as an Irish painter by many critics, but he himself denied this, stating that “For a start, you can’t really say I’m Irish.”) (Archimbaud, 116) Bacon had a difficult relationship with his parents. In his own words, his “parents were totally against [him] becoming a painter.” (Archimbaud, 22) His father abused him physically and verbally, pain which would later shine through in his art. However, his mother began to pay him an allowance of three pounds a week when he was sixteen. This pittance of a salary allowed him to travel away from home and live in cities such as London and Berlin. He knew from an early age that he wished to be an artist, but without the support of his parents, he had to make his own way. Hence, he worked jobs such as cooking and decoration (despite hating decoration), and painted every once in a while in his free time. It was only after living in Paris and seeing a Picasso exhibition that he vowed to himself

that he was “going to paint.” (Archimbaud, 23)

As a painter, his key inspiration was Pablo Picasso. He declared Picasso a painter he “admires greatly,” (Archimbaud, 32) and has been “very much influenced by.” (Archimbaud, 32). However, he wasn’t completely enamored with the great Spanish artist. He didn’t like “nine-tenths” (Archimbaud, 33) of what Picasso did, as stated later in life. But he did believe that at every period of his career, Picasso produced at least one great work, which in Bacon’s eyes made him a genius.

Bacon was fascinated by photographs. He was particularly engrossed by photographer Eadweard Muybridge’s photographs of the human body in motion. Bacon had five copies of his book, *The Human Figure in Motion*, “including two copies of the 1901 edition and one from 1931.” (Dawson, 59) His studio was covered in ripped and partially destroyed photographs—throughout his artistic career, he was inspired by the unique forms created through this deconstruction of the human figure. One can observe in photos of his studio, documented by photographer Perry Ogden in tandem with gallery The Hugh Lane and Bacon’s inheritor and executor of his estate John Edwards and Brian Clarke, that he also used newspapers and magazine photographs for inspiration. He also had pictures of his own paintings affixed to the walls, ripped and violated; much as his other photographic references were.

Michelangelo’s creations also served a particular inspirational purpose for Bacon. He had seventeen books featuring reproductions of drawings by Michelangelo. (Dawson, 62) Bacon believed that Michelangelo was possibly the greatest draftsman of all time, and that he had an immense ability to “render the most authentic ‘voluptuous male nudes in the plastic arts.’” (Dawson, 62)

Bacon was fond of destroying paintings which he considered imperfect. There are very

few destroyed paintings which are still viewable in some way. One such example is through another artist's works. Roy de Maistre, an Australian artist, painted *Francis Bacon's Studio* in 1932. In this painting, there are five canvases depicted, two of which one can see the painted side of. Both compositions are lost. Bacon destroyed every painting he made from 1936 to 1944; therefore, every work depicted in de Maistre's painting is lost. Later in life, he indicated regretting a few of his decisions to destroy particular works. Unfortunately for him and the world, those decisions were irreversible. During the documentation of Bacon's studio, one hundred slashed paintings were discovered, although Bacon had no doubt destroyed more than a hundred of his own works in his lifetime. From the beginning to the end, Bacon was extremely self-critical.

His work in 1929, *Watercolour*, is clearly heavily inspired by Picasso. Both seem to employ a Cubist visual style, portraying a flat picture plane composed of various shape elements. Drawing the eye in the painting is what appears to be an abstracted human figure diving, splitting the canvas in two. Here, Bacon could have been influenced by Picasso's numerous paintings of female nudes. One sees hints of the bright red and orange planes that he would continue to use throughout his life, as well as his most constant subject: the human figure. One deviation from his later works, however, is in the media he employed. Most of his later paintings were purely oil paintings; however, *Watercolour* was created with watercolor, gouache, pencil, and black ink on paper.

Over the decade of the 20s, his work evolved into a style truer to Bacon as an artist, and less heavily influenced by Picasso. Bacon's 1933 work, *Crucifixion*, served as the genesis of many Bacon motifs which reappeared throughout his entire career. Particularly, his fascination with crucifixion and the morbid beauty of sides of beef. Slashed, pale lines suggest sun-bleached

bones, while the figure itself is pinned up against an unrelenting black background like so many pounds of dead weight. In calling it *Crucifixion*, Bacon invites us to feel sympathy for this amorphous figure; and to reflect upon the brutality of crucifixion itself. The ancient torture does indeed reduce a human into a simple slab of meat, pinned up for display with no sympathy from their abusers. Does the dead meat of *Crucifixion* portray Christ in his most desperate, pained moments, reduced to being viewed by humanity as a side of beef? Bacon always had a complicated relationship with religion—as a gay man, and one with stigmatized sexual tendencies as well, being raised “rabid[ly] Protestant...with no beliefs, of course” (Smith, 2017) inevitably shone through in his artwork throughout his entire career.

Bacon’s 1944 triptych *Three Studies for Figures at the base of a Crucifixion* introduced yet another fundamental Bacon motif—the triptych. Although crucifixion is commonly seen as a violent, horrifying act, Bacon considered his paintings to be not very violent at all. In fact, he stated that he was “always very surprised when people speak of violence in my work.” (Archimbaud, 151) This comment of his allows us to view his triptych, and indeed his entire repertoire, in a different light. Rather than being violent, they are simply beautifully complex and blunt at the same time. His thickness of paint in *Three Studies* and frenzied application combined with his abstracted forms and areas of flat color perfectly combine the delicate and baser sides of life. The tender blue used to depict the distorted figure contrasts sharply with the hot orange (“Orange, which is my favourite color,”) (Archimbaud, 170), punching the eye directly into the work and forcing us to stare. Beyond its impressive visual elements, *Three Studies* also serves an important historical role: Bacon considered it his first “real debut” as a painter. (Archimbaud, 166)

Bacon’s 1946 work *Painting* is undoubtedly one of his great masterpieces. Painted a few

years prior to his famed papal series, it immediately captures the eye with a cross-style composition, once again evoking images of Christianity. This holy association, however, is subverted by the subjects forming the cross—sides of beef from which a shadowy man emerges. Particularly eye-catching is the figure oozing from underneath the giant umbrella; his teeth bared, his expression caught between a pained grimace and the breath before one speaks. The figure's teeth are individually painted, stark against the umbrella. After being arrested by the man, the viewer's eye moves across the painting, noting the guts, the yellow flower in the man's lapel, and mysterious, smaller abstract shapes which cut through the painting and give the impression that the entire scene is located in a sort of factory or slaughterhouse. His use of colors, particularly the virulent red-pink of the background, slams the painting into one's visual field and doesn't relent. Bacon's many details and vertical brushstrokes are a veritable feast for the eyes, succulent layers of paint creating depth and texture which can cause the viewer to get lost in a miniscule section of the painting for hours. *Painting* is undoubtedly a serious evolution of Bacon's work, combining the symbolism of beef, Christianity, and looming men all in one shocking, beautiful composition.

*Study for Man with Microphones* (1946-48) was, unfortunately, destroyed by Bacon. However, tantalizing images of the initial compositions still remain. This painting fully encapsulates the chaotic working processes of Bacon's early career. Initially, he painted it so that the mouth of a shadowed man was visible speaking into a collection of microphones under an umbrella. Roughly a year later, he completely reworked it into *Gorilla With Microphones*, which depicted a large, hunched figure from the back standing over a barely-visible collection of microphones. Due to x-ray examinations of what remained of the canvas after Bacon cut out a large portion of the middle and top, one can see that he reworked the painting in at least twenty

different layers of paint. Some layers were left to dry fully before he painted over them, and others were still wet when he went back into the work. The color variation is likewise complex and intense, with multiple bright pigments in lower layers being covered up by a greater, darker pigment in the final layers. Bacon labored over this work for years, only to slash it up at the end of its journey.

Ultimately, Francis Bacon's art is at once arresting and repulsive; beautiful and destructive. It's the home on fire you can't look away from. It's the car crash you pass by on the highway, seen only for a fleeting second. It's the honest brutality of this world, lovingly portrayed by a complicated soul. His paintings are infused with an essence that could only come from Bacon, and Bacon alone.

## Works Cited

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