

Edinburgh

Francis Bacon: Portraits and Heads

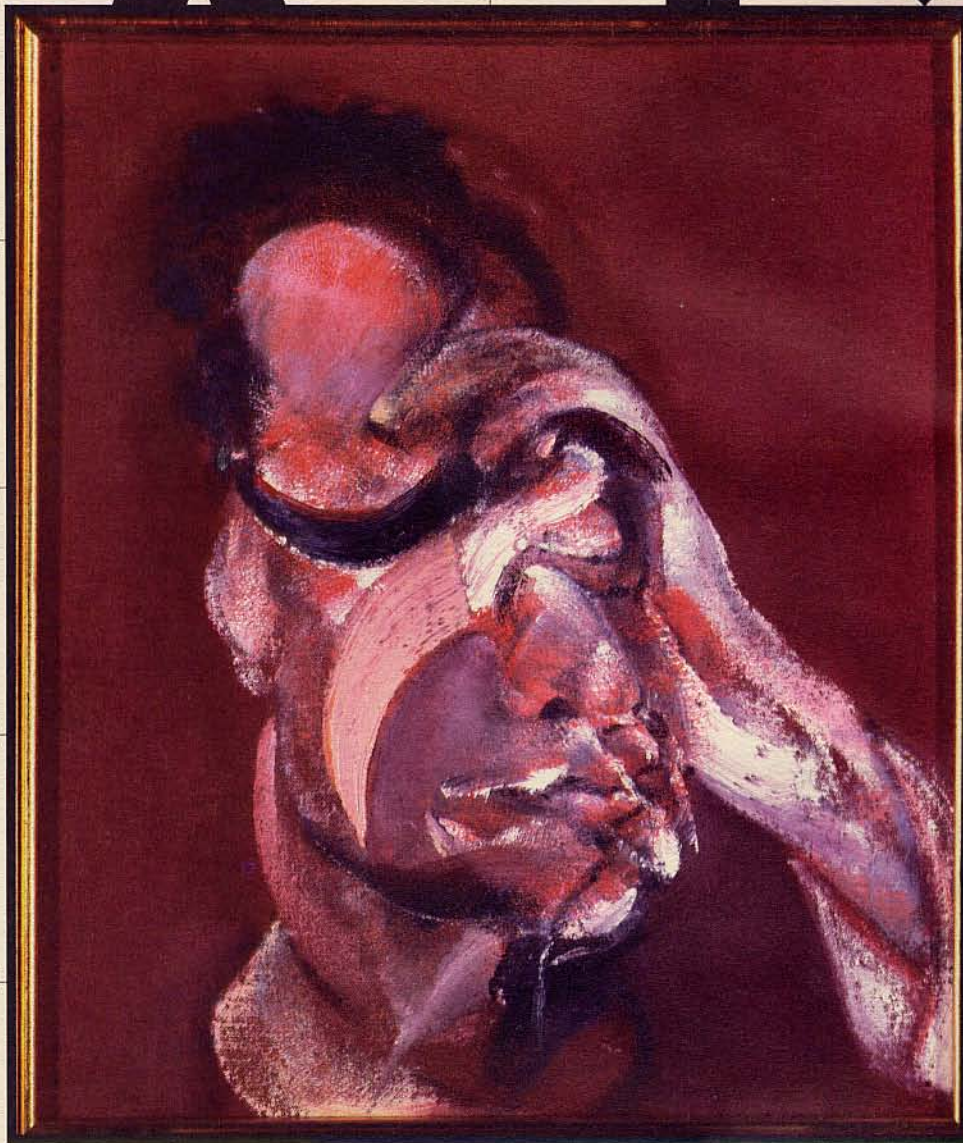
SCOTTISH NATIONAL GALLERY OF MODERN ART 4 JUN - 4 SEP

As a young art student in the late 80s my perception of Francis Bacon was that he was nothing more than the funny, frequently bitchy, pantomime totem for a powerful section of the London art world. His Napoleonic, peacock-like strut and drunken antics on TV with Melvyn Bragg represented everything I wanted to move away from. The romantic ideas that swirled in tortured spirals around Bacon's aura, not least the notion that he had been somehow pickled in authenticity, to me bordered on the fascistic in their omnipotence and power. In 1988 I couldn't wait for the end of Bacon, the 'London school' and their thinly veiled anti-American parochialism to lose its power. As a consequence, for a very short period, the internationalist, chi-chi polished sharpness of Goldsmiths was the perfect antidote. Later of course, Hirst and Emin started hanging out in Francis' old watering hole the Colony Club: the cloning and the circle were once again complete.

During his lifetime Bacon was as much a victim as a beneficiary of his myth (something Hirst and Emin perhaps share). However, since his death, and the severing of his paintings from the 'enigma', there's been increased critical indifference to his work. *Portraits and Heads* is then timely, offering a valuable opportunity to reassess the work, now the myth's power has diminished.

The gallery has assembled an excellent, comprehensive selection of key works. An early, stylistically distinct pastel (from 1931) reveals a sensitive, nervous hand, but this is soon replaced by what were to become the patented, morphing brushstrokes of the Bacon's signature style. The impact of these early works hasn't diminished; there is still something unsettling about paintings such 'Head I' or the Velazquez-sourced painting of Pope Innocent X ('Head VI', 1949). In these paintings, Bacon's often under-valued ability to produce iconic, memorable images is striking (perversely a talent more usually associated with American artists of the period). In all of these works from the 1950s the tension that pulsates throughout Bacon's best work is pronounced; the head and torso appear trapped between states of materialising and being literally dissolved. At this point in his career the anguished screams and open mouths have yet to become the mannerist markers of a painter going through the motions.

The key role friends and lovers played in providing Bacon with source material is attested to in the thematic grouping of works around individuals such as his friends Henrietta Moraes, Isabel Rawsthorne, Muriel Belcher, Lucian Freud and his lovers Peter Lacy and George Dyer. The picture of 'Miss Muriel Belcher', 1959, one-time owner of the Colony Club, is exemplary as an example of Bacon's ability to produce images of psychologically disturbing moments in the life of the individual. In such works the formal techniques of blurring and superimposing offer a depiction of humanity where the cosy securities of 'civilisation' are peeled back; this is plastic surgery in reverse, an acid bath orchestrated to illuminate a



ABOVE Three Studies for Portrait of Lucian Freud (left-hand panel), Francis Bacon, oil on canvas, 1965

profound sense of alienation and emptiness. Unfortunately all too quickly the scalpel was blunted. The 1966 'Portrait of Isabel Rawsthorne' is perhaps one of the last great pictures he painted. After this, the mannerist ticks and tricks dominate rather than transforming the photographic source material, the later works look like pale illustrations of amalgamated Photoshop images.

In the same way that 40-year-old punks are stuck in a morbidly regressive scene from their youth, so perhaps Bacon advocates are unable to acknowledge the severe limitations of his work. It is easy to perhaps explain this; the early works in this show, such as 'Head V', still possess enough of the hysterical ferocity of their age; the screaming eyes mirror a post-war world, where the atom bomb dominated every imagination. It must also have been in the context of the notoriously parochial, pedestrian doodling of British art, an unforgettable blast of early rock'n'roll rebellion. Bacon was, after all, the first bad boy of British art, a real bit of rough, whose wild-eyed shake up was deeply seductive to leaderless domestic bohemians. Historically then, there's no doubt,

that, like Hirst and Emin, he is significant. The question of whether he is in any way relevant today is a moot point. His work signals the limitations of basing a career solely on the performance of unmediated angst and rage. Anger may well be an invigorating energy, but an art based solely on emotion soon becomes repetitive, indulgent and fatally lacking in self-reflexivity.

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