

**HISTORY OF ART
THESIS**

FRANCIS BACON

THE UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN

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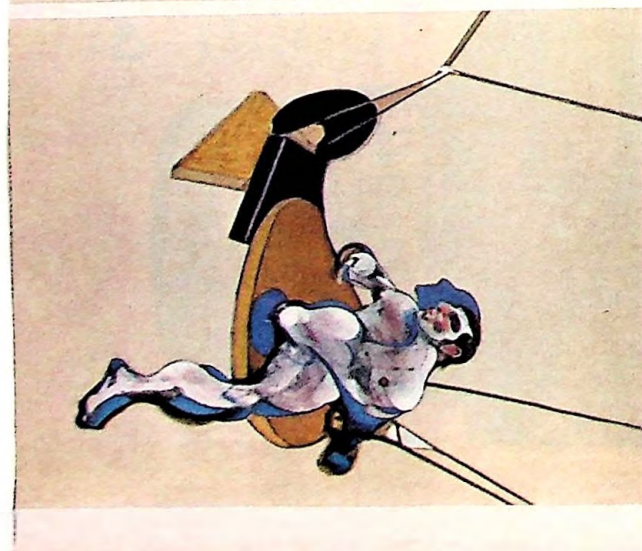
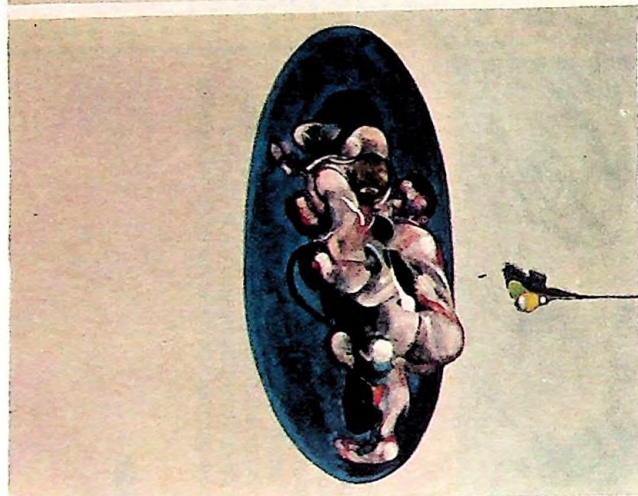
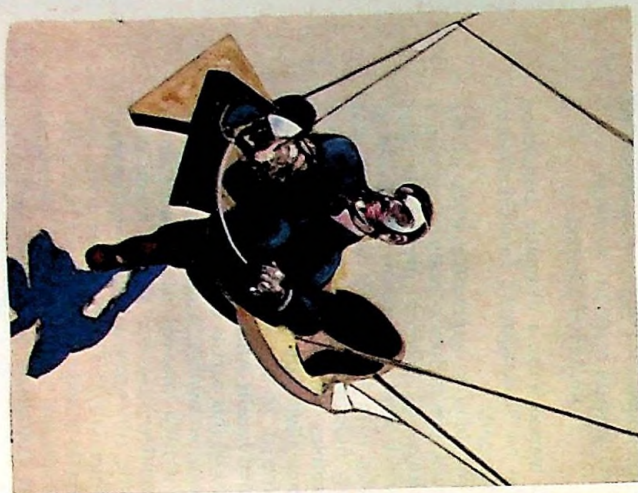


FRANCIS Bacon.

C O N T E N T S

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Isolated on a spaceless, beige-gray canvas, two naked figures grapple beneath an unshaded light bulb; on either side, two men, one nude and the other in a business suit with a cigar clamped in his hand, swing on bizarre, hammocklike objects. Bacon's paintings cannot be decoded like narratives. They have to be confronted like bad dreams.



FRANCIS BACON 1970

I think my first commitment in writing this thesis, would be to give my reasons for my choice of subject - FRANCIS BACON AND HIS WORK.

Indeed, I find this question very difficult to answer, I think maybe, like Bacon, who spoke - "of an ordered image that came about by chance" - that perhaps the subject for this thesis "came about by chance (I am not so sure about the ordered image end ~~of~~ it").

I was always interested in Francis Bacon's approach to painting the human figure. At a time when abstract expressionism was making it's mark on the art world, Bacon was in his own way making his mark using the human form.

I myself did concentrate on the human figure as a means of expression (obviously this brought about my interest in Bacon). While I do not find all Bacon's paintings visually tasteful - infact I find some of this distasteful, I think I can appreciate his problems in painting those images of hysterical ferocity trying to shock the spectator into an awareness of cruelty and violence. Maybe in the process of writing this thesis I will discover the philosophy that lies behind such work.

I have divided the thesis into two parts. In the first half I hope to write about what motivated Bacon to paint. Having shown no interest in painting in his former years, he received no formal art training, one of the few things Bacon regrets is not starting to paint earlier, but perhaps for Bacon, it was an advantage, as when he did start to paint

He had reached intellectual maturity and this paved the way for his selectivity in choosing his subject matter.

In the second part, I will take a look at some painters who may have in some way influenced Bacon in his work.



BACON'S STUDIO.



BACON "SLEEPING FIGURE"
1974

INTRODUCTION:

On looking back to the 1940's when Bacon had started painting it is important to take a look at what was happening elsewhere.

Art in Europe had virtually come to a standstill during the war as the younger artists had stopped painting completely, their seniors carried on, but the events of the time made their activities seem somewhat irrelevant. This resulted in New York taking over from Paris as the "capital" of the art world. It could be said that Europe's loss, was America's gain, as many European artists had emigrated to America, so this now gave America the opportunity to take part in this "art revolution". As a result of this, what came out of America ?

Certainly, it did give artists the freedom and the encouragement that was so vital for a healthy working environment, and I think this new found freedom was evident in the work that was produced and brought about the new era of "abstract expressionism".

People like Pollock could now paint with supreme confidence and conviction knowing that "the unconscious provides a justification for the results". There was Motherwell, who was doing much the same as Pollock, but was much more aware of the importance of abstract forms in his compositions. The return to brushwork was attracting attention everywhere. Perhaps it could have been the political situation that had driven painters back to this "pure" form of painting.

Then back in France there was Jean Dubuffet, who like Francis Bacon turned for inspiration to the human form, subjecting his figures to unparalleled distortion. Dubuffet showed total unconcern as to whether his figures could be called abstract or not, he invented a new pictorial language cellular in structure which he used for 30 objects as well as in his paintings.

Around the same time Francis Bacon, the son of a horse trainer, started painting and his attempts "to shock the spectator into an awareness of cruelty and violence were being met with total consternation. It was from this beginning that Francis Bacon went on to become one of Europe's most recognised painters.



FRANCIS BACON
Through nightmare to discovery.



Camera Press

Bacon in his studio: Struggling with chance.

One of the reasons his paintings have been so controversial is his preoccupation with accident or chance as a major factor in the creation of an original work of art. He claims that most of his original effects are achieved quite by accident and he has a gam-compels him to take chances to achieve these original effects.

PART I

WHAT WAS THE MOTIVATION BEHIND THE WORK OF BACON ?

Certainly he was open to many different influences, as Bacon said himself, he is influenced by practically everything from pre-historic artifacts onward, by this he means he has looked at everything, examined what he thought important and accepted or rejected what was there.

When asked about what would influence one most, he replied that to answer that question one would have to be aware of how the unconscious works.

The motivation behind the work of Bacon could have been a purely unconscious motivation, but on examining his work, certain points came forward which I think are worth looking into, - for instance, his occupation with human images must automatically mean that he is making some sort of comment on society. He completely denies this accusation and claims that the majority of his paintings result from chance, this may be true in regard to how he makes his paintings 'happen' e.g. how he applies paint etc., but his subject matter is much too strong to be dismissed as chance.

With regard to the Crucifixion theme, Bacon made it clear that his reason for doing these paintings had nothing to do with religion or christianity - but as a traditional, mythological and tragic subject. He was making a comment on society as he sees it. He compares the figures in it to animals being slaughtered who are totally aware of their destination. Surely this is a comment on mankind today.

His occupation with destruction of his own people and even the destruction of himself and his environment. The theme of these paintings is of human degradation, the distortion of the figures make them seem more grotesque and inhuman. John Russell in his biography of Francis Bacon, compares them to leaders in Europe around that time.

Possibly Bacon did not set out to shock people but he could not avoid this without camouflaging the truth. At the beginning of his career these paintings could have been an embarrassment to him as only a certain section of the "art world" could appreciate what he was trying to depict.

In April 1945 with the end of the war only one month away, Bacon's Crucifixion was put on view at the gallery Lefevre, among other works were Henry Moore's, Mathew Smith and Graham Sutherland.

The emphasis was on the return to normal life - nobody wanted to be confronted with the evil they had experienced during the war years. With this in view people went to see the exhibition. Needless to say the works of Bacon were treated with disgust.

The figures in his paintings that were regarded as great monsters, brought back to the people the total degradation they had been through. Obviously people were deeply wounded by these paintings and could not show any credit to the artist.

In contrast to this when Bacon exhibited in the Tate gallery, seventeen years later the strangeness of his work

had disappeared, the shock element was gone, what people saw this time was an ordered look.

For Bacon art was an obsession with life, which meant he was not willing to compromise in order to satisfy those who could not understand his work or what he was trying to say. ("I only paint for myself"- Bacon).

Going back to the Crucifixion Triptych there was a figure who wore a Swastika, when questioned about this, Bacon denied that it had any reference to the Nazis - but was there simply to break the continuity of the arm and add colour to it. I doubt this answer to be absolutely true and I think that it could be a good example of what Bacon meant when he said - "one would have to be aware of how the unconscious works".

Bacon figures always give a feeling of great panic, this I think might be the result of his dwelling on the subject of 'mortality'. He has been accused of concerning himself too much with death, but he feels that death is such an inevitable end for all of us - so how can it be avoided ? - and even more so - why should he avoid it ?.

As he says himself, many classical figures such as Shakespear and the Greek scholars continually wrote about death in their tragedies.

Bacon has painted several paintings of various Popes. He attributes these paintings to his tremendous admiration of Velasquez's Pope Innocent. Again, he dismisses

the idea that it had anything to do with religion, saying his only obsession was from the photograph of Velasquez's Pope Innocent. (For much of his work Bacon is dependant on the use of photographs, many of the images in his portraits are taken from photographs of X-Rays). He admits that when he was in Rome he did not even bother to see the original, having only seen reproductions of it in photographs. As far as he is concerned it is one of the best portraits he has seen, and has opened up for him a new world in his imagination. He went on to paint more recent Popes e.g. Pope Pius XII, again this was the result of photographs he had seen of Pope Pius being carried through St. Peter's Square.

Between his Pope paintings and the figures of Christ there is the similarity of someone who is elevated above all men.

Apart from the Crucifixion Christ and the Pope paintings religious themes do not enter into Bacon's work. This element of tragedy seems to be the thread running through them. Any images that Bacon decides to paint seem to take on an air of tragedy about them. In Velasquez's work he admires the way he can stick to the illustrative form and at the same time bring out such a depth of feeling into his painting.

Bacon believes that the problems for the painter today are much greater than they ever were before. At this stage I would like to quote from David Sylvester's "Interviews with Francis Bacon".

Bacon - I think man realises that he is an accident and he is a futile being - he has to play a game without reason -



VELASQUEZ POPE INNOCENT X.
1650

"One of the problems is to paint like Velázquez, but with the texture of hippopotamus skin," he once remarked.



POPE INNOCENT X'S STUDY FROM
VELASQUEZ POPE INNOCENT X.
1650

I think that when Velasquez was painting, even when Rembrandt was painting they were still, whatever their attitude to life, slightly conditioned by certain types of religious possibilities which man now you could say has had completely cancelled out for him. Now of course, man can only attempt to make something very positive by trying to beguile himself for a time, by the way he behaves, by prolonging possibly his life, by buying a kind of immortality through the doctors - all art has now become a game by which man distracts himself and I think that this is the way things have changed, and what is fascinating now is that it's going to become more difficult for the artist because he must really deepen the game to be any good at all -

I think from this paragraph we can well anticipate the problems Bacon presents to himself in his work, and his consciousness of the problems of the painter today, but at the same time he is conscious of the "right" of the painter today. This brings us back again to what Bacon meant when he said the painter must have an "obsession" with life. This obsession would be the reason for the painter wanting to record something in the form of a painting. An artist surely cannot concentrate on "shape" and colour - for without this "obsession", there is no excitement or tension to his work.

Ideally, he believes that shape and colour, is all that painting is about, but without some sort of idea this can only be a "superficial" attempt at a kind of creative image.

Unfortunately, a lot of painters today are prepared to settle for this superficiality in their work, because through flattery from various critics and self-indulgence on their own behalf, they have built up a following that will ensure their popularity.

Bacon believes this to be true of many "contemporary" artists in America today. They have no tradition to back them up and their painting is devoid of all purpose. At the same time he is confident, that very soon, something will come out of America.

He has never moved in the direction of "abstract art", finding fault with "the undisciplined emotion" which he sees as a weakness in a painting. Bacon claims that if a painting is successful, then the painting should enter the spectator, in other words the emotions of the onlooker should not dominate the painting. Bacon has proved this himself with his paintings, which have their own strength and energy - not to be dominated by the spectator, he believes that people's response to abstract art has only come about through fashion and people having opinions formed for them.

One abstract painter Bacon sees in a different light is "Michaux". He describes Michaux as having a great awareness of whatever situation he is in. Michaux's paintings are about ways of making the human image without resorting to illustrations. I think this is something these two painters have in common, even though they tackle the problem in very different ways.

He believes a great work of art must be non-rational and unplanned. "The moment you know what to do," he says, "you're making just another form of illustration". But he doesn't want to rely entirely upon chance. "I want a very ordered image," he says, "but I want it to come about by chance".

His images are being variously described as horrific and sadistic impressions on canvas. But, however you might interpret, you cannot fail to be awakened by the profundity of his vision. The viewer is captivated by the freakish imagery quite often he uses himself as the subject in his paintings.



PAINTING 1946.

PART II

Before turning to painting, Bacon started his career as an interior decorator, where he achieved some modest success. However, he soon tired of this, and finally turned to painting. It is true to say he was "self-taught" but he did have someone to turn to with "technical problems".

This was Roy de Maistre the Australian painter who I suspect had a very profound influence on Bacon. De Maistre during World War II made valuable experiments with colour in decorating the rooms of shell shocked patients. His own paintings which were Post-Impressionist sold well. His work oscillates between stylization and near abstraction. It is worth noting too that De Maistre's most powerful works, were his religious themes - Crucifixion, 1942, Stations of the Cross 1940 - 1956. (Could it be that De Maistre was the influence behind Bacon's early religious themes.

Bacon moved from abstraction to figurative paintings. These developed into distorted, half human, half animal creatures like we see in "The Studies for Figures at the Base of a Crucifixion". He rarely paints directly from nature, but relies on photographs, either press photographs recording violent scenes, or public figures, reproductions of paintings, or stills from films.

Bacon has continually made reference to the photographs of Edward Muybridge.

Bacon - "They were an attempt to make a recording of human motion, - a dictionary in a sense - and the thing of

doing series may possibly have come from looking at those books of Muybridge, with the stages of movement shown in separate photographs. Speaking of photographs, Bacon says they are often "triggers of ideas" rather than just points of reference, as ~~they~~ say in his Pope paintings.

At this point I would like to take a look at the work of Bacon in relation to other painters, whom he seems to share an affinity with.

DEGAS

Bacon had been greatly influenced by Degas, and even though these painters are 75 years apart, I think they share a common interest, in the treatment of the human figure. I would like to quote from Bacon speaking about Degas's "After the Bath".

"You will find at the very top of the spine, that the spine almost comes out of the skin altogether - and gives such grip and twist that you are conscious of the vulnerability of the rest of the body, than if he had drawn the spine naturally up to the neck. He breaks it so this thing seems to protrude from the flesh".

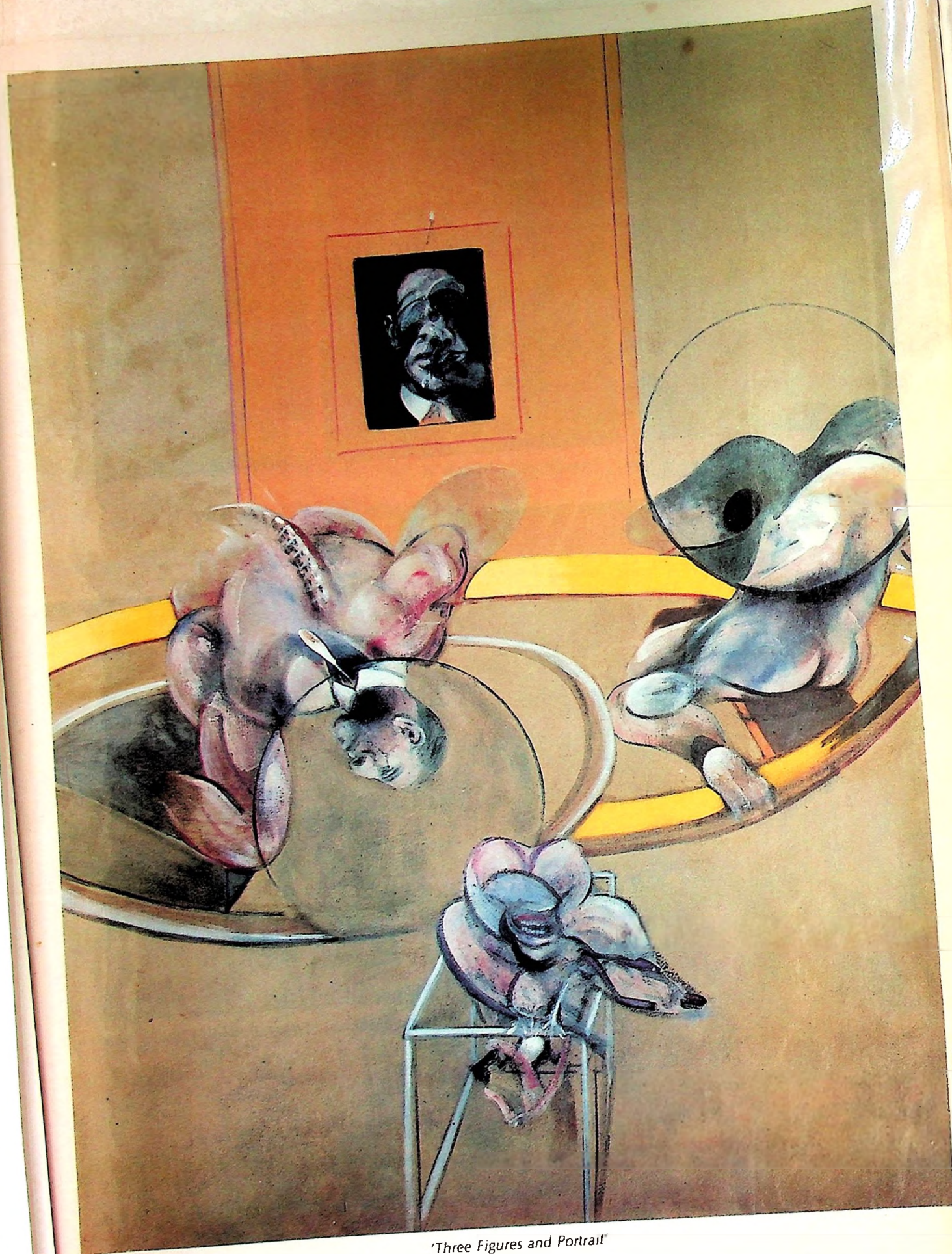
Undoubtedly, Degas's "After the Bath" has influenced Bacon's "Three Figures and a Portrait" (1975), where the figure on the left side is bending over, with his spinal column protruding from his body, doing exactly what Bacon had said of the Degas painting. Also in Degas's "The Morning Bath" which I think depicts a similar image to some of Bacon's figure paintings. In this painting of Degas's, where the



Degas "THE MORNING BATH"



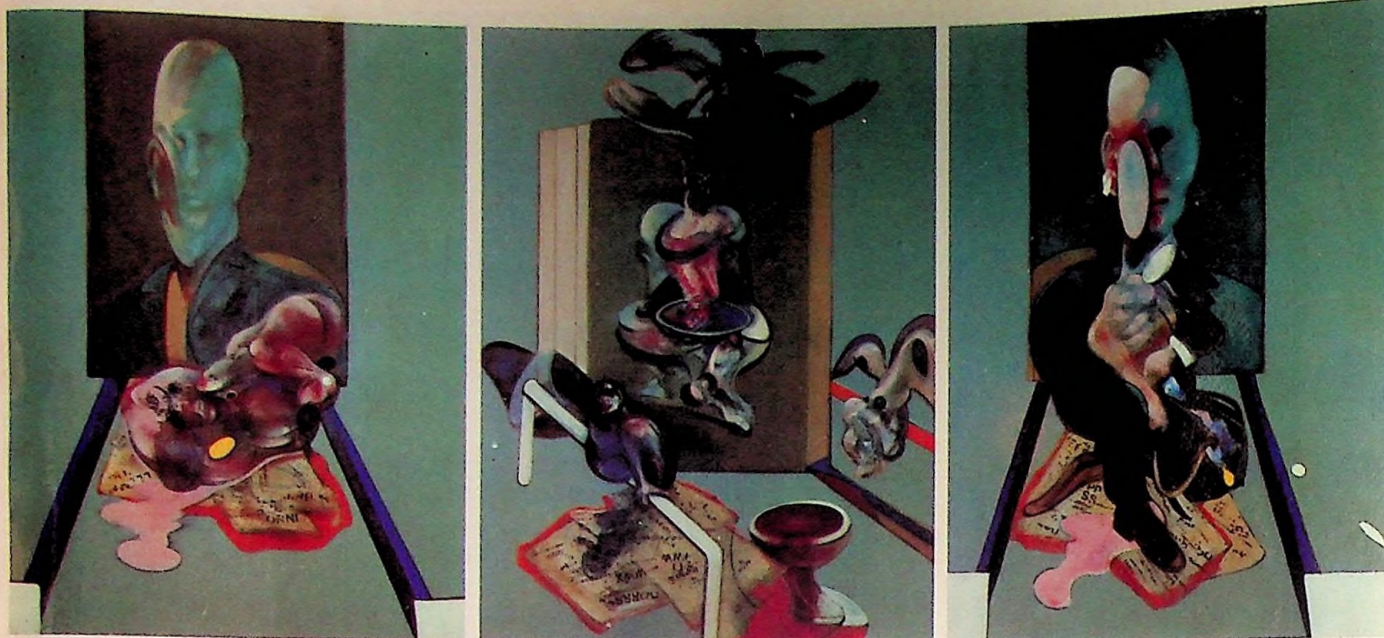
Degas "AFTER THE BATH" 1885



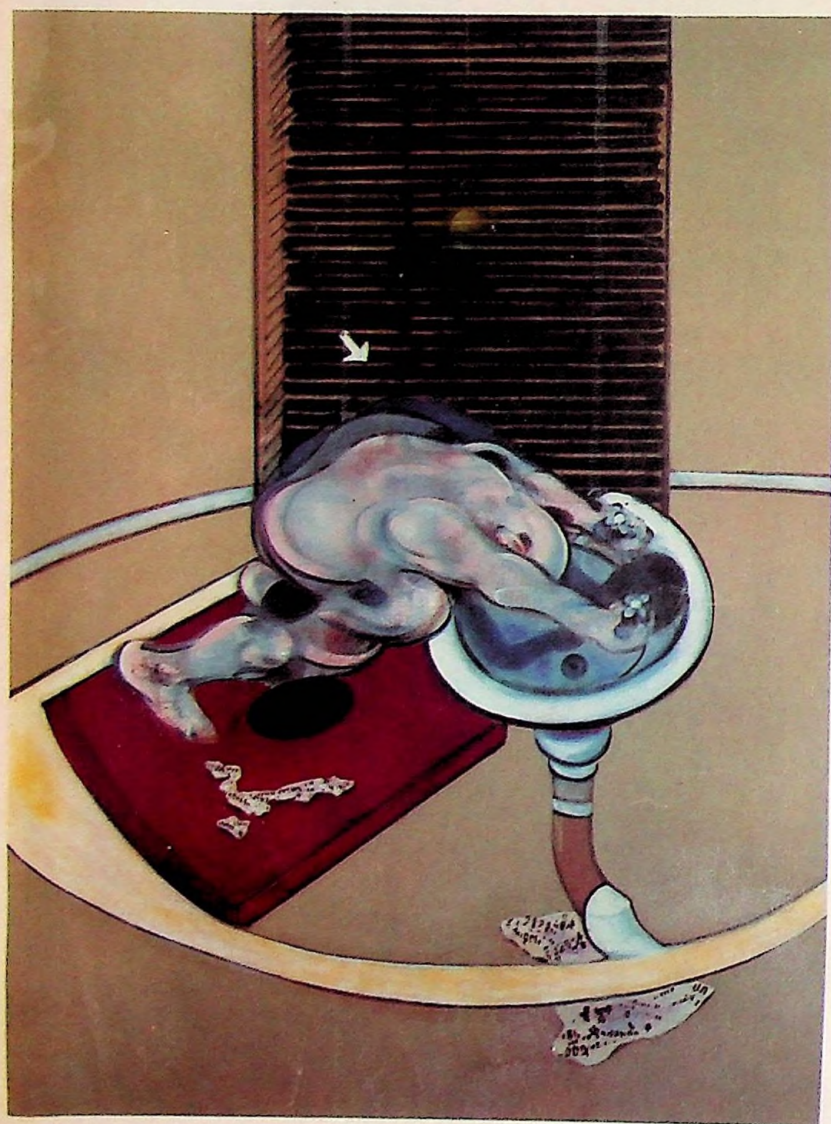
Photographed by Jean Dubout

'Three Figures and Portrait'
(1975)

same time. They both turned to painting having rejected other careers, also both were influenced by their travelling experiences.



'Triptych'
(1976)



One part of diptych 'Two Studies for Portrait'
(1976)

'Figure Standing at a Washbasin'
(1976)

and de Brocquay both started painting around the same time. They both turned to painting having rejected other careers, also both were influenced by their travelling experiences.

dislocation of the figure becomes almost painful, takes on a "tortured pose" and one wonders what has become of the "calm" Degas. Also, in some of Degas's later paintings he has been accused of giving off an atmosphere of dense shut in rooms which again would be likened to Bacon's painting where he seems to be portraying a figure in a claustrophobic set up.

The ways in which these two painters went about their work was probably quite different. While Bacon continually refers to the importance of "chance" in his work, (maybe this was because he was a keen gambler), on the other hand, Degas says - "do it again and again, ten times, a hundred times. Nothing in art must seem to be an accident - not even movement".

Perhaps these very different viewpoints are a sign of the times. Would Bacon have held the same views if he had painted 75 years ago ?

Like Bacon, Degas relied on the use of the camera and infact did go on himself to be a photographer.

LOUIS LE BROQUAY

Bacon has this to say about Louis le Brocquay:

"Louis le Brocquay belongs to a category of artists who have always existed obsessed by figuration, who are aware of the vast and potent possibilities of inventing ways by which fact and appearance can be reconciled".

Bacon and Le Brocquay both started painting around the same time. They both turned to painting having rejected other careers, also both were influenced by their travelling experiences.

Le Brocquay was fortunate enough to have been born into a family where a love of art and literature was a matter for everyday concern. Although he began painting at a much earlier age than Bacon, it was after pursuing a number of years in the family business.

Just like Bacon, he did not have any formal art training, but got his inspiration from paintings of the past.

Le Brocquay had a much more sympathetic approach to his subjects than Bacon and showed far greater sensitivity to his subjects. His first original paintings were based on the culture of Irish life. They were wild and dynamic.

Le Brocquay says - "for me the travelling people represented dramatically perhaps the human condition - ".

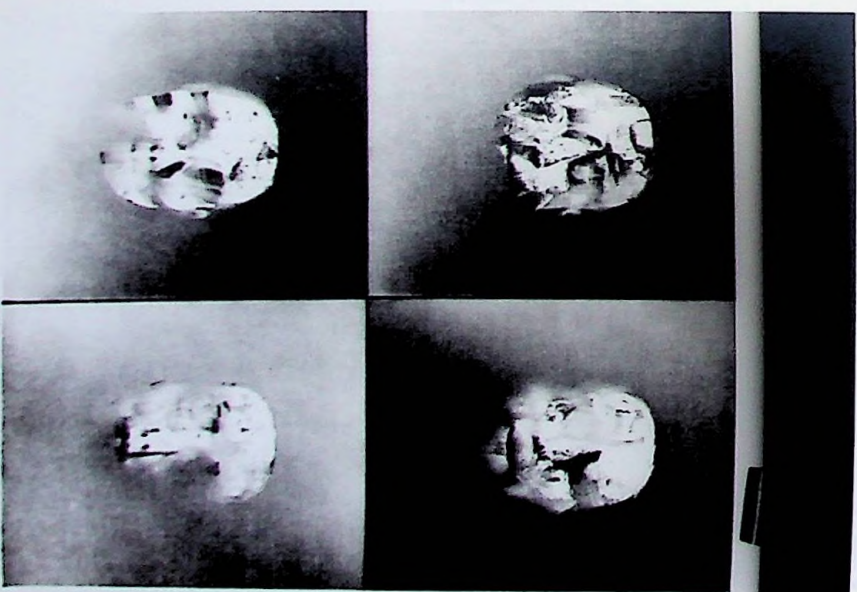
Bacon was also concerned about the human condition, but in a much deeper and morbid sense. Where Bacon concerns himself with painting figures in isolation, Le Brocquay put figures in groups.

Bacon when asked why he painted so few paintings with several figures in them, explained that from the time a number of figures become involved you immediately come to the story-telling aspect of the relationships between figures and this sets up a kind of narrative. He goes on to say that someday he would like to paint a picture with a number of figures.

Like Bacon, Le Brocquay was sensitive to empty spaces within the painting. While his forms may suggest pain and violence as Bacon's do, there is a much more optimistic note in them, perhaps this is a personal view that each had of life.

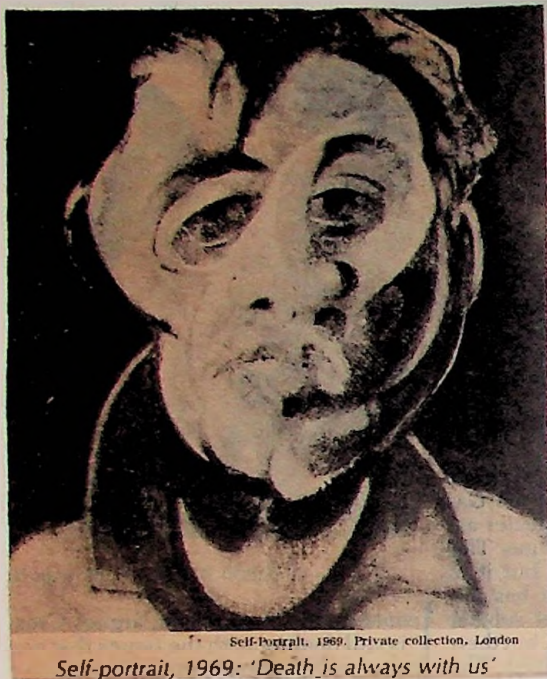


Louis le Brocq
"STUDY OF A GIRL'S HEAD."
1960



Louis le Brocq
Quatre Têtes Sumodèles et
Peints.
1964

BACON'S SELF-PORTRAITS



Self-Portrait, 1969. Private collection, London
 Self-portrait, 1969: 'Death is always with us'



Three Studies for Self-Portrait, 1973. Private collection, Su. Itz.
 1973: 'I'm a lazy person'



Two Studies for Self-Portrait, 1972. Private collection, Madrid
 1972: 'My work isn't liked'



Two Studies for Self-Portrait, 1972. Private collection, Madrid
 1972: 'I accept my problems'

BACON
HEAD II 1949



LE BROCCAU
STUDY 1957.



It is interesting to note that both painters at one stage were involved in theatre design. Both of them have been described as "lone" painters. I think this is a flattering remark to be made of any painter, as it suggests that they stand out on their own and their work is highly individual.

ALBERTO GIACOMETTI

In the 1960's Bacon did have an encounter with Giacometti and was said to have shown profound admiration for this Swiss painter's work. Giacometti like Bacon, presents solitary figures sitting stretched out like his statues, only more precisely drawn with lines.

The only reason why I mention this painter is because I think there is a strong resemblance between his work and Bacon's.

VINCENT VAN GOUGH

Bacon had been fascinated by Van Gough's paintings. He has made many variations on his painting "The Artist on the Road to Tarason" he has also done many portraits that are extensions of Van Gough self-portraits. In the portraits, using whirling brush strokes he twists the face as it might be seen in an excessively distorted mirror, giving the effect of madness.



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GIACOMETTI "HEAD OF DIEGO"
1955



12 VAN GOGH *The Painter on his
Way to Work* 1888



DS And they do get very transformed. But can you general-
ize about how far you foresee these transformations of
existing images before you begin a canvas and how far they
happen in the course of painting?

FB You know in my case all painting and the other I get
the sense of it.

STUDY FOR PORTRAIT
OF VAN GOGH 1957

HOW ironic—and sad—that I had to go to Spain to see an exhibition of the paintings of Francis Bacon.

Like so many great Irish artists, he seems only to receive his true acclaim abroad. None of his work has been on show in Dublin since 1965.

To me his tormented distortions of the human form, set in coldly symmetrical rooms, come nearer than any other art to the fundamental human conflict between the disordered freedom of the individual spirit and the necessary order of society.

On view with the Bacon paintings at the Thea Gallery in Madrid are a complementary set of Picassos.

"The two monsters of modern painting," the gallery's owner, Madame Mignoni, told me. "But at least both have been recognised in their own lifetime."

Comprehensive reviews of the exhibition have appeared in the leading papers and magazines, but all refer to The Curragh-born painter as "English"!



★ A Bacon nude on exhibition in Madrid.

SUMMING UP

It could be said that Bacon is dependant on the "media" of today, yet he is not trying to make any sort of a social comment. His dependance on visual material has even gone as far as to work from reproductions of other paintings. Maybe some of us would frown upon such a practice.

When asked by David Sylvester whether there was any great difference between working from a photograph of a painting or a photograph of reality, Bacon replied:

"With a painting it is an easier thing to do, because the problem already has been solved. The problem that you are setting up of course is another problem. I do not think that any of these things that I have done from other paintings have actually worked".

One notable failure Bacon did have was to attempt to use the still from the Battleship Potemkin of the "human scream" however, this was not successful for him. I think maybe the reason might be that in this photograph all the qualities of suffering and pain that Bacon dwells on are already present, so that leaves nothing more for him to say about it.

Indeed he gives credit to Poussin for his painting of the human scream in the Massacre of the Innocents. So perhaps someday Bacon will succeed and paint his own version of the human scream. It is interesting to note that Bacon never painted a smile.

Of course, Bacon's chief concern, has been putting expression into his figures, more than their facial expression.



STILL FROM THE
BROTHERSHIP OF TEMPLE



DETAIL FROM THE
MASCOT OF THE
IMMORTALS 1630-31

To Bacon one of the prime ingredients of life seem to be "man versus man", this probably goes back to the atmosphere of violence during the war years, when Bacon started to paint, I think this is a very strong theme running through Bacon's paintings.

Today I think we can see for ourselves the utmost importance that this artist will have in the history of art and surely could be compared to the great Picasso for the success he has achieved in his life time. The importance of his coming exhibition in Paris must be the proof of this. Sadly he has not exhibited in Dublin since 1965.



Francis Bacon in Paris at the Galerie Claude Brenard where he has an exhibition of his more recent work.