

ARTFORUM

Francis Bacon

SKARSTEDT

Five of the ten portrait paintings in this Francis Bacon exhibition, "Faces & Figures," were studies, indicating that they may have been works in progress. The artist's hyperactive, agitated brushstrokes seem to imply that a person's true essence can never be definitively nailed down. Thus, Bacon (1909–1992) offers us *Three Studies for Portrait of George Dyer (on light ground)*, 1964, bizarre embryonic renderings of his burglar lover (who committed suicide in 1971), and *Three Studies for a Portrait*, 1976, a visceral excavation of some unknown soul with disagreeably wormlike lips. The show also included *Study of Henrietta Moraes Laughing*, 1969, a depiction of the famously hedonistic bon vivant, who seems to be morbidly grimacing rather



Francis Bacon, *Figure in Movement*, 1972, oil and dry-transfer lettering on canvas, 78 x 58".

than happily giggling—a rather unflattering picture of a close friend. Also featured were full-body illustrations, such as *Seated Woman*, 1961, in which a woe-folly twisted being rests uncomfortably on an ungainly gray thing that appears to be carved from stone, and *Figure in Movement*, 1972, a portrayal of a man who casts a pitch-black shadow that contrasts irreconcilably with the bright-yellow space of its surroundings. Bacon's imagery is indebted to film, as he acknowledged, and possesses a certain melodramatic flair. All of these works are masterpieces of their kind; but what was Bacon trying to master?

The artist's canvases contain only excruciating pain and unrelieved suffering, as the relentless blackness that surrounds many of his figures makes clear. His harshly rendered, grotesquely distorted subjects, often fragmented to the extent of being dehumanized, are monstrous creatures, tormented in hells of their own making. Their bodies and faces are frequently patchworks of conflicting colors and shapes, further marred by streaks of darkness recalling scars and pus-like eruptions of white, the latter of which convey a sickness unto death. The figures are both Manneristically distorted and expressionistically destructive—actors in some bloody theater of the absurd. None of Bacon's models seem capable of cracking a smile—to do so would go against the grain of their steadfast ugliness. As art historian Stephen Eric Bronner once stated, these faces are "bursting the objective barriers that constrain the subjectivity of the subject," achieving an objective he claimed was the goal of all expressionistic painting. So I wonder: Does this aspect of Bacon's work make it existentially authentic? Or, rather, is denying his vulnerable human subjects the "*promesse du bonheur*," per Stendhal, a terrible injustice?

"Everywhere and at all times the portrait was a school of objectivity," wrote art historian Max J. Friedländer—but in modernity it has become a school of subjectivity. All of Bacon's people convey a sense of what psychoanalyst Erich Fromm felicitously called "vital impotence," which he said is indicative of "psychical 'crippledness.'" Bacon's people are as emotionally incapacitated as Bacon himself was: The man was notorious for his uncontrollable destructiveness, someone whose particular brand of love almost always led to ruin. Psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott noted that the painter's depictions of his subjects' faces were "distorted significantly," arguing that their hideousness indicated the artist's "painful striving towards being seen," or the need to be empathetically mirrored, a desire that can persist throughout life. Bacon was a shy child with an effeminate manner, a trait that angered his manic-depressive father, a breeder of horses who had his son whipped by stable hands in his employ. Is Bacon projecting this experience of paternal violence onto his subjects, mercilessly brutalizing them as his father had brutalized him? "The past is never dead," as William Faulkner said. Perhaps more to the emotional point of the individuals Bacon portrays is that they are all wracked by pain, as he was his entire life—the most broken of souls, lost and isolated.

—Donald Kuspit