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Francis Bacon / Marlene Dumas

Richard Francis

Positioning in Francis Bacon

"It could be argued that Bacon's essential aim is not so much to produce a picture that will be an object worth looking at, as to use the canvas as a theatre of operations for the assertion of certain values."

(Michel Leiris, *Francis Bacon Full Face and in Profile*, 1987)

Theatre of operations...

In an early article on the English Neo-Romantic movement, Kenneth Clark (the future Lord Clark), wrote of *Painting*, 1946, now in The Museum of Modern Art, New York, and compared Bacon with his English contemporary Edward Burra: "They are both unusually skilful technicians, and this, combined with the sincerity of their disgust, gives value to what would otherwise be mere *grand guignol*". Bacon hated this remark, hated Clark's presumption in saying it from his privileged, smug, establishment base in Renaissance art history, (that *cunt* never liked me) and refused to allow it to be republished. Like the things we respond most violently to, it contains an element of critical veracity which Bacon was unwilling to acknowledge. Bacon's work was extraordinary by the standards of the English artworld of the 1940s but had clear connections to it, despite Bacon's denials. It was, I would argue, less a "theatre of operations" - the military metaphor is inappropriate - and more a theatrical performance. The sense of arena and event is different from that of the Abstract Expressionists. Bacon hated Pollock too, referring to him often as a decorative artist, on occasions, describing the "drip paintings" of 1947-50, as a "lacemaker". What they had in common was the need to perform the work, to make an event out of the picture and to relay the world physically, through their senses, to the canvas. ("My ideal would really be just to pick up a handful of paint and throw it at the canvas and hope the portrait was there", Bacon told Sylvester.) They both used mythology and the replaying of it through their psyches, Pollock finding his American roots in native cultures and Jungian analysis, Bacon in what has recently been called the great canon of Western Literature and Freud's writings. Pollock's art was based in Nature and the spirituality of natural experience, Bacon's in the human figure, human discourse, and what he constructed as the almost religious experience of human recollection. Bacon's insistence on the figure was posited on a snobbish hierarchy of subject matter. The figure was preminent in explaining yourself to others as it had been in the greatest art (no wonder Clark's remark was so stinging). Not only did he dislike being out of the city (although he did spend some time in an Essex fishing village) he seemed to be most alive in clubs and restaurants as if both he and his work depended on his social milieu. This sociability, at once so charming and generous, and the subject of many recent books about the man, seems now to cast doubt on the works themselves. If they were so grounded in his fast set, how, we might ask, can his work be serious and elicit complex emotions?

The assertion of certain values...

One answer is in the books that he used. He proposed a small number of classic texts, that he claimed to constantly read and re-read, as the sentinels by which he managed his recollections and thus, his production. Aeschylus, Shakespeare, Proust and T. S. Eliot were his most often quoted authors, and throughout the work these authors and their themes are offered as commentary by him (or those who entitled his works after them). Triptychs are labelled after *Sweeney Agonistes* or have clear and literal references to the Furies from Aeschylus' *Oresteia* (often in a specific translation); his interviews with David Sylvester are interleaved with quotations from Shakespeare and Eliot. The intention was no doubt sincere but, it has now, forme, the same hollow ring as many of Eliot's borrowings in, for example, *The Waste Land*. They both are highly conscious of their sources and the effects that they will create and both seem to be operating consciously in the highly self-conscious and prim between-the-wars art and literary world.

Gray Gowrie gives a more generous reading of the period in his essay for Bacon's Moscow exhibition of 1991, referring to "gaiety" and "grace under pressure" (recalling no doubt Eliot quoting Dr. Johnson on Andrew Marvell!) and "the same feeling of a civilization undergoing nervous breakdown". The recent revisions of Eliot's reputation questioning his conversion to catholicism, his uncomfortable outsider status, his lack of humanity created without adopting a full existentialist agenda and his ambiguous sexual demeanour all contribute to a reading in which archness dominates in his poetry. It is as if Eliot is unable to display himself because to do so would be to reveal the weaknesses. Unlike Ezra Pound (warts and all) who grows, even now, as Eliot's dedication in the *Wasteland* puts it as *il miglior fabbro*. Eliot is diminished by his "erudition", which looks like posturing, because it is offered as a cloak for real feelings; Pound uses his real erudition to explain the uncomfortable and rough edges of his relations.

Bacon's adoption of Eliot as a primary source might cause us to ask similar questions of him. Bacon is less inhibited than Eliot, but the operators are equally socially conditioned. The quotations from Eliot and others create the atmosphere of existentialist despair (Bacon's exhilarated despair from the interviews with Sylvester)

"You'd be bored.

Birth and copulation, and death.

That's all the facts when you come to brass tacks:

Birth, and copulation, and death.

I've been born, and once is enough.

You don't remember, but I remember,

Once is enough"

(T. S. Eliot, *Sweeney Agonistes*, in *Collected Poems 1909-35*, 1936)

and the forms painted construct the shocking and sexually charged world he wanted. I question whether the quality of shock in the works is so different from Eliot's quotations.

They are used to ground the work and to pretend a seriousness of ideas based in great literature, but this, in Eliot's case, at least, is what masks a personal and manipulative cynicism. Perhaps the standards by which both worlds were created, their "certain values" are, and remain, those of the socially alienated bourgeois intellectual of the 1930s masquerading as Baudelaire's *flâneur*. The innate conservatism of Eliot's work, its espousal of elitist values as a form of entertaining provocation, and its embedding in the literary milieu of London, which was resolutely anti-modern, remains throughout. Bacon may protest his universality (or even his French connections - Proust,

Degas, Van Gogh and Picasso) but he is fixed in the same aspic as others he professed to admire or despise, De Maistre, Sutherland and Frances Hodgkins, as Eliot was with D. H. Lawrence and Virginia Woolf.

The brutality of fact

Bacon said that he enjoyed reading Freud as literature, particularly the case histories. He talked to Hugh Davies about his use of Freud when he was discussing the Furies and comparing them to his own demons. "We are always hounding ourselves. We've been made aware of this side of ourselves by Freud, whether or not his ideas worked therapeutically." As far as I am aware, Bacon did not seek treatment, preferring to live as close to an uninhibited life without any restrictions as he could. His works reveal his willingness to confront his "furies" although he prefers to dramatize them as tragic elements in a staged setting rather than depict them more realistically. What I mean is that he presents a drama of his emotions through the consciously violent manipulation of his images. Often, these images are successful in conveying the existential blank of his experience. Sometimes, they are romanticized and almost idle in their purposeful need to shock. It is on these latter occasions, when they are less successful, that his interviews appear to confirm his dated and culturally confined view of art and society. Bacon has told on many occasions, and often repeated it in almost the same phrases, the means by which he describes his working methods. His phrases such as "leaving a trail of the human presence and memory traces of past events, as the snail leaves its slime" or "the artist may be able to open up or rather, I should say, unlock the valves of feeling and therefore return the onlooker to life more violently" create his agenda and reveal his desires and ambitions for the work. It may be time to judge his position more carefully in relation to works, in literature and art, of his direct contemporaries. I am simply, in suggesting a discussion of the context of production, casting a cold eye on Bacon's desire, and that of his apologists, to raise him beyond his generation and even beyond the art of the twentieth century. It also, in this essay, gives me a reason to connect Bacon and Dumas, in their separate artistic environs.

What is clear about Bacon's work is that it is driven by desire and excitement even if this is conditioned by its cultural micro-context. (For example, Bacon's equivocations over his lovers drawn from Muybridge's Wrestlers which he describes as wrestling and an interest in particular groupings of forms seem unnecessarily coy in today's climate.) Desire and its representation are the core of the work. He works at the pleasuring and creation, for himself, and by revealing and passing it, for the spectator, of sexual excitement through the combined acts of daydreaming and painting. Bacon worked from memory, early in the day, soon after sleeping (and, one imagines dreaming) by remembering specific people and emotions. He talks of pushing his paint as far as he could in his search for the essence of the moment in which he recalled the person and the accoutrements which he gave to those people. "That is why real painting is a mysterious and continuous struggle with chance - mysterious because the very substance of the paint, when used in this way, can make such a direct assault upon the nervous system... I think that painting today is pure intuition and luck and taking advantage of what happens when you splash the stuff down" (written in 1953, by Bacon about Sir Matthew Smith). He tried to connect his unreason (the irrational of the surrealists) directly to his hand. In some of the portraits he achieves, we must assume, since we cannot meet the people, more than a likeness and approaches his goal. In others, I believe, the literary overlays interrupt the direct contact and commit the work to melodrama rather than tragedy.

Placing the sexual desire

"Physical pain is able to obliterate psychological pain because it obliterates all psychological content, painful, pleasurable and neutral. Our recognition of its power to end madness is one of the

ways in which, knowingly or unknowingly, we acknowledge its power to end all aspects of the self and world".

(Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain*, 1985)

"It is only as an aesthetic phenomenon that existence and the world appear justified".

(Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy out of the Spirit of Music*)

That Bacon was homosexual and his work often homoerotic is a commonplace. His sexuality provided a conduit for his emotions and the placing of the excitement in the act of painting. Its contrariness, outside the conventions of his social background (upper-class Dublin but linked to the socially ambiguous world of horse racing) and its perversion, in the view of his father, at least, made the excitement more intense. It is an excitement, as he characterised it, at the moment of despair, the moment of existential extremis, with its maker, by necessity, a stranger to conventional society. The romantic existentialist of Sartre and Camus, born of Nietzsche's Dionysian glamour, is the place from whence Bacon's "rivers of flesh" emerge. (Bacon told Sylvester that he wished to "make paintings in which images, as it were, would arise from a river of flesh.") The work denies the strict self-reference of modernist practice because it uses the literary as a device to extend its emotional range. The sense of emotional structure is contained within the bleakness of *existence*, that nothing is important beyond the momentary pleasure, and this is achieved at the risk of extinguishing it through death rather than boredom. The paintings excite us because they are at the very edge of our experience, reporting nothingness as subject and in this lies their modernity.

Marlene Dumas' pictures seem by contrast to be less extreme, to be coded within a discourse of sexual desire that conveys a sort of happiness rather than despair. They look as if they are made with desire, but a desire satisfied. This may be only in contrast with Bacon, since Dumas is operating within the conventions of 1980s theoretical practice, the period of post Freudianism and abjection. We can speculate that the dominant emotion here, in its presentation of simple, calm forms (in general), is pleasurable, that is, without the despair that drives Bacon. Perhaps this reading is too easily made and we should be asking if the simple pleasure is the mask for more complex emotions such as assertion after rejection, or the driving fear of abjection and denial. In order to understand Dumas's process we can place her representations of sexual desire precisely post-Kristeva, that is, within a European post-Freudian analysis using the feminist project in relation to highly mediated ideas about the world. She is as confined by her moment, this moment, as Francis Bacon was by his. The comparisons that I am making rely on the critical application of context and an acceptance, with the knowing collusion of the spectator, of the specificity of the moment of desire.

If Bacon's works celebrate the impossible, then Dumas' could be thought to be contemplating the despair of the ordinary and trying to modify it through the act of reproducing it. Her work appears to me to present a purposely *naïve*, partially sophisticated view of sexuality. It is highly sophisticated, that is, in its *fausse naïveté*, its way of making the paintwork against the message of desire, where the means of talking, the language of the image, predominates. In this reading Dumas proposes sexual desire as the mediated subject of the post-modern discourse. Its clues to interpretation are within the simplicity of its presentation (the incorporation of the desire and its commentary, *within* the method of painting) upon the making of the work. The self-consciousness of the method, by involving the spectator as collaborator, in understanding the way in which the process works is what distinguishes Dumas from Bacon for me. It is this demonstration of means, this acceptance, even celebration of the contract with the spectator, of *artifice* as the communication that is different. It allows abjection, a peculiarly *fin de siècle* emotion, to be present and

acknowledges the need to hold the fear of abjection within the exhilaration of sexual pleasure in order to maintain a complex and human equilibrium.