

Francis Bacon: Man and Beast

Curating Bacon at the Royal Academy of Arts

Background notes

Sarah Lea — 02 February 2022



Francis Bacon, *Study for Bullfight No. 1*, 1969. Oil on canvas. 198 x 147.5 cm, Private collection.

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Francis Bacon is recognised internationally as one of the most important artists of the 20th century to have emerged from the British Isles. Against the grain of trends toward abstract painting, Bacon insisted on figuration, all the while refusing what he termed 'illustrative' art. *Francis Bacon: Man and Beast* spans the artist's career from one of his earliest surviving works – *Crucifixion*, 1933, to his final painting of 1991, *Study of a Bull*, but it is not a comprehensive retrospective. The 46 works on display, six of which are large-scale triptychs, represent a fraction of Bacon's total oeuvre (around 600 extant paintings - not including the many he destroyed himself), yet stand together as a powerful testament to the artist's enduring fascination with animals.

Bacon's revelation of the 'animal' in man has featured in discussions of his work, but this is the first exhibition to look more deeply at the crucial role of animal imagery in Bacon's oeuvre. He painted dogs, chimpanzees, baboons, monkeys, elephants, rhinos, owls and bulls, but more importantly, his engagement with the animal kingdom was an impetus for significant developments in his work, and had a profound impact on his approach to his ultimate subject: the human body.

Bacon's path to becoming a painter was unorthodox. He had no formal artistic training, and began his working life as an interior designer. In the early 1930s, Bacon tried his hand as an artist. His charm and impeccable manners attracted fellow artists and patrons: Graham Sutherland and the Australian painter Roy de Maistre helped him understand the rudiments of technique and recommended him to art world contacts, while Eric Alden – a wealthy gentleman with time on his hands – supported Bacon by buying work and even funding his first solo exhibition in 1934. After a brief moment of success when Herbert Read featured *Crucifixion*, 1933 in his seminal publication *Art Now*, Bacon floundered. For example, his work was refused for the 1936 International Surrealist Exhibition held in London.



Francis Bacon, 'Fury', c. 1944. Oil and pastel on fibreboard. Private collection

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When war broke out, Bacon avoided active service on account of his asthma; he served in the Chelsea ARP, working briefly as a rescue driver but was unable to cope with the dust of the Blitz. Eric Hall (another patron, a wealthy businessman who was also Bacon's partner, as well as being a married family man) arranged for Bacon to rent a cottage in the village of Steep, Petersfield. The work that would make Bacon's reputation began here, but was completed on his return to London in 1943. The paintings of bio-morphic creatures – partly inspired by Picasso's *Dinard* series – explored what Bacon described as 'organic form that relates to the human image but is a complete distortion of it.' Fundamental to that distortion are distinct animal features: canine or simian teeth, quadrupedal gaits and swooping necks are seamlessly combined with familiar human fragments – an ear, a mop of hair.

These works were conceived in the context of the theme of the crucifixion, which as an atheist, Bacon regarded as nothing more than 'an act of man's behaviour', but which dominated his early works. Bacon rarely painted the figure on the cross, and when he did, that figure was not human, but a butchered carcass (see *Painting*, 1946: <https://www.moma.org/collection/works/79204>). Bacon was mainly preoccupied with associated figures, and often layered historical, mythological and personal references with religious ones. In works such as *Fury*, c. 1944 Bacon seems to have had in mind both Mary Magdalene and the Eumenides or 'Furies': female creatures of guilt and vengeance that appear in the *Oresteia*, a trilogy of plays by the Ancient Greek writer Aeschylus.

Two concepts are pertinent when considering Bacon's works of the 1940s in this context: the notion of painting as a kind of witness to events that extends over, and penetrates through time, and the blunt but forceful alignment of humans and animals as equal in their inescapable physical state as flesh, skin and bone. Bacon's conviction that 'we are all meat' manifests itself in the omnipresent theme of mortality in his paintings, but equally in his relentless pursuit of a painting geared towards human physicality. He believed that there 'is an area of the nervous system to which the texture of paint communicates more violently than anything else.' Bacon wanted his paintings to have an immediacy that activated the senses ahead of conscious understanding: 'to unlock the valves of feeling and therefore return the onlooker to life more violently.'



Francis Bacon, *Head I*, 1948. Oil and tempera on hardboard, 103 x 75 cm. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Bequest of Richard S. Zeisler, 2007.

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The extraordinary *Head I*, fulfils this aspiration, its powerful presence arising by frustrating the viewer's instinct to mentally and emotionally resolve an image that pulls in many directions at the same time, or as Bacon put it: by creating an elusive 'moment of magic, to coagulate colour and form so that it gets the equivalent of appearance'. The fanged mouth originated in a photograph of a chimpanzee, and the motif can be found repeated in a number of paintings. It is one of six Heads exhibited at the Hannover Gallery in 1949, also including *Head IV (Man with Monkey)* in which the eponymous figures are face to face, merging through a

diaphanous curtain of paint. Bacon's turn of phrase often reveals the rich visual metaphor that the world of animals provided him. He described, for example, his desire 'to paint like Velázquez but with the texture of hippopotamus skin' and to create paintings that felt 'as if a human being had passed between them, like a snail, leaving a trail of the human presence and memory trace of past events.'

Amid the 'compost' of photographs and magazines that Bacon collected in the various studios he worked in, are thousands of images of animals. Favourite books included *Introducing Monkeys* by V. J. Staněk and *Human and Animal Locomotion* by Eadweard Muybridge. The myriad subjects recorded by Muybridge acted as a visual dictionary for Bacon: he created a number of works in response to sequential photographs of a mastiff walking, while images of men wrestling provided a legitimate context for Bacon to paint erotic subjects (Bacon was an openly gay man at a time when homosexuality was illegal).

In 1951 and 1952, Bacon visited Southern Africa, where his mother (now remarried after the death of his father in 1940) and his two sisters were living. Bacon described being 'mesmerised' by the movement of the long grass under the beating sun, and the sight of animals simultaneously concealed and revealed as they moved through it. A series of paintings followed that placed naked human figures crouching in, or crawling through, grasslands. These 'landscapes' are charged with the adrenalin of the stalk and the power dynamics of the chase and final tussle, often with strong sexual overtones.



Francis Bacon, *Man Kneeling in Grass*, 1952. Oil on canvas, 198 x 137 cm. Bayerische Staatsgemäldesammlungen, Pinakothek der Moderne, Munich, Dauerleihgabe Sammlung Olcese

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Bacon had already been exploring the notion of the cage in the geometric 'space frames' of the late 1940s, and stripping back the veneer of civilisation by piercing the masculine authority of Popes and businessman alike. In the 1950s his works amplified 'the cage' to existential proportions. Works such *Study for Baboon*, 1953 (<https://www.moma.org/collection/works/80580>) conflate the pattern of the grass with that of the fencing, the tree left spatially ambiguous, as if nature itself were a cage. The protagonist of *Man Kneeling in Grass*, 1952 is seen through a curious aperture, as is the door of a darkened room had opened onto the veldt. Crawling on all fours, the central, muscular body is human, but the pose may have derived from a photograph of a rhino in Marius Maxwell's *Stalking Big Game with a Camera in Equatorial Africa* (1924). The striated bars of paint that form the 'background' of *Study of the Human Head*, 1953 (<https://www.francis-bacon.com/artworks/paintings/study-human-head>) are more correctly described as constituting the head itself, extending the metaphor to the human condition of a consciousness trapped in a body, one no less felt in 'portraits' of imagined animals, such as *Study of Chimpanzee*, 1955.

Bacon's assertion in his works that man is nothing but an animal presaged the popularisation of this idea in mainstream culture. In 1967, Desmond Morris published 'The Naked Ape: A Zoologist's Study of the Human Animal' which purported to account for behaviour in contemporary life through the principles of biological evolution, and tore down the idea that people occupied a superior moral or spiritual realm. Controversial then as now, in particular for its lack of scientific rigour and misplaced attitudes to gender, the book was nonetheless a bestseller. Bacon knew Morris, and around the same time developed a friendship with the adventurer and photographer Peter Beard, whose study of the devastating effects of big game hunting, and ill-researched, early attempts at conservation, 'The End of the Game', was published in 1965. Bacon was no eco-warrior, he was ruthlessly unsentimental, but was interested on a philosophical level about the relationship between man and nature, especially on a vast scale of time predating even the ancient cultures he so admired (Greek tragedy, and ancient Egyptian art), and current discourses of 'consciousness' and 'naturalness'.



Francis Bacon, *Two Studies from the Human Body*, 1974–75. Oil and dry transfer lettering on canvas, 198 x 147.5 cm. Private collection

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Beard's aerial photographs of dead elephants were added to Bacon's accumulation, and Beard was one of the few people Bacon allowed to photograph his studio. He once recorded an early state of a painting Bacon later modified, at the time known to Beard as 'The Last Man on Earth' with a glimpse of Bacon in the doorway. The final composition, *Two Studies from the Human Body*, 1974–75 is a fascinating example of Bacon's fusion of source materials. The ape-like gait of the left-hand figure derives its low, swinging arm from the discobolus or discus thrower, poised before the whirling motion of the throw. Bacon's source for this was likely Muybridge, whose photographs sometimes reprised well-known classical subjects. The body in the background, squatting on its haunches on a structure suggestive of a swing, was partly based on a photograph of a cormorant. Bacon stated: '[I] look at animal photographs all the time. Because animal movement and human movement are continually linked in my imagery of human movement.'

Indeed, in Bacon's paintings of the bullfight, the dance-like motion of the fight is rendered as a swirling mass that merges matador, cape and bull, challenging a clear distinction between human and animal. In two of the three surviving paintings on this subject, a strange, concave screen reveals a feverish crowd, who mirror our status as onlookers. Above, a red banner with hints of an eagle recalls the imagery of the Nazi dictatorship. The paintings raise questions about the

disturbing connections between spectacle, excitement, terror and power, and an individual's capacity to become lost in an anonymous mob or herd mentality. In the third painting, a brush loaded with white paint was hurled at the canvas. Later the 'accidental' marks were built up with layers of paint, and a black trompe-l'œil shadow added. A parallel exists between the performance of the matador and the painter at work – both entail choreography, instinct, and an appetite for risk.

It is therefore telling that Bacon, in ill health, chose a bull as the subject of what would turn out to be his final painting. Mixed with the paint, is dust - a potent cipher for mortality, although for Bacon it represented permanence too: 'Well, dust seems to be eternal – seems to be the one thing that lasts forever.' He himself said that only time can tell whether art is really good or bad. Some thirty years after his death, *Francis Bacon: Man and Beast* looks again at an artist's work that, forged in the trauma of the 20th century, is unnervingly prescient as we negotiate the consequences of the human impact on the natural world, and live our lives, day by day, taking our chances in the face of a virus.

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Online resources:

The website of the estate of Francis Bacon – navigate tabs at the top to find a catalogue raisonné of paintings and further information: <https://www.francis-bacon.com/>

Reece Mews studio relocation to Dublin, contains information on technique and source and materials: <https://www.hughlane.ie/history-of-studio-relocation>

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