

An insightful view into an artist's world

Francis Bacon Studio at Hugh Lane Gallery, Dublin

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The almost life-long art studio and residence of Francis Bacon (1909-92) was recently donated and transported from 7 Reece Mews, London and placed on permanent exhibition at the Hugh Lane Gallery in Dublin, Ireland. John Edwards, Bacon's sole heir, made the donation; the most significant since Hugh Lane was established in 1908. The relocation was carried out with all the care of a major archaeological dig, with each and every item—some several thousand in all—catalogued and exactly repositioned in the Dublin gallery.

The expense and energy required for the project created some controversy. Relocation and reconstruction cost in the vicinity of IE£1.5 million (\$US2.02 million), partly provided by the National Millennium Committee, a state-funded body. An entrance fee of IE£6 (\$US8) for over-18s also generated some debate because public art institutions in Ireland are generally free of charge. Some critics raised concerns about the dedication of permanent space to the studio because the Hugh Lane Gallery is quite limited in size; others suggested that the exhibit was not a work of art and therefore had no right to be located in the gallery.

These objections, however, do not alter the fact that the exhibit, which has attracted considerable interest and large crowds since opening in May 2001, provides a rich and meaningful insight into the work and life of this significant 20th century artist.

Despite its limited size, the Reece Mews studio was where Bacon was most at home. He had tried working in other, more practical studios but could not warm to them. More importantly, it constitutes the most extensive collection of visual reference material that inspired his work.

Physical access to Bacon's principal place of work, therefore, is extremely helpful for anyone who wants to understand the makeup, methods and origins of his art. Along with the studio, the exhibit contains an interview with Bacon by Melvin Bragg, several new paintings, including his final unfinished piece, and a lush, complex interactive multimedia presentation establishing the context of many items in the studio.

Francis Bacon, one of five children, was born in Dublin on October 28, 1909, to English parents, Edward Anthony Mortimer Bacon and Christine Winifred Firth. Bacon's parents were of wealthy, land-owning descent and remained in Ireland until World War I, whereafter they moved between England and Ireland.

Bacon was born into a world undergoing tremendous upheaval. The Irish Republican Movement was torching English-owned properties in a campaign aimed at ending British rule, and Europe was beset with increasing tensions between Britain, Germany and France. At the same time, science and industry were making great advances and large numbers of working people were demanding a new political order with real improvements in their social existence.

Bacon, who was said to have been closest to his mother, was a frail child and frequently ill. His father, an austere, puritanical figure, regarded his son as weak and reacted with horror against the young man's homosexual tendencies. (Homosexuality was illegal in Britain at this time and severely punished.) Shortly after the 17-year-old Francis was discovered dressed in his mother's clothes in 1926 his father forced him out of the family home. Over the next few years he spent time in Berlin, Paris and other European cities, a period that defined his personal and artistic development.

The bohemian and more open post-WWI Berlin and Paris were dramatically different to the highly repressed and conservative Irish social life with which Bacon was familiar. His visits to these cities were defining experiences and he spent time passionately sketching in the transvestite bars of Berlin and on busy summer evenings in Paris' Montparnasse district.

It was during a visit to Paris in 1927 that the 18-year-old Bacon saw Picasso's drawings at the Paul Rosenberg Gallery. He later explained that these works had made a great impression. In fact, Bacon was to name Picasso as the most significant influence on his work. Michael Peppiatt, the art critic and author of *Francis Bacon: Anatomy of an Enigma*, described Picasso as a "father figure" to Bacon.

Although not as prolific or artistically varied as Picasso,

one can see the connection between Bacon's explorations of the figure and Picasso's—for example, Bacon's attempts to represent and capture far more of a person than the mere conventionally representable. But the similarities end there. Picasso was full of passion and the joy of life and simply could not stop creating. A dynamic and playful artist and person, he created in a multi-dimensional way. Bacon, by contrast, was far more introverted in his approach and his work radiates pain, confusion and uncertainty.

Bacon, who held his first solo exhibition in 1934, drew on many and varied sources of inspiration. He chose not to paint from life, but rather from memory and an eclectic collection of visual images. His portraits—even of close friends, whom he painted frequently—were derived from photographs. The aim of this practice, he said, was to “deform his portraits back into appearance,” because the presence of sitters in his studio would “disturb the deformation.”

The Reece Mews studio contains all the recognisable visual influences in his work: reproductions of Diego de Silva Velázquez's painting of Pope Innocent X; the screaming woman from Sergei Eisenstein's *Battleship Potemkin*; and photographs of Bacon's lover and long-time partner George Dyer.

But working through the maze of Bacon's studio one comes into contact with an extraordinary range of images—virtually everything the 20th century had to offer. There are black-and-white reproductions torn from books and medical journals; x-rays and film stills; phonograph recordings; and images given to him from photographer friends John Deakin and Peter Beard. Bacon was also captivated with the carnal and the animal and the studio contains pictures of animals screaming in aggression and pain and includes many images from the great African plains and the predators found there. One can imagine him randomly drawing on these pictures in times of difficulty and low motivation.

Bacon, who had many dark sides to his imagination, was obsessively focused on the human figure and painted it in a compelling and complex style. This darkness was indicated by his fixation with disease, particularly of the mouth and skin, and manifest in one of his best-known works—*Study after Velázquez's Portrait of Pope Innocent X* (1953)—an unsettling picture of a screaming, inhuman, blood-spattered pope.

One long-standing and debatable habit of Bacon's has blocked greater access to his artistic work. A passionate and explosive man, he would often erupt in anger and destroy any painting that displeased him or fell short of the mark. When asked by his friend, the writer and curator David Sylvester, about this practice, Bacon said he “liked to find

accidents in the image and would often ruin a found image in the course of attempting to explore and develop it further”. While Bacon ruined many pieces, particularly those from the 1930s and early 1940s, he later regretted the destruction of some works, particularly an important early painting, *Wound for a Crucifixion*.

Although Bacon spoke at length about his work, he refused to discuss its significance or meaning. He did not adhere to any social, political or religious belief, at least not publicly, and shunned literal readings of his work, claiming they were unexplainable products of his sub-conscious. He once declared: “Talking about painting is like reading a bad translation from a foreign language. The images are there and they are the things that talk, not anything you can say about it.”

This approach, however, suggests that art cannot be understood by examining the social context in which it is produced. Notwithstanding this false assertion, Bacon's artistic vision developed in specific political conditions and on the foundations created by the Dadaists, Surrealist movement and Sigmund Freud's explorations into the subconscious.

By the time Bacon had reached “artistic maturity” and created his own unique and longstanding style in the mid- to late-1940s, he had lived through two world wars, the Great Depression and numerous betrayals of the Soviet and international working class by the Stalinist bureaucracy. Although it is not clear how much Bacon understood of these events—he largely isolated himself from other artists, both physically and ideologically—his work seems to be an intuitive but pessimistic and acquiescent response to them, a vision of humanity that is bleak and disturbing.

The Hugh Lane Gallery studio reconstruction certainly deepens one's understanding of Bacon and his work. In fact, the dark negativity in his art seems to prefigure the present social and political climate and can serve to remind us that the background to his harrowing images—the onset of war and imperialist conflict—is in danger of being repeated.



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