

Lucian Freud: “A life of uncertainty and loneliness” ... and enduring insights

Paul Mitchell
2 August 2011

British figurative painter Lucian Freud died July 20 at his home in London at the age of 88. The artist’s death followed a brief illness, according to New York-based art gallery owner William Acquavella in a statement.

Reports of the death of the painter, identified with a ruthlessly honest and self-critical attitude toward life, art and his own work, appeared in the media the same week that all the filthiness and corruption represented by 80-year-old Rupert Murdoch hit the headlines. These two personalities, these two human types, were mutually exclusive. (In an ironic twist, the artist’s nephew Matthew is married to Murdoch’s daughter Elizabeth).

Lucian Freud found little pleasure in money or fame and was prepared to face general disapproval for much of his life in his attempt to examine the most intimate and private sorts of relations. He once explained, “Many people are astonished people would sacrifice the possibility of comfort and what is thought to be an agreeable life to a life of uncertainty and loneliness perhaps ... an incomprehensible activity with results which are fairly unlikely to change or affect your situation in an economic way”.

Freud insisted that art was “not a by-product of anarchic mistakes or an idyllic, undisciplined way of life”. Eventually his craftsmanship and dedication paid off and his work began to resonate with a great many people who found in it something recognisably human and remarkably sensitive. (See here.) There seems little doubt that his paintings will endure and he may well be ranked in the future as one of the major figures of our time.

From all accounts Freud was an attractive, witty and generous man who enjoyed betting and the occasional fight (on one occasion he rushed home after receiving a black eye to begin painting a self-portrait). He loved, and was loved by, a series of women who had a prodigious number of children with him. Countering the howls of disapproval at his “immorality”, Freud would retort, “[T.S.] Eliot said that art is the escape from personality, which I think is right. We know that Velazquez embezzled money from the Spanish court and wanted power and so on, but you can’t see this in his art”.

What one can see in Freud’s art is to his ability to “astonish, disturb, seduce, convince” as he strove to paint people “how they happen to be”.

Freud was born in Berlin in 1922; his father Ernst was the son of Sigmund Freud, the creator of modern psychoanalysis. In 1933 Ernst managed to bring his family to London as refugees from Nazism. Many of their relatives ended up in the concentration

camps.

Lucian became a British citizen in 1939, before briefly attending the Central School of Art and then going to the East Anglian School of Painting and Drawing in Dedham set up by artist and art teacher Cedric Morris. About Morris, Freud said, he “taught me everything I know about art”.

In 1941 Freud joined the Merchant Navy but was discharged on medical grounds after only three months. He began to exhibit surrealist figurative works in 1944 and from 1946 until 1948 lived and painted in Greece and France, where he met Picasso.

With his large *Interior at Paddington*, exhibited at the Festival of Britain in 1951, Freud began to gain some recognition. *Paddington*, an unfashionable working class area of London, became the site of his studio for some 30 years and the figure dressed in a shabby raincoat with nicotine-stained hands was Freud’s friend, odd-job man Harry Diamond.

Freud’s early work is flat, stylised and severe. It’s detached, disturbing nature so much resembled the work of the French painter Ingres (1780-1867) that art critic Herbert Read was prompted to call Freud “the Ingres of existentialism”. Existentialism, an amorphous term, emerged out of certain subjectivist philosophical trends (Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Jaspers, etc.). It registered a moral (and sometimes political) protest in a bleak world, where individuals were entirely on their own confronted with the absurdity of the universe. It was also, in Western Europe, a social mood prevalent among the intellectuals in the ruins left by the war, including, in many cases, the ruins of their socialist ideals in the wake of Stalinism’s crimes.

Freud’s first series of portraits were of his first wife Kitty, daughter of sculptor Jacob Epstein, whom he married in 1948. The marriage was only to last four years. In the beautifully poignant *Girl With a White Dog* (1951–52), painted towards the end of the relationship, one can sense the developing problems. Love, romance, eroticism seems to be evaporating before our eyes. Kitty, dressed in her night gown and curled up on a mattress, is melancholic, staring out rather vacantly. She still wears her marriage ring, but self-consciously covers her left breast. Even that symbol of loyalty and faithfulness, the dog, one of a pair of bull terriers given to the couple as a wedding present, looks forlorn.

From the late 1950s Freud’s paintings began to take on greater depth and expressiveness. His subjects begin to look like they are made of flesh and blood. This development is tied up with his use of impasto techniques where paint is laid so thickly on the surface

that the brush strokes can be seen and the paint seems to come out of the picture. Help and encouragement also came from the loose group of figurative artist friends dubbed “The School of London”, which included Ronald Kitaj, Francis Bacon, Frank Auerbach and Leon Kossoff.

In the 1970s Freud embarked on a new period dedicated exclusively to painting nude figures.

By the time he painted the artist Leigh Bowery in 1992, we can see how far Freud had progressed in his quest to make his paint “as real as flesh itself”. He manages to give the balding overweight Bowery a reality and subtlety that no photograph could do.

In *After Cézanne*, (2000), Freud depicts three naked figures in a chaotic interior comprising a bed with crumpled sheets, an upturned chair and empty bookcase. Each figure is painted differently, its flesh fatty and sagging, angular and taut, pale or flushed. There is a definite feeling of tension and alienation, a strong sexual undercurrent and sense of mystery about what precisely is taking place.

Freud’s painting involved intense and exhausting periods of collaboration between the artist and his subject. Some pictures took a year or more to complete and involved hundreds of sittings, several times a week for several hours. Freud justified the length of time it took to paint his subjects (friends, fellow painters, lovers, and children), explaining that “if you don’t know them it can only be like a travel book”.

The painter Anne Dunn described how the collaborative process was “mentally painful—because the sitter has to give so much back to Lucian that the sitter in fact feels devoured and digested and regurgitated almost and it also, for myself personally, gave me acute anxiety ... I didn’t feel I had the strength to go on”. Daughter Rosie Boyt revealed how the sessions turned into “combat under the surface and possibly much more on the surface”.

Freud went through the same rigorous routine with his self-portraits, consciously avoiding giving “pleasant or conciliatory light” to them. He pointed out that artists “very often give themselves a grandeur, which I am not saying they haven’t got, but which they certainly don’t give to other people”.

For many years Freud’s work remained unfashionable for both social and aesthetic reasons. But with the exhaustion of many of the dominant trends in the visual arts in the 1980s, interest revived. He was shortlisted for the Turner Prize in 1989 and a retrospective of 160 paintings was held in 2002. A major exhibition was held at the Metropolitan Museum in New York in 1993-94. His works began to sell for a great deal of money. *After Cézanne* was bought by the National Gallery of Australia for \$7.4 million in 2001 and, in 2008, *Benefits Supervisor Sleeping* was sold at auction for \$33.6 million, setting a world record for a painting by a living artist.

Freud claimed that his art was “all to do with hope and memory and sensuality and involvement”, but the overriding feeling one experiences in his paintings is of the uncertainty and loneliness that he speaks about in the interview. His haunting portraits and fleshy, “warts-and-all” nudes of men and women are beautifully executed, but there are few displays of warmth or flashes of optimism.

The one-sided aspect to Freud’s work is not entirely surprising.

It is bound up with complex social processes, which can only briefly be touched on in this review.

Although the inter-war movements had limitations, their liberating themes, particularly those of the surrealists, aligned them with the struggle for human emancipation and against the growing threat of fascism. At the same time, the avant-garde, fighting for the independence of art from dominant commercial interests, was driven to challenge established tastes and the limits of what could be considered art. But by the time Freud had embarked on his artistic life these artistic movements had collapsed due to far-reaching social processes, above all, the blows dealt to the project of human liberation by Stalinism and fascism.

The avant-garde, which found its centre in New York City before and during the Second World War, was largely forced into a retreat from active participation in politics, a position summed up most succinctly in the comment of the abstract expressionists Robert Motherwell and Ad Reinhardt in 1947: “Political commitment in our times means logically—no art, no literature”. History was largely transformed into myth and nature. (That was not to say that abstraction did not produce some heroic paintings that strove to uphold certain spiritual truths and the old spirit of protest in the midst of conformist, McCarthyite, Cold War America.)

In post-war Britain, abstraction found few followers, with Bacon dismissing it as “old lace” and Freud having no interest whatsoever in it. What has been described as a loose neo-Romantic movement took place looking to “natural” landscapes and “emotional” realism, one strand of which was Freud’s figurative pictures.

Unfortunately, most of Lucian Freud’s paintings remain in private collections and relatively few have made their way into public art galleries. One can only get a limited sense of their craftsmanship, honesty and beauty from images in books and on the Internet. Even so, I have no doubt his work will stand the test of time. Future generations will regard him as one of the Great Masters because of his unique and enduring insight into the consequences of the twentieth century for the human personality.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact