

At the Art Gallery of Ontario in Toronto

Making sense of human suffering: *Francis Bacon and Henry Moore — Terror and Beauty*

Lee Parsons
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Two of the most prominent British artists of the modern period—a rare and unlikely pairing—are brought together in the exhibition *Francis Bacon and Henry Moore — Terror and Beauty*, currently at the Art Gallery of Ontario (AGO) in Toronto. The show features 136 works, including paintings, drawings, photographs and sculpture. The styles and sensibilities of these two artists present some illuminating contrasts within the traditions of figurative modern art, but it is their shared encounter with the traumas of the past century that lies at the center of this show.

Both artists developed unique approaches to the human figure, but along avenues that are virtually antithetical. With its distinctive solid and natural forms, the work of Henry Moore (1898-1986) suggests a redemptive and stabilizing response to the traumas of the 20th century. Francis Bacon (1909-1992), on the other hand, places his figures in alienated colors and settings, developing imagery that generally tends toward the tortured.

While there are formal parallels between the two, and inevitably some common ground, the question arises: why have two so divergent artists been joined in an exhibition of this sort here and now?

It seems, in fact, the AGO inherited the idea of exhibiting the two together, apparently inspired by the show last year at the University of Oxford's Ashmolean Museum, entitled "Flesh and Bone." Although the two artists knew each other (Bacon reportedly once approached Moore for sculpture instruction), their association was slight and not in any way collaborative. Given their considerable reputation and stature, this exhibition may have begun as an act of shrewd marketing, but it proves to be the sharp differences between Bacon and Moore that makes the juxtaposition as engaging as it is.

Of particular interest and the focus of this show—and what perhaps unites these two artists more than anything else—were the artists' historical experiences, particularly of the Second World War. Having lived through World War I, both Bacon and Moore resided in London during the Blitz (the period of sustained bombing by Nazi Germany, during which 40,000 civilians were killed) in 1941 and their work speaks to those experiences and the larger experience of the war as a whole.

With Moore this occurs quite directly, in a number of wartime drawings on display here, while Bacon's work, although not so explicit, is clearly a reaction in part to those horrific events. His isolated figures appear in distortions of raw color and form, twisted beyond recognition, often with exposed wounds that evoke bodies torn in battle.

Henry Moore, in fact, became an official war artist and the AGO exhibition displays a moving collection of his nighttime drawings illustrating the bomb shelters that housed a besieged population, huddled and frightened in underground London. These are compassionately drawn images of the dark reality of that war, rendered in the softened lines and round volumes that strongly indicate his distinctive sculptural style.

Many of the sculptures in this exhibit will be familiar to Torontonians who have had access to the Henry Moore Sculpture Centre, the largest public collection of his work anywhere, housed in the AGO since 1974.

Redeeming art

Much of Moore's sculpture depicts primordial forms of large bone-like structures such as "Reclining Figure" (1951). These rough-hewn recumbent figures appear timeless and monumental, giving this vein of work a relatively easy and comfortable feel, but leaving this viewer at least, on the whole largely disengaged. The plaster sculpture, "Atom Piece (Working Model for Nuclear Energy)" (1964-65), is conversely among his more disturbing works. A distinctly forbidding form, it seems to stand at once in awe and fear of human industry. But this is an exceptional piece for Moore who tended toward less difficult material, returning often to some of his favored subjects such as mother and child. He was nevertheless no stranger to difficulty, and in fact once stated, "I find in all the artists that I admire most a disturbing element, a distortion, giving evidence of a struggle."

Having grown up in a large and poor family in the coal mining district of West Yorkshire in northern England, Moore was not to begin his art studies until the age of 21, by which time he had already seen battle and been wounded during the first imperialist war. Though he soon established himself as an accomplished artist, for many years he had to rely on teaching art to make a living.

Like Bacon, and most of their generation, Moore developed under the influence of innovators in abstraction like Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque. In his early development, he was part of The Seven and Five Society, a grouping that from its inception following World War I opposed what was seen as the excessive experimentation of modern art, and which brought him into contact with such important artists as Barbara Hepworth. As Moore and others were increasingly

exposed to avant-garde currents in the rest of Europe, the group moved away from traditional and toward a modernist sensibility.

Neither Moore nor Bacon was chiefly concerned with artistic innovation, but tended to take from the dominant currents of their time what was most appealing and useful. In the early 1930s Moore met a number of the Surrealists, including Alberto Giacometti, Hans Arp and Joan Miró, whose work had a great effect on him. While his association with that movement may have been brief, its influence and concern with unconscious imagery remained evident in his work throughout his career.

Moore pursued an unadventurous lifestyle, and was devoutly religious. In personality as well as artistically, in other words, he could hardly have been further from Bacon who was, to say the least, a more unconventional sort.

The problem of Bacon

I came into this show, the first exhibit of Francis Bacon in Canada, predisposed to a favorable attitude toward the painter. Having seen most of Bacon's work only in reproductions, the real-life images were all the more striking and troubling and, along with a survey of his own observations, led me to a fresh consideration of his work.

Born in Dublin, Ireland, Francis Bacon was raised in a wealthy military family and early on came into conflict with his father who regarded him as weak, and was horrified by his evident homosexuality. Forced from the family home, he became a social outsider, bouncing from one menial job to another across Europe.

With little formal training, Bacon began his career as an interior and furniture designer. He gained early acclaim for his painting "Crucifixion" in 1933. Some of his most powerful images deal with icons of the Catholic Church, including "Study for Portrait VI" (1953), one of a series of terrifying paintings he did based on Velasquez' portrait of Pope Innocent X.

Influenced by such diverse sources as Sergei Eisenstein's silent film *Battleship Potemkin* (1925) and an old reference book on diseases of the mouth, Bacon was attracted to the grimmer side of social life as well. An inveterate gambler and drinker, his relationships were reputedly conflicted and George Dyer, his partner of many years and the subject of a number of portraits, ultimately took his own life.

It should be noted that one of Bacon's most important artistic contacts and influences was Lucian Freud (1922-2011), one of the great painters of our time. Along with Moore, these artists persisted in representing the human figure in their work, through the post-war period when much of the art world was looking to higher abstraction as more or less the only way forward.

A painting such as Bacon's "Lying Figure in a Mirror" (1971) presents an image of inchoate flesh, seductive in flowing form and color, but cruelly contained by geometric frames (and the mirror itself). The painting's contrasts create a tension that in some real manner reflects the extremes of bottomless desire and severe repression.

Referring to his preoccupation with viscera and tortured forms, Bacon famously countered his critics by saying, "I lived through the revolutionary Irish movement, Sinn Fein and the wars, Hiroshima, Hitler and the death camps and daily violence that I've experienced all my life. And after that they want me to paint bunches of pink

flowers."

The issues raised by Bacon's life and work are not easily resolved. This may be the strength of his work, that it articulates the contradictions of a striving for beauty in a world that would distort and subvert all our finest impulses. Yet, the more I learned about Bacon and his outlook and looked at his paintings, the more I came to reassess the value I had hitherto placed on him.

The difficulty I have is that Bacon's response to human tragedy is more or less passive, uncritical, and could be interpreted almost as approving of things as they are. Indeed some of his pronouncements could well be taken as a fatalistic acceptance of the horrors he has witnessed. "I'm not upset by the fact that people do suffer, because I think the suffering of people and the differences between people are what have made great art, and not egalitarianism."

Artists in the world

In any event, the careers and output of Bacon and Moore don't allow for simple responses, much less prescriptions. These were both figures who took art and the world seriously. A discussion of concerns about their work, one hopes, will promote a more critical consideration of the relationship of art and artists to their audience, to society and to history—especially at a time when the art world is largely dominated by concerns with money and celebrity. (Bacon, for example, is probably best known at present because his painting, "Three Studies of Lucian Freud" (1969), set a record in 2013 as the most expensive art work ever auctioned—\$142 million.)

I would have to say that, on balance, I do not find the bulk of the work of either Bacon or Moore altogether satisfying. In the most general sense, no doubt, the efforts of both these artists are vital reflections of and responses to a world convulsed by conflict and suffering. They both grappled with the cataclysms of their time, yet their work, in differing ways, strikes me as a turning inward, in one case for a sort of spiritual solace, in the other as merely a means of painful self-exploration.

Moore's work is said to be life-affirming, and to a certain extent it is, while Bacon casts a harsh light on human torment. Both, in one way or another, strive for a means of making sense of their time, while perhaps accommodating themselves to it.

However, whatever their individual weaknesses, a great portion of the artists' difficulty ultimately originates in objective problems of social development in the 20th century. The "unsatisfying" element, in the end, was the delay in the social revolution, which opened the door to the horrors of war and fascism and also generated disappointment and pessimism among the artists and intellectuals. These obstacles helped block Bacon and Moore from more directly and urgently illuminating the human situation.



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