

Francis Bacon: Tate Britain, London

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It used to look like death. Now it looks like life in abundance. And it certainly doesn't look like going away. Francis Bacon's art has survived to his birth centenary, or I guess it will, since that falls next year. Therefore this retrospective at Tate Britain, which opens tomorrow and just squeaks into January, is a centenary show. But survival itself didn't need proving. Since its appearance on the London art scene in the 1940's, attention has never drifted from Bacon's work. What does need marking is how our view of it has altered.

And it seems to me that its whole place has changed. Bacon no longer stands as an artist among artists, not even a very special artist. He won't be grouped with the School of London, say (Freud, Auerbach, Kitaj), or under Post-War European Figuration (Giacometti, Balthus), or in the Great Tradition (Titian, Rubens, Velazquez, Delacroix). No, to me he now looks simply like an icon of general British culture. He's a familiar. You talk about Francis Bacon as you talk about The Beatles or Monty Python.

When the classical composer Mark-Anthony Turnage titled a piece of music *Three Screaming Popes* - referring to Bacon's famous series of images, and referring to them by a nickname - you could see what was going on. A refined art was drawing strength and vitality from a more popular art. He might as well have called the piece *Three Dead Parrots*. And if an unaccustomed air of levity seems to have entered the discussion, that's no mistake either. Bacon has a characteristic British mixture of violence, comedy and bloody-minded big-heartedness. And perhaps you hadn't noticed how fond of animals he is.

Bacon's art is not a tunnel vision of horror, expressing the abject futility of the human condition or the special nightmare of the 20th century. And going to "Francis Bacon", you shouldn't expect to be inching forward in agony through frescoes of the skull (to use a Samuel Beckett-ish phrase). You should expect your money's worth - and you'll get it, even though the price is high. The art of Bacon is a variety bill. It's a hall of mirrors, a crooked house, a peep show, a ghost train, a circus, a limbo dance, a stand-up act, a piece of conjuring.

Its theatricality is obvious. Bacon's paintings are scenes. They're made of

distinct stage areas and backdrops and entrance-doorways and assorted props and upfront actors. His people are presented full on, usually centre frame. Bacon never had any embarrassment concerning “figure” and “ground” – that old modern art nicety about arranging a perfectly balanced integration between the subject and its background. Bacon’s figures stand out starkly and shamelessly against their backgrounds, though perhaps disintegrating into them.

Sure, I don’t deny they are sometimes in a terrible mess. Everyone, on their first encounter with Bacon’s art, gets an impression of car crash, bomb damage, burns, meltdown, slaughterhouse, and for a while you can’t bear to look (or tear your eyes away). The red paint and the open mouths of course encourage this response. Still, they shouldn’t distract you for too long from the amazing performance that’s going on before your very eyes.

Bacon is a magician, a quick-change artist. He brings off the most sudden and elusive disappearing acts and reappearing acts, fusions and transformations. The flesh slips, slurps, smears, flares, blurs, fades, evaporates, abruptly dematerialises. Legerdemain: you look straight at it and you just can’t see how it’s done, how it moves from solid to film to spook to gleam to void and back - and then breaks the picture surface in a great sticky licking whiplash gloop of gunk.

All this “damage” is in fact enormously animating. There isn’t a corpse anywhere in Bacon’s work. His savage treatment is an extension, an exaggeration, of the body’s own movements and sensations and expressions. And though his use of oil paint gives him a much more liquid language, it wouldn’t be wrong to see him in the line of English graphic caricature, and the way it uses distortion, not only to play with likeness, but to inject energy and rub the nerves raw.

Yet the strange condition of Bacon’s bodies is that they are both sensational and invulnerable. They’re in an awful state – and nothing can harm them. Whatever catastrophe befalls their flesh, they’re saved by their very firm, curvy, bouncy outlines. They seem to be held within a mould. Often they look like inflatables. Or rather, they seem invulnerable because they are both infinitely flexible shape-shifters, who can pass through any physical metamorphosis, and also these sturdily thick-skinned creatures, who can always bounce back. They carry a double fantasy of survival, familiar from animated cartoons: total plasticity, total resistance. Another name for this is slapstick.

And so we watch them, on their stages, in action: shouting, racing around, clenched on the loo, sitting chatting, bugging, blowing smoke, throwing up, shaving, turning on a street corner, writhing on a bed, posing, lolling, stretching a leg out delicately. Their human shapes are joined by others, and dance along with them. There are elliptical forms that might be areas of spotlight, and amoeboid blobs that could be cast shadows or pools of spilt drink – except that the colours and tones are all wrong, and they become more like thought bubbles, or ectoplasm, a kind of company.

Sometimes Bacon sticks in a very overt and artificial device, a geometrical circle or a road sign arrow, or a lopsided cubical structure framing the whole action. These things perform a focusing, pointing, intensifying function – look at that, feel that. They're a mark of how far Bacon is from purism. He doesn't have his rules, his resources, which – win or lose - he must work inside. If the act needs one of these extra winks, nudges or double-takes, he throws it in. But if not, not. He's never into playing with the language of painting for its own sake.

It's a surprisingly large and embracing art. You could make a nice I-Spy list of the odd things that turn up in Bacon. His props go far beyond the existential bedsit stuff, the bare light bulbs, ticking mattresses on iron beds, basins, blinds. He's one of the few modern artists to do cars - see them racing across in the background like little Monopoly pieces.

There's his menagerie of animals, real and fantastical, from the monster critters in *Figures at the Base of a Crucifixion*, to the monkeys, dogs, owls and bulls. There are odd bits of undigested reality – did you expect to find in the foreground of a picture a clearly identifiable packet of Rothmans? (Product placement? The show doesn't mention it, but Bacon near the end of his life did a label for Chateau Mouton Rothschild.)

And somehow one manages to leave over to this late point the primary fact that Bacon is an absolutely sumptuous, delicious colourist. I wouldn't call him a real explorer in colour, but he is a great decorator, a great maker of tastes, and the point is: the tastes are rich and sweet, the harmonies are major key. Again, it's a shamelessness, it's showbiz. He can do it and he does it. He doesn't have any puritan qualms about being gorgeous. He's a vulgar entertainer.

Though sometimes put on a high culture pedestal, as tragic and sublime, what's remarkable about Bacon's painting is how assimilative it is. It takes in all levels of culture. His studio, as we know, was a kind of open visual drain through which every kind of image flowed and found its way into the pictures. Any Bacon book will give you a list of his miscellaneous sources, but anything you think you can see, high or low, and in the craziest, most madcap combinations, is probably there. "I look at everything."

It's true that Bacon's express allegiances were tragic. He turned again and again to the ancient Greek tragedian Aeschylus, and a favourite phrase (in a fruity English translation) "the reek of human blood smiles out at me." But when you consider the exuberance, the energy, the sheer elation of Bacon's art, it seems to me that the ancient Greek comedian Aristophanes might be a better name to conjure with.

As a critic once said of him: "It is to this absolute freedom of spirit, which is utterly consoled in advance in every human undertaking, to this world of private serenity, that Aristophanes leads us. If you have not read him, you can scarcely imagine how men can take things so lightly." That's pretty much how I'd praise Bacon too.