

## All Too Human: Getting up close and personal

**All Too Human: Bacon, Freud and a Century of Painting Life at Tate Britain, 28<sup>th</sup> February to 27<sup>th</sup> August 2018**

I'm not sure what to make of *All Too Human*, the summer blockbuster at Tate Britain. So let me start with the positives. There are some mighty fine paintings on show.

At the heart of the exhibition are 30 works by Francis Bacon and Lucian Freud. The leading lights of what R B Kitaj termed the 'School of London', Bacon and Freud were drawn to each other as figurative artists working in an age of abstraction, formed a close friendship and met every day for a quarter of a century to eat, drink and gamble before falling out over fame and money.

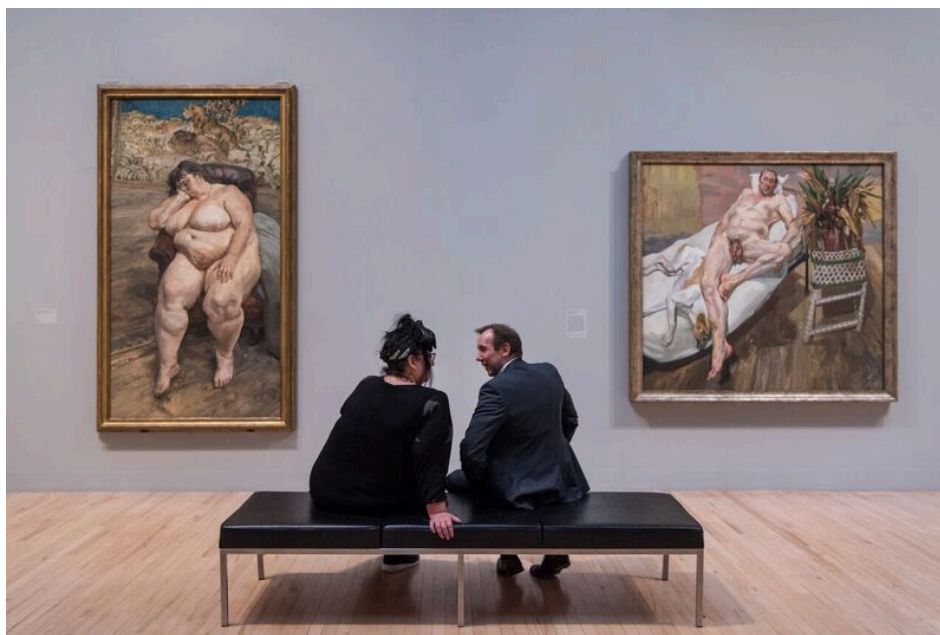
We meet Bacon the older artist first when the 'Butcher of Soho' was still developing his pictorial style. The *Study after Velazquez* (1950) is raw and urgent, the void in the sitter's face prefiguring the infamous screaming Popes. There are animal surrogates for other later portrayals of human angst in *Dog* (1952) and *Study of a Baboon* (1953), while in the ethereal *Study for a Portrait II (after the Life Mask of William Blake)* (1955), Bacon contrives to paint a likeness that instantly dissolves into nothingness.

The early works of Lucian Freud arrive two rooms later. Two feature his first wife Kitty Garman. In *Girl with a Kitten* (1947), Kitty looks off canvas while holding a startled kitten too tightly around the throat. In contrast to the distracted sitter, the cat looks directly at us, holding our gaze. In *Girl with a White Dog* (1950-51), Kitty's dressing gown has slipped revealing her right breast in a gesture that speaks more of the painter's control over the sitter than of tenderness. Painted with cool precision when she was pregnant with his child, Kitty looks tense, tearful and terrified by Freud's close scrutiny.



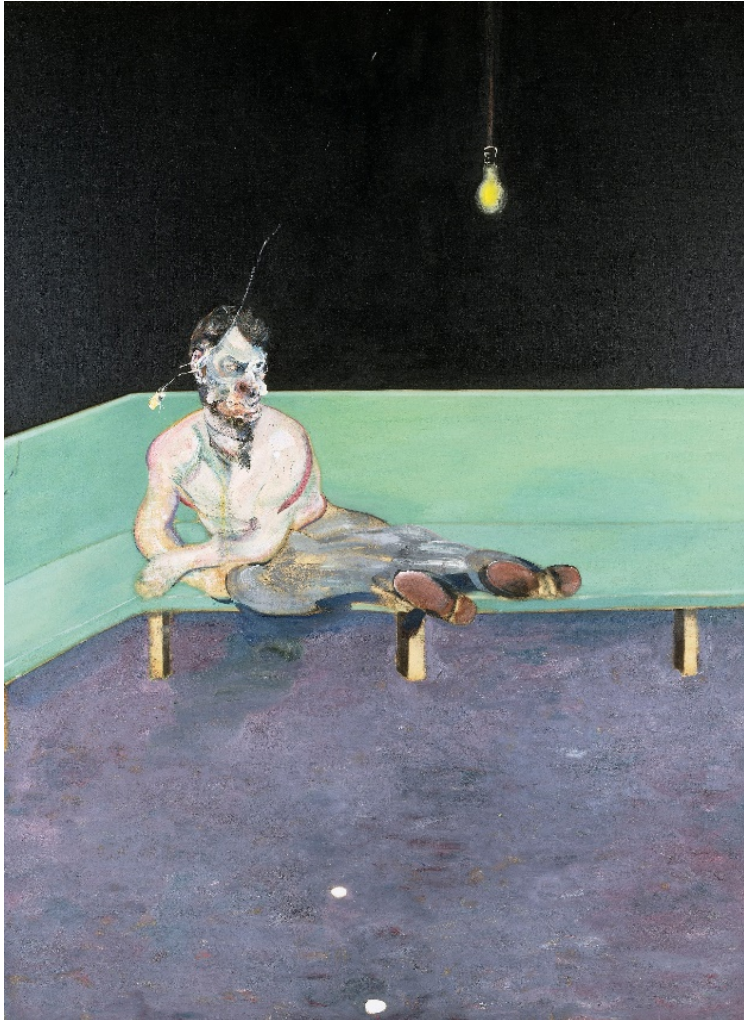
Lucian Freud (1922-2011) *Girl with a White Dog* 1950-1 © Tate

This room immediately leads onto a mini-retrospective of Freud's later works in the show's central gallery. Has there ever been a better painter of flesh, at least in modern times? In *Sleeping by the Lion Carpet* (1996), Sue Tilley's naked body seems to flow lumpily down the canvas, cascading breasts merging into distended stomach and corpulent thighs. Also asleep is *Leigh Bowery* (1991), whose oversized shaven head rests tenderly on his shoulder, almost Christ-like in its repose. In *David and Eli* (2003-4), the naked man lies next to his dog, both relaxed and comfortable in their surprisingly tranquil pose, which finds an echo in *Two Women* (1992), the naked figures on an old iron bed again at ease and vulnerable.



All Too Human (c) Tate photography, Joe Humphrys

Bacon then makes a return. In *Portrait* (1962), Bacon depicts his lover Peter Lacey scowling up from a sofa. Awkward and contorted, his internal organs – or is it his genitals? – lie on top of his stomach. Lacey's successor George Dyer features in *Triptych 1974-77* (1974-77). Unusually for Bacon, these three paintings are set outside with Dyer's body twisting in the shade of a beach umbrella, while two forbidding father-figures lurk in the background. The most interesting painting in this room though is *Study for a Portrait of Lucian Freud* (1964). Not seen in public since 1965, Bacon depicts Freud muscular and bare-chested lit by a single bulb. Freud's sharp features suggest a penetrating, unkind intelligence, while his coiled body is filled with pent-up energy.



Francis Bacon (1909-1992) *Study for Portrait of Lucian Freud* 1964 The Lewis Collection © The Estate of Francis Bacon. All rights reserved. DACS, London Photo: Prudence Cuming Associates Ltd.

Before the Bacon/Freud centrepiece, the show presents some interesting individual paintings and room pairings. Euan Uglow's meticulously composed if dull *Georgia* (1973) shares a room with the softer curves of William Coldstream's *Seated Nude* (1952-53). Frank Auerbach and Leon Kossoff share rooms too. Auerbach's elemental *Head of E.O.W. I* (1960) and Kossoff's sly *Self-Portrait II* (1972) both seem to emerge from folds of paint as if constructed rather than painted.

Later in the show, Michael Andrews and R B Kitaj also share a room. Kitaj paints himself surrounded by émigré booksellers in *Cecil Court London WC2 (The Refugees)* (1983-84), while the room's highlight is Andrews' *Melanie and Me Swimming* (1978-79). Ostensibly about a father teaching his young daughter to swim, the sinister rocks and ominous skies that surround them seem to say this is a precious moment in life about to be cut short.



Michael Andrews (1928-1995) *Melanie and Me Swimming* 1978-9 Tate © The estate of Michael Andrews

The high spot at the end of the show though is Paula Rego. Undervalued but worth the price of admission on her own, Rego's narrative paintings are deeply unsettling and endlessly ambivalent. Take *The Family* (1988). At first glance, a woman and a girl are attacking a seated man, while a younger girl looks on cracking her knuckles voyeuristically. Even knowing that Rego's husband was ill with MS at the time and that the wife and daughter in the painting are struggling to dress the male figure does not completely dispel its strange ambivalence.



Paula Rego (b. 1935) *The Family* 1988 Marlborough International Fine Art © Paula Rego

So Bacon and Freud then and a handful of good individual paintings, sometimes interestingly paired, but here's the rub – what do they have in common with each other and with the show's theme? And to tell the truth, I don't know what this show is actually about.

It could be about many things. Most likely it could be about the connections between the artists. Sickert for instance taught Bomberg; Bomberg taught Coldstream, Auerbach and Kossoff; Coldstream taught Uglow, Andrews and Rego in a virtually biblical lineage. They painted each other too – Bacon painted Freud, Freud painted Auerbach and Celia Paul. And they knew each other socially. But how to account for a whole room devoted to Francis Souza, who arrived from Bombay in 1949, and whose menacing works of static mythological figures clearly come from another tradition entirely?

Or the show could be about painting. How then to account for John Deakin's photographs or the single spindly Giacometti figure? Or it could be about the representation of the human body. But what to make of the cityscapes of war-blighted London by Auerbach and Kossoff that introduce social history into the show's many themes. Or it could be about realism. But what about the modern fairytales of Rego, wonderful though she is, or the stylized modernism of Souza, who becomes more of a misstep by the curators the closer one looks?

And these doubts about the show's coherence become immediately apparent in the very first room. I have no idea what connects Sickert, Bomberg, Spencer and Soutine to each other or to the show's theme. Sickert and Bomberg did arguably influence what follows. But what about Soutine, a Russian émigré Jew who lived and worked in Paris and who has no discernible connection to London? What's more, the three paintings by Soutine have been poorly chosen, as have the gloomy Sickert's. Arguably the two portraits of Patricia Preece, the quizzical lesbian wife of Stanley Spencer, point the way into the show best with their properly rendered blue-veined flesh.

The show starts badly then but it ends on a better note with an all-female final room. Celia Paul's self-portrait in *Painter and Model* (2012) is poignant and reflective, Cecily Brown's works of teenage desire are both painterly and charged, while Lynette Yiadom-Boakye's enigmatic black figures are evocative and dreamlike. Jenny Saville's self-portrait *Reverse* (2002-3) though demands our close attention, with its visceral depiction of her bloodied and bruised face that immediately asks questions about what we are witnessing.



Jenny Saville (b.1970) *Reverse* 2002-3 © Jenny Saville. Courtesy of the artist and Gagosian

So, my advice then is to go for some remarkable individual works by Freud, Andrews and Rego. Better still would be to follow the clues to uncover one of the good smaller shows buried within this mediocre large one and make a coherent show of your own. There isn't one here otherwise.

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