

Francis Bacon: A Terrible Beauty

Foreword by Barbara Dawson, additional contributions by Rebecca Daniels, Barbara Dawson, Marcel Finke, Martin Harrison, Jessica O'Donnell, Joanna Shepard and Logan Sisle, Steidl, Göttingen, Germany, 2009; 208 pages, illustrations, paperback, U.S. \$34.95, ISBN:978-3-86930-027-6

Artists' studios come in all shapes and sizes. Ranging from garrets to home offices with modern comforts and from clinical showroom-like spaces to the griminess of industrial settings, these spaces bear evidence of artists' media and techniques and influence the art produced inside them. Some studios present conundrums: how exactly Morris Louis produced such large paintings in so small a space still presents a puzzle. The culture of artists' lofts has also bestowed a highly generic character to many of today's studios. A case in point is Jussi Tiainen's 2007 photographic survey of contemporary Finnish artists' studios. Remembering specific images of these studios proves exceedingly difficult since most of these artists worked in the open expanse of loft spaces. Jackson Pollock's retrospective exhibition at New York's MoMA in 1998 included a replica studio. Evoking the ambience of a stage set, its presence, together with Hans Namuth's film and photos showing Pollock painting, not only cast him as a performer, but also conferred an uneasy theatrical air to the proceedings.



Francis Bacon
A Terrible Beauty

Steidl

Francis Bacon: A Terrible Beauty presents an altogether different perspective of an artist's working environs. This publication makes what may be the 20th century's most infamous studio its central focus. Now permanently housed at the Dublin City Gallery, The Hugh Lane, the contents of Bacon's studio – what many considered a horrific trash heap –

have been subjected to careful documentation and close analysis, gradually disclosing much information about the artist's working methods and the contradictions inherent to his oeuvre.

What this book offers is a highly illuminating journey through Bacon's studio. Though it doesn't make the same visual impact as the exhibition which it originally accompanied, it conveys important interpretive essays of the studio's contents. The book begins with a brief overview of the artist's output. The story then travels backwards. From completed art works we move to the unfinished paintings kept by the artist, through source material to his media and techniques. The final section contains a selection of notes Bacon wrote to himself. The conclusion of the book essentially brings us to the beginning of his work. It presents ideas out of which Bacon's own inspiration grew. At the same time the book also maps out a circle. Launched in celebration of the centenary of the artist's birth, it recounts the studio's move from London to Dublin, the city in which Bacon was born.

I recall being introduced to Bacon's studio through a documentary film screened at art school back in the 1970s. The camera recorded Bacon speaking about the chromatic richness of an open flesh wound while seated in this squalid and disorderly environment. At the time I not only found it difficult to believe someone could work in such a space, but the topic of the conversation together with the cramped and dingy character of the space also repelled me. The book informs us that the studio's notoriety began a good deal earlier, and photos of it had already appeared in a 1952 issue of *Magazine of Art*.¹ To a limited extent it also contends with Bacon's enigmatic aura. In interviews Bacon sidestepped discussions on technical matters and asserted that the progression of his work developed by chance. As much of what is known about his work stems from these interviews, this aura has, to a large degree, been promulgated by him.

Bacon had developed an awareness of the artistic avant-garde from his travels around Europe that began in the late 1920s, which was well before the point that he decided to become a painter. Though Bacon was drawn to the work of Velazquez, van Gogh and Muybridge, among others, his canvases were informed by a much broader range of influences. He professed to be a late starter and self taught painter with no knowledge of technique, but the contents of the studio show an altogether different picture. The evidence not only circumvents the artist's evasive statements, but also casts his oeuvre in an altogether different light.

In practice Bacon paid a great deal of attention to his materials and technique. The colour and texture of paint, and the visual associations that stemmed from its attributes were extremely important to him. We find discussion and consideration of these technical aspects appearing in every contribution to this publication. Bacon also exercised great discipline in order to develop his craft and invested in a significant amount of experimentation to achieve the visual effects he desired. We learn, for example, that he mixed dust and paint to obtain the colour and texture appropriate to a grey suit and created a pattern of parallel lines across a subject's face by pressing corduroy into wet paint.

In the course of painting portraits Bacon became irritated with the presence of sitters in the studio. His solution was to become increasingly reliant on photographs, going so far as to having many commissioned, and borrowing from this bank of images as he saw fit. In the resulting composite figures – artistic amalgamations deriving from two or more images – are some of the earliest examples of photo generated paintings.

Time and time again we encounter close links between Bacon's paintings, and the photographs and reproductions he tore out of books. An assiduous collector of images of his own work, he kept them close at hand but outside of the studio, filling the wall of an adjacent room with them. Further proof of this link lies in the fact that the photo enlargements that he worked from were almost identical in size to the 35.5 x 30.5 centimetre supports that he used for his portrait paintings.

In his essay, art historian Marcel Finke deflates the commonly held assertion that Bacon focused on depicting violence and injury, arguing that some of the violence in Bacon's imagery derives from the incorporation of disfigured photographs. Bacon saw something positive in disfiguration. Damage occurred randomly to the photographs; many of them became crumpled and torn underfoot in the studio. But Bacon also consciously manipulated a number of them. Examples from the studio show that he painted out portions of some images, created distortions and even added extensions which functioned as handles. These extensions let him hold and turn the images as necessary and prevented the fingers from covering parts of the images. Several pertinent illustrations support Finke's views.

Conservator Joanna Shepard's overview of Bacon's technique highlights the artist's seemingly contradictory ways of working. Her study of abandoned and destroyed canvases found in the studio shows that the artist planned aspects of his compositions,

but also forged a technique that allowed for unpredictable outcomes. The distinct ways in which he treated the figures and backgrounds reinforces this duality. Whereas figures were quickly rendered in oil using a wet-in-wet painting technique, their surrounds are minimalist fields of solid and mottled colours painted with synthetic emulsions. The date of the earliest destroyed painting included in Shepard's survey is 1946-48; the latest is 1986.. Mounted chronologically in the exhibition, they exhibit a gradual reduction in spontaneity and the decreased presence of reworked passages that are plainly visible to the viewer. Cross sections of paint samples taken from a number of these works support the fact that Bacon steadily developed more consistent ways of working. Whereas the earliest sample holds up to twenty paint layers, a sample from the background of a 1962s canvas delineates four changes in colour. The background of a work dating from the 1980s consists of just a single grey layer. Shepard focuses on only one canvas in detail, discussing the evolution of *Study for Man with Microphones* (1946-48), an artistic struggle that was exhibited in two states before it was slashed..

In her essay Shepard also dispels myths associated with Bacon's technique. Claims made by the artist during interviews that his work was influenced by boredom or resulted from a series of accidents don't hold up when compared to the physical evidence from the studio. Shepard also makes note of Bacon's discussion with a major museum about resolving the problem of flaking paint on one of his canvases. We also wonder about his decision to paint on the reverse of primed canvases. Was it really for economic reasons as the artist once suggested? And the question of which medium Bacon used for the backgrounds of his paintings also still hangs in the air. Although Bacon claimed to have used acrylics, the studio held far greater quantities of household emulsion paints.² Unfortunately, no results of media analyses were included in the publication. Shepard notes that the technical scrutiny of Bacon's work is still in its initial stages. On the positive side, the vast quantity of destroyed canvases provides a virtually unlimited number of sampling opportunities.

Francis Bacon: A Terrible Beauty makes an important contribution to the scholarship of this artist's work. Not only does it bring together a broad range of perspectives, but it also introduces new information that modifies our understanding of Bacon's work and his studio. From a practical perspective, the pearly texture of the book's cover together with its medium size and weight makes it a comfortable object to hold, flip through and read. The well written texts are accessible and of interest to specialists as well as to general readers with an interest in

Bacon's oeuvre. A rich selection of reproductions amplifies points made in the texts and conveys the intensity of Bacon's preoccupations. By mapping out the diverse elements which inform these complex paintings and elucidating their structure, the authors help us see them for what they are. The process of reading this volume also changes our relationship with the studio. Its move from London to Dublin necessitated an archaeological survey of over 7,000 objects, a process that has forever altered the status of the studio's contents. We now see it as an historical site and a repository of information. What was once floor-bound detritus has been reclassified as working documents and preparatory studies. The studio now evokes the aura of an art installation – Bacon's final work. More will be revealed as research continues. As Barbara Dawson infers in her essay, this private site, once so silent, has begun to speak.

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¹ These photos documented Bacon's studio at 7 Cromwell Place. The studio now in the collection of Dublin City Gallery The Hugh Lane stood at 7 Reece Mews. Bacon moved into the Reece Mews space in 1961 and worked there until his death in 1992.

² For more information on the artist's materials discovered in the studio please refer to Margarita Cappock's *Francis Bacon's Studio*, London 2005, pp. 205-213.