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GAGOSIAN GALLERY

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Gagosian Looks at Francis Bacon's Late Period

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Francis Bacon's "Second Version of Triptych 1944," 1988.
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In old age, masters like Titian, Velázquez, and Rembrandt loosened up, allowing for more free-flowing brushstrokes, informal compositions, and unplanned events to enter their canvases. The late career of 20th-century painter Francis Bacon never followed this pattern. In the last two decades of his life, the Irish-born, English artist stripped down his evocative figures as his work took on a more formal, economical effect.

This month, 25 pieces from this late period are on display at Gagosian gallery in New York, including loans from the Museum of Modern Art and Tate, among other institutions.

Richard Calvocoressi, formerly the director of the Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art and the Henry Moore Foundation, who recently joined Gagosian in London as director and senior curator, spoke to ARTINFO about why Bacon's style transformed from more painterly to austere in these late years.

Francis Bacon once said: "Painting is an old man's occupation. Some of the greatest have done their best work in old age: Titian and Picasso and others." Should we count Bacon among them?

It has certainly been a period that has been overlooked, as so often with artists. And I do think it has taken awhile for people to appreciate just how radical and extraordinary he was as an artist in these last 15 years. Whether it is his greatest period is really difficult to say — really a subjective

assessment. But, as he leaves out more and more, he is getting at the essence of things in this process of simplifying, paring down, and being more economical.

His earlier work was more improvised and spontaneous. What do you think he achieves in these more controlled late compositions?

What he achieves is not exactly a state of calm but a certain equilibrium. There is a Classical grandeur and authority about these late works. It is something you find in another great English artist who is more or less his contemporary, Henry Moore. In Henry Moore's sculpture there is a kind of reduction to simplified forms on a large scale. Monumentality, I think, is probably the word I am looking for.

Would you say Bacon's own work becomes more sculptural in the last 15 years?

Yes, I think so. He is looking at space, at the arrangement of forms in space, and the forms themselves become more three dimensional, more volumetric; the figures are often placed on plinths, pedestals, ledges. He is thinking of sculpture a lot — he wanted to make sculpture, in fact.

But he never did?

No, he never did. But he even at one point asked if he could take sculpture lessons with Henry Moore, astonishing as it may seem. It never happened; I think Henry Moore was politely noncommittal. They weren't the best of friends, though they certainly admired each other.

Is there a particular work that is emblematic of this pared-down aesthetic and more sculptural expression of space?

Yes, in fact, his very last triptych, which MoMA has lent to the exhibition, is very simplified and very symmetrical. The left- and right-hand panels show the male human body from the waist down stepping out of a black rectangle, in each case with one leg still in the black rectangle. You could read these as some kind of tomb-like slab. The central panel shows the coupling figures you find in his work going back to the 1950s, but in a much more abbreviated form. And then again in the left and the right panels, as if pinned on, are portrait heads based on photographs — one of his friend, this lover, who was Spanish and lived in Madrid, and the other of himself. But the whole triptych has a kind of architectural, monumental feel about it. It is as if it were a kind of memorial or monument. Even the portraits on the side panels appear like portraits of the dead pinned to tombstones.

Generally there seem to be fewer portraits of friends in the work. Why is that?

He depended less on living people and his lovers — as many of them had died by that time — and more on ideas, emotions, feelings portrayed in Greek tragedy and literature. There is an extraordinary painting inspired by the Oresteia of Aeschylus, a couple of paintings inspired by Ingres, another of a deceased friend depicted as a sphinx, as in Greek myths. And the other great literary source, of course, for his work was the poetry of T.S. Eliot.

He said that in the trilogy of the Oresteia, Agamemnon had always struck him and inspired him, particularly its violent nature. It is the most blood-soaked play that there is. He had always been

fascinated by blood and butchery and man's cruelty to man, so you get more of that coming in, less perhaps his own personal biography.

And do we see him reflecting more on death?

There is a kind of ghostlike quality to these last paintings: figures disappearing into nothing, or else just glimpsed. There is one particular 1987 self-portrait painted with aerosol spray where it looks as if he really is fading away. It is extraordinarily delicate, so much so that it doesn't look as if it has been painted — it looks like some sort of x-ray.