The New York Times
December 4, 2015

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

The New York Times

Vivid and Visual Narrative of a Career's Final Act

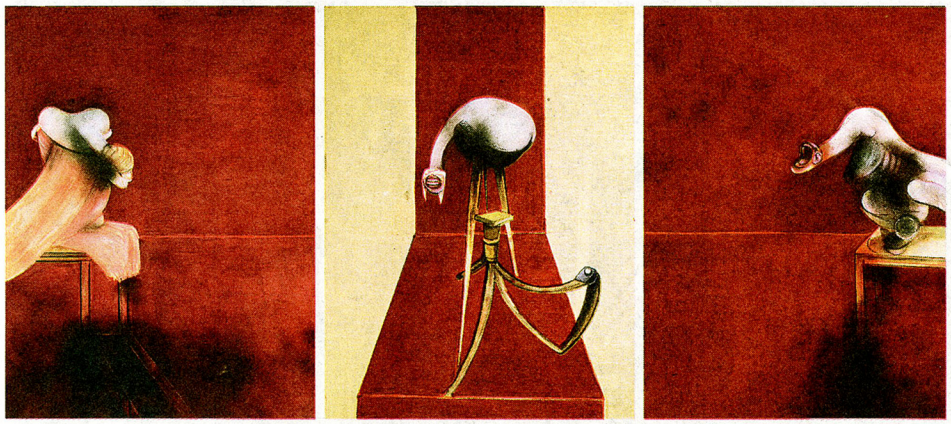
KEN JOHNSON
ART REVIEW

In 1944, Francis Bacon painted a triptych called "Three Studies for Figures at the Base of a Crucifixion," which caused a considerable stir when it was exhibited in London the following year. With its horrifying, anguished, gargoyle-like figures rendered in gray against vivid orange backgrounds, it captured the feeling of a mind pushed to the brink of insanity by the violence, terror and absurdity of a world at war. Bacon (1909–92), who had no formal art schooling, was in his mid-30s and not well known. Generally seen as his first mature work, "Three Studies" started a career that would make him one of the most popular artists of the 20th century.

Forty-four years later, Bacon reprised the "Three Studies" with a triptych called "Second Version of Triptych 1944," this one much bigger, at about 20 feet wide and almost 5 feet high, with the same three demonic figures on backgrounds of velvety maroon. It's one of the outstanding works in "Francis Bacon: Late Paintings," a show at Gagosian Gallery of paintings from his last two decades. Billed by the gallery as the first in-depth presentation of the artist's late work, it's an exhibition that Bacon fans should not miss.

The show proves that Bacon worked at a high level into his 80s. The eight works displayed in Gagosian's sixth floor, skylit gallery are all terrifically vivid, psychologically as well as visually. The 17 miscellaneous works of portraiture and narrative crowded into the narrow gallery on the fifth floor make a weaker impression, but they testify to a still vital imagination and painterly ambition.

"Francis Bacon: Late Paintings" continues through Dec. 12 at Gagosian, 980 Madison Avenue at 77th Street; 212-744-2313, gagosian.com.



Francis Bacon's 1988 piece "Second Version of Triptych 1944" is part of an exhibition of Bacon's later works at the Gagosian Gallery. This work reprises Bacon's "Three Studies for Figures at the Base of a Crucifixion."

The exhibition also offers an opportunity to rethink what kind of artist Bacon was. If your idea of him was formed by the more than 45 versions of the so-called "screaming pope" that he started producing in the early 1950s, you may think of him as a painter of 20th century horror. But is this scathing image of hysteria not also hysterically funny? As his palette brightened from the 1960s on, and as broader areas of pure color set off his smeary, rubbery, cartoonish figures, he started to look more like a painter of mordant comedy than existential tragedy.

"Second Version of Triptych 1944" might not seem funny at first, but consider the gray monsters pictured in the middle and right-hand panels. They're more goofy than scary. The middle one has an egg-shaped body on three, long, pointy stilts; the other resembles a side of beef. Both have long serpentine necks ending in toothy mouths, one grinning, the other either screaming or threatening to bite. They resemble escapees from movies like "Ghostbusters" and "Men in Black." The kneeling, armless woman in gauzy orange dress in the left-hand panel seems to be warily eyeing them.

On the other hand, the deep red backgrounds of the outer panels, darkened in places by black spray paint, suggest high seriousness. Without the figures, they could be late Rothkos. In the middle panel, a red carpet leads to a platform where the central chimera presides like a nightmarish priest. With shiny gold frames and reflective glass containing each canvas — required by Bacon for his later works — the whole ensemble becomes a hyperbolic, ultimately comedic mix of the sacred and the profane, the ridiculous and the sublime. That can be said about his entire oeuvre.

Bacon wasn't a painter's painter in the sense that, say, his onetime friend Lucian Freud was. But if you don't think of illustration as a bad thing, then it's fair to say he was a great illustrator. Often his paintings are like much-enlarged panels from an unusually stylish graphic novel. The two canvases of "Diptych: Study of the Human Body — From a Drawing by Ingres" could be details lifted from a longer, sequential narrative. The right side features a headless, fleshy, nude female torso, while the left pictures a headless man, naked but for a cricket player's leg- and foot-wear, crouching with hands ready to catch a ball. Backgrounds of lush cadmium orange and overall dimensions of about 6½ feet high by 10 feet wide, give the diptych an imposing physicality, but it remains essentially a kind of surrealistic cartoon.

Francis Bacon
Late Paintings
Gagosian Gallery

"Oedipus and the Sphinx After Ingres" updates an ancient myth with help from one of Bacon's favorite artists. In a room with bright pink walls, a muscular man in a sleeveless white undershirt, with his foot and lower leg in bandages leaking blood, faces a beast inspired by an Ingres painting with the head and breasts of a woman merged with a stumpy body of indeterminate species; whether animate or carved from stone is hard to say. An open closet door reveals something ragged, bloody and spectral hanging from a horizontal bar. As Bacon was wont to do, he added graphic signs like forensic markers: an oval around Oedipus's foot and a white arrow pointing to the thing in the closet — the Sphinx's secret revealed, perhaps.

The exhibition's funniest painting is "Jet of Water." From the end of a pipe emerging to one side of an urban alley or rooftop a diagonal swath of white paint shoots across the whole canvas. It's a visual pun linking Abstract Expressionist-style splatter to a phallic reference.

Most surprising of all is "Blood on Pavement," a nearly abstract painting of a puddle of blood on a sidewalk with a black wall directly behind it. Like a lingering shot in a noirish detective movie, this raises a question: What if Bacon had been a filmmaker? Chances are he'd have been a great one.