

## GAGOSIAN GALLERY

# HYPERALLERGIC

### The Calmer, Contemplative Mood of Francis Bacon's Late Paintings

Melissa Stern



*Francis Bacon, "Self-Portrait" (1978), oil on canvas, 78 x 58 inches (Private Collection, © The Estate of Francis Bacon, all rights reserved / DACS, London / ARS, NY 2015 photography by Robert McKeever, courtesy Gagosian Gallery)*

Over the past several years the Gagosian Gallery in New York City has mounted shows described as “museum quality.” Borrowing heavily from institutions and private collectors these exhibitions such as *Jean-Michel Basquiat* (2013), the Takashi Murakami exhibition (2014), *Picasso & the Camera* (2014), and the two-part exhibition *In the Studio* (2015) all wowed New Yorkers with their breadth and depth. Each drew impressive crowds — with lines down the block — for a commercial gallery.

The most recent show *Francis Bacon: Late Paintings* is perhaps the most stunning of them all. Not because of size; in fact, it's probably the smallest of all the aforementioned blockbusters. Twenty-seven paintings all made in the last two decades or so of Bacon's turbulent life have been hung on mushroom-colored walls on the two floors of Gagosian's Madison Avenue gallery. The works are complemented by a hallway exhibit of candid personal photographs of Bacon taken by Eddy Batache, mostly shot in the mid-1980s, in which Bacon appears almost happy, an occasional flutter of a smile replacing his usual look of utter despair.

Having not really focused on Bacon's work in quite a while I was blown away by how fresh, shocking, and incredibly beautiful the paintings are. His work seems to be a lightning rod for strong reaction. From Jerry Saltz's fierce review of the 2009 retrospective of Bacon's work at the Metropolitan Museum of Art to the group of ladies on an art tour, who were at the gallery the day I visited and left muttering "too hard." Indeed, a group of young art students in the gallery were so moved that they were almost unable to speak when asked what they thought of the show.

The paintings in the exhibit reflect a change of mood in Bacon's work over time. Work of the earlier decades portray the agonies of man, masses of ectoplasm, flesh, bone, and loneliness, whereas his later works give way to calmer psycho-landscapes. Gone are the piles of flesh, replaced by a vision more stripped to its essentials, both in terms of painting and psychology.

There is, of course, that gorgeous color that Bacon's work has characteristically employed. His palette has always been sophisticated. Pairings of brilliant oranges and reds with cool blues and greens, and of odd, neutral tones with warm black set the images in motion. The work is both aggressively modernist, reflecting a color palette that was initially used in fashion and interior design in the '60s and 70s (look at Rudi Gernreich's clothes and Harry Bertoin's furniture) and is distinctly 20th century. The use of oil pastel in conjunction with oil paint contributes to many of the urgent gestures in these works as well as the delicate veils of color we see.

All of this sublime color of course belies the deep psychological trauma and loneliness of the figures that inhabit Bacon's world. The later paintings more often than not portray a solitary figure constrained by the suggestion of a geometric architecture. In the triptychs, there is a single figure in each frame. As always, Bacon walks the line between figuration and abstraction. "Figure in Movement" (1978) can be seen as an acrobat caught in movement, the backdrop and suggestion of a painted ring hinting at a performance. Or one may look at the work as the interplay of form, color, and paint, the figure reduced to a tangle of strong, abstracted forms. The kicker in this painting is the purple shadow that lies underneath the figure. The shadow, which appears as a standing figure with hands on its hips, bears no relation to the movement or figure above, suggesting that it is perhaps someone else's shadow, a watcher of some sort, and perhaps it is we who are the watchers, a tacit acknowledgement of the relationship between the painter and the viewer. It is part of the mystery of the narrative.

"In Study From the Male Body" (1986) Bacon has placed a male nude on what could be a sculpture stand or a piece of mid-century furniture. The figure sits in an awkward pose, head looking right, torso dissolved into vague outlines of muscle and flesh. There is a very odd spatial game in this painting. It's impossible to tell whether the architecture is advancing or receding — everything is out of whack here in time, space, and mind. The architectural black square behind the figure's head melts and merges with the body, a depiction painted in beautiful, glowing color, like darkness descending over the mind.

Much of the overt pain and fear of Bacon's earlier work from the 1940s seems to turn inward in the '70s and '80s. These paintings are more contemplative. We see few of the screaming rictuses that haunted the paintings of the 1940s; rather, that pain feels more muted. The small portraits that hang interspersed between the huge canvases seem to be exploring form and abstraction, rather than the "horror" often attributed to Bacon's portraits. In "Study for a Portrait" (1978) we see a placid male face, perhaps painted from a photograph, as Bacon was known to prefer this to painting from life. The face is defined by pastel forms and gesture begins to take over figuration.

Bacon has begun to carve the face, not in a gristly way, but into abstraction. The concrete forms have begun to be more prominent than the flesh of the man beneath them.

If you didn't already like Francis Bacon's work, this exhibition may not change your mind. However, perhaps those who found Bacon's early work too graphic and too "fleshy" will be drawn in by the sheer beauty of his painting as well as by what some might perceive as a more palatable sensibility. These later paintings convey both a technical mastery and the self-reflectiveness of an artist who had entered a new phase of maturity.

Francis Bacon: Late Paintings *continues at Gagosian Gallery (980 Madison Avenue, Upper East Side, Manhattan) through December 12.*