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**Francis Bacon: Couplings review – a taboo-busting opus of sizzling flesh**  
*Sublime paintings of sex in all its guises unlock entire worlds of beauty and terror – and reveal Bacon as the true heir to Picasso*

Jonathan Jones



*Monstrous mashup ... Three Studies of Figures on Beds (1972) on display at the Francis Bacon: Couplings exhibition.  
Photograph: Guy Bell/Rex/Shutterstock*

The authority of Francis Bacon's art is papal. I am not referring to the paintings inspired by Velázquez's portrait of Pope Innocent X that made him famous. It's just that walking into Gagosian's immaculate selection of his paintings feels like exploring the art treasures of St Peter's and the Vatican, so sublime is this display. If these pictures really were in the Vatican, though, they'd have to be veiled, perhaps even in a secret room where only cardinals could peek. For this is a sustained exploration of how Bacon saw sex.

An imaginary curtain swooshes back as you enter a chapel-like space to see *Two Figures*, painted in 1953 and last exhibited in Bacon's retrospective at the Grand Palais in Paris in 1971. It has the sense of some supreme revelation. Two men make love on a bed that's an expanse of crumpled white sheets. As they do it they look out of the canvas at us – but their faces are distorted, blurred. One might be grinning into a camera. It's as if they are gleefully showing us their crime, their identities disguised for their protection. When Bacon painted this in the 1950s, he really was portraying a crime. That thrills him. The white bed is enclosed in a transparent box

whose outline in perspective draws you towards the central act. It resembles the glass booths that enclose those renowned paintings of popes. Yet it has the opposite meaning.

Bacon's popes are trapped in a hellish prison. Two Figures, painted in the same style, in the same era, is their antithesis. This transparent box does not confine. It opens on to a stormy space filled with rushing vertical lines. It's as if the bedroom contains the cosmos. These lovers have an entire universe of beauty and terror at their command, their bed is a stage where anything can happen.



*Two Figures with a Monkey, 1973 Photograph: Francis Bacon/The Estate of Francis Bacon. All rights reserved, DACS/Artimage 2019.*

Bacon once said he wanted his art to “unlock the valves of feeling”. It’s an odd metaphor, as if the human self was a Victorian steam engine that needed its pistons greased. But this incredible painting, a baroque masterpiece painted in the 20th century, unlocks them all right. But it would be sentimental to say it’s a proudly gay artwork or claim Bacon as any kind of a role model. His art glories in chaos and torture. In one later work here, lovers copulate on a kind of operating table raised on one of the horrible art deco tubular frames he frequently painted – and that he’d designed as a young man in the 1930s – while a monkey looks out from under the table with hilarious nihilism.

Sometimes Bacon sees much more than the beast in us. His 1959 painting *Sleeping Figure* explores the contours and soft secrets of his lover Peter Lacy’s unconscious flesh. It is a mighty depiction of the nude, a curvaceous pink landscape of desire resting on a blue sofa that resembles a plinth. As Lacy sleeps, Bacon can contemplate him gently. It’s natural to compare Bacon’s paintings of the male form with the western tradition of the male nude: his cluttered paint-spattered studio had books on Michelangelo among the “physique” magazines. But looking at this enrapturing nude, I don’t see the toughness of Michelangelo so much as the melting colours of Titian. Just like the pinks that delicately waft a Titian Venus into being, Bacon’s reds and whites create a swirling mist of flesh.

In his 1959 painting *Lying Figure*, that painterly ambiguity becomes openly hermaphroditic as a nude spreads her/his legs in the air. Bacon indulges a summer afternoon daydream in which anything and anyone is possible. He painted this idle fleshy reverie by the seaside in Cornwall but the blue sea could as easily be Picasso's Med. This exhibition makes a great case for Bacon as the Spanish genius's true heir: the only artist who could add to Picasso's metamorphic lexicon of the human figure. *Three Studies of Figures on Beds*, the most disturbing work here, was painted in 1972, a year before Picasso died. Its monstrous mashup of buttocks, limbs and heads is a turbocharged reply to the impossible orifices in Picasso's late nudes.



*Supreme revelation ... Two Figures (1953). Photograph: Guy Bell/Rex/Shutterstock*

Speaking of buttocks, this exhibition has some of the best I've ever seen. The lover on his front in *Two Figures in the Grass*, from 1954, displays two big hemispheres of rose and purple with a giant shadowed cleft. Other anatomical details emerge with similar precision from these storms of colour. Bacon painted penises much more exactly than he ever portrayed faces. In his 1967 painting *Two Figures on a Couch*, two men are locked in a fleshy grapple. Your eye flinches at their violent contortions. Ah yes, you think, almost with a weary sigh, another coupling. Then your attention rests on the clenched fist of one of them. It is a tight ball of pure feeling.

Bacon was an artist capable of flamboyant allegory. From 1940s paintings of demonic gargoyles to late canvases decorated with meat and swastikas, he threw symbols about with generous abandon. This exhibition deftly strips away the excess to reveal his true greatness as an artist of our vulnerable human pulp.