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Sex and death: how Francis Bacon reinvented art history around his essential themes

Unseen in London for 50 years, the artist's paintings of double figures come to Gagosian

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Francis Bacon's 'Two Figures with a Monkey' (1973) © The Estate of Francis Bacon DACS/Artimage 2019/ Prudence Cuming

“Why ever change the subject?” Francis Bacon asked. “You could go for the whole of your life painting the same subject.” So, dominating postwar figurative painting with enthralling virtuosity and infinite variety, he did: almost all his compositions feature a figure, recognisable but blurred, distorted, convulsed, within an airless, confined space. Rigorously, there is no narrative.

Two figures, though, caused Bacon trouble, because “you immediately come on the storytelling aspect of the relationships . . . I always hope to be able to make a great number of figures without a narrative”. These magnificent, complex double figure paintings, some unseen in London for 50 years or ever, star in Francis Bacon: Couplings, the outstanding current exhibition at Gagosian’s Grosvenor Hill venue.

Highlights include the sensationalist “feelthy pictures”, as Bacon’s early gallerist Erica Brausen called the explicit works she kept hidden behind a curtain at her Hanover Gallery in London, and sold at reduced prices.

The writhing copulating men, adapted from Eadweard Muybridge’s photographs of wrestlers, in “Two Figures in the Grass”, provoked public complaints to the police when shown in 1955; the lyrical/savage composition declares man’s untamed, instinctual nature, and was inspired by a visit to Africa where Bacon said he “felt mesmerised by the excitement of seeing animals move through the long grass”.

“Two Figures” (1953), one of Bacon’s most voluptuous yet brusque paintings, made at the height of his violent affair with pilot Peter Lacy, sets bruised flesh against crisp, crumpled white sheets, derived from those in Manet’s “Olympia”. Striations from a background curtain continue through the two heads, at once diffusing and enlivening the embrace/assault. What Bacon called the “bed of crime” is aggrandised into a fraught, classical interior. Lucian Freud owned — and surely learnt from — this painting, and refused to lend it for Tate’s 1985 retrospective; it has not been exhibited since Bacon’s 1971 show at the Grand Palais in Paris.

Sourced from private and public collections, the “couplings” here span Bacon’s most significant two decades, building up to and immediately following that landmark Paris exhibition, and trace with concentrated flair how he unpacked and reinvented art history around his essential themes of sex and death.

Mexico’s Museo Tamayo has sent — how does Gagosian manage this? — the rarity “Two Figures with a Monkey”: the animal leaps out from beneath the couple thrashing on a tabletop to snarl mockingly at us, voyeuristic observers, while a free-floating pillow, painted with exquisite delicacy, offsets the brutish figures. The uncharacteristic “Lying Figure” is double in that it is androgynous; unusually too it is placed against abstract horizontal planes in changing sea colours — it was painted in St Ives, when Bacon lived next to Patrick Heron, whose abstractions he loathed.

Exhibited only once, at a New York commercial gallery in 1968, is the intimate contorted “Two Figures on a Couch”, from 1967, the year homosexuality was decriminalised for those over 21 in England. The deeply private, claustrophobic rendering probably reflects Bacon’s reservations about this: the frisson of the forbidden thrills through his oeuvre.

The earliest work, “Painting” (1950), features a twisting muscular nude, based on Michelangelo’s “Dying Slave”, and its shadow of death; the heavy, slow pair pass before a bright striped screen hung from a brass rail, suggesting the scene is a bath house. “Figures in a Landscape” (c1956) merges crouching nudes with a photographic image, a cameraman mauled by a lion in Africa, within a geometric, transparent golden throne as in Bacon’s screaming pope paintings. “Three Studies of Figures on Beds” (1972) commemorates Bacon’s lover George Dyer, who committed suicide hours before the opening of the Grand Palais exhibition.

Bacon outlined thick circles, drawn around dustbin lids, to direct the eye to sexualised encounters — a penis and a bondage black leather belt are clearly delineated — on bare mattresses in two panels; the last contains only Dyer's encircled profile: Eros and Thanatos inseparable again.

The palette brightens in the 1970s but the mood of isolation and meaninglessness darkens. Bacon's working title for "Two Studies from the Human Body" was "The Last Man on Earth": the central figure stumbling on a blank green surface is mirrored/shadowed by a hunched ape-like form with a cormorant's head. "Two Men Working in a Field" is a one-off: twinned naked workers plough a furrowed ochre terrain of scumbled impasto coursing with watery lilac rivulets. The muddy corrugations parallel Bacon's familiar shuttered screens, and are held within an ellipsis surrounded by expanses of unnatural deep blue. Seen from above, the field is shaped like a vast eye running with tears; it is also a gaping abyss, pointlessly, repeatedly, raked over by the men, just as Bacon poured paint into the voids of his canvases: creation wrought from the bleakest vision of futility.