TimeOut
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GAGOSIAN

‘Francis Bacon: The First Pope’

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Installation view, Francis Bacon, © The Estate of Francis Bacon. All rights reserved. DACS 2022 Photo by Prudence Cuming

The man on the dais screams his invective. The microphone in front of him shakes with the volume of his speech. His mouth is wide, his teeth are bared, the anger and viciousness of his rhetoric is almost real, physical, like you can feel it in your chest.

This is Francis Bacon’s first pope painting. He painted it in 1946, based on a Velázquez image of Pope Innocent X. It would lead to more pope paintings, images full of aggression and tyrannical hate, but this first one hasn’t been seen in public since it was sold in 1967.

And now it’s here, presented all on its own, with no other works around it, in a pitch black room. It’s like entering a tiny private chapel. The air conditioner hums, but otherwise it’s silent. You are alone with this one single, beautiful, awful, violent painting.

The pope in his shirt and tie is part religious leader, part tyrannical despot. He stands in front of a neo-classical Nazi colonnade, spewing his bile at a crowd of violet cyclamen flowers. It’s a stunning, powerful work.

If the giant Royal Academy exhibition of Bacon’s work that’s on show now is an overwhelming celebration of his art, this is a tiny, private, personal meditation. It’s a chance to be one on one with his painting, eyeball to eyeball with his first pope, and it’s amazing.