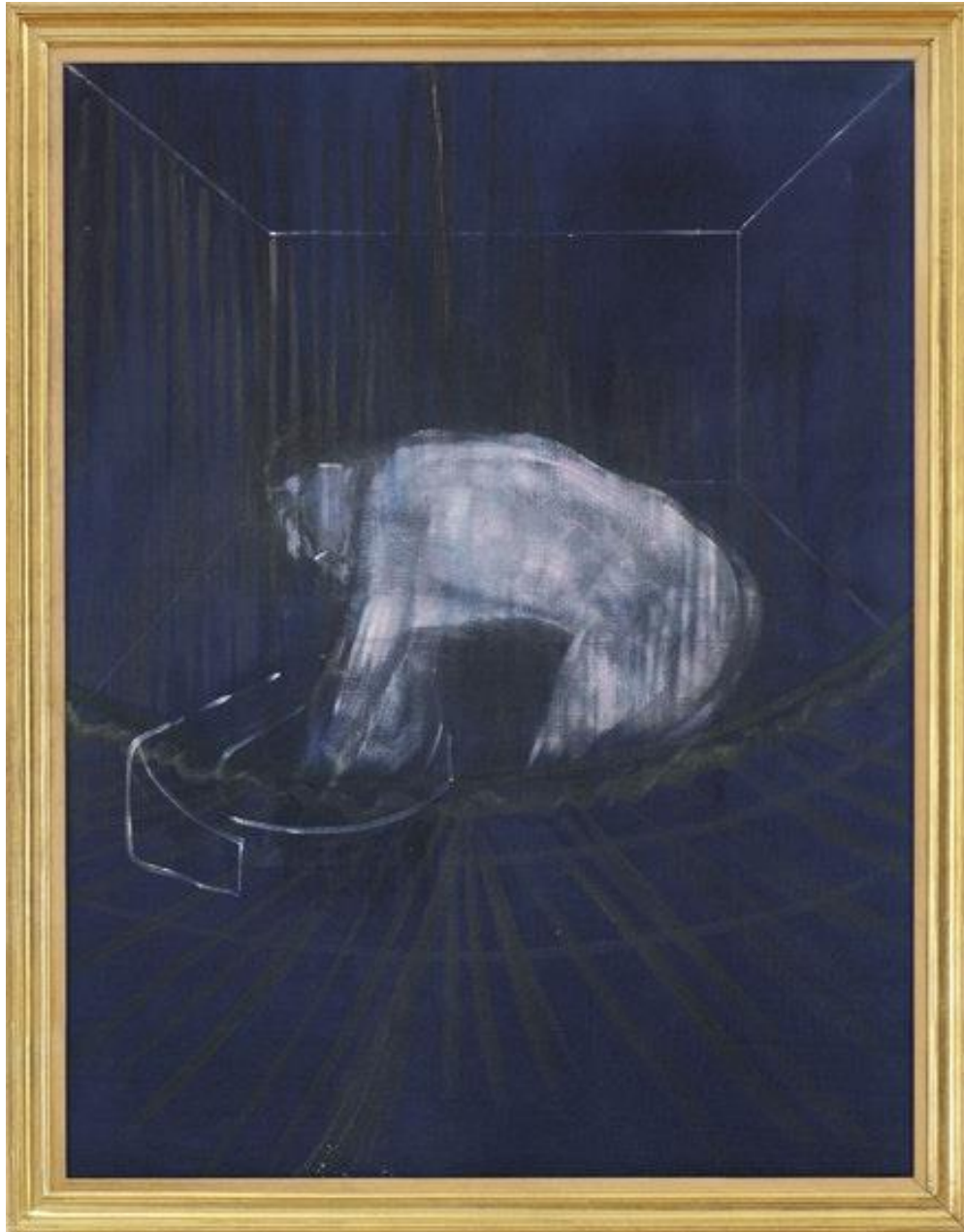


SKARSTEDT

 **BROOKLYN RAIL**

Francis Bacon: *Faces & Figures*

By Alfred Mac Adam



Francis Bacon, *Man at a Washbasin*, ca. 1954. Oil on canvas, 59 7/8 x 45 5/8 inches. © The Estate of Francis Bacon. All rights reserved. / DACS, London / ARS, NY 2022.

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Francis Bacon's biography may help us to understand the artist, but can explain nothing about his art. That is, from the biographer's perspective, the work only exists to reveal something about Bacon's tumultuous life. To learn that such and such a figure is George Dyer, a lover, or Henrietta Moraes, a friend, is at worst anecdotal gossip and at best historical fact.

To deal with Bacon as artist, to deal with this extraordinary panoply of ten paintings assembled here, we have to deal with a number of undeniable facts. Bacon does not represent people as they are: his bodies or faces are contorted, his colors are unnatural, and his disregard for verisimilitude is total. To deal with Bacon's work, we must equip ourselves with an aesthetic of ugliness.

Umberto Eco's 2007 essay "On Ugliness" establishes the ugly as an artistic category, one that traffics in rejection, disgust, lack of harmony, irrationality. Notions such as these, and not the names of Bacon's sitters, explain our unending fascination with Bacon, revealing why the emotional and psychological reactions his paintings arouse in us far outweigh the importance of his drinking, gambling, and sexual proclivities.

If we do want to take into account a biographical fact about Bacon in looking at his work, it would be that he is not our contemporary. Born in 1909, before World War I, he comes from a remote, alien social and artistic milieu. It is precisely Bacon's unabashed manipulation of "primitive art" elements, his affinities with Picasso, with the distortions and unnatural colors of Expressionism, with his reworking of the composition principles in seventeenth-century Dutch portraiture and genre paintings: all of that links him inextricably to a twentieth-century art that revealed in its links to art history.

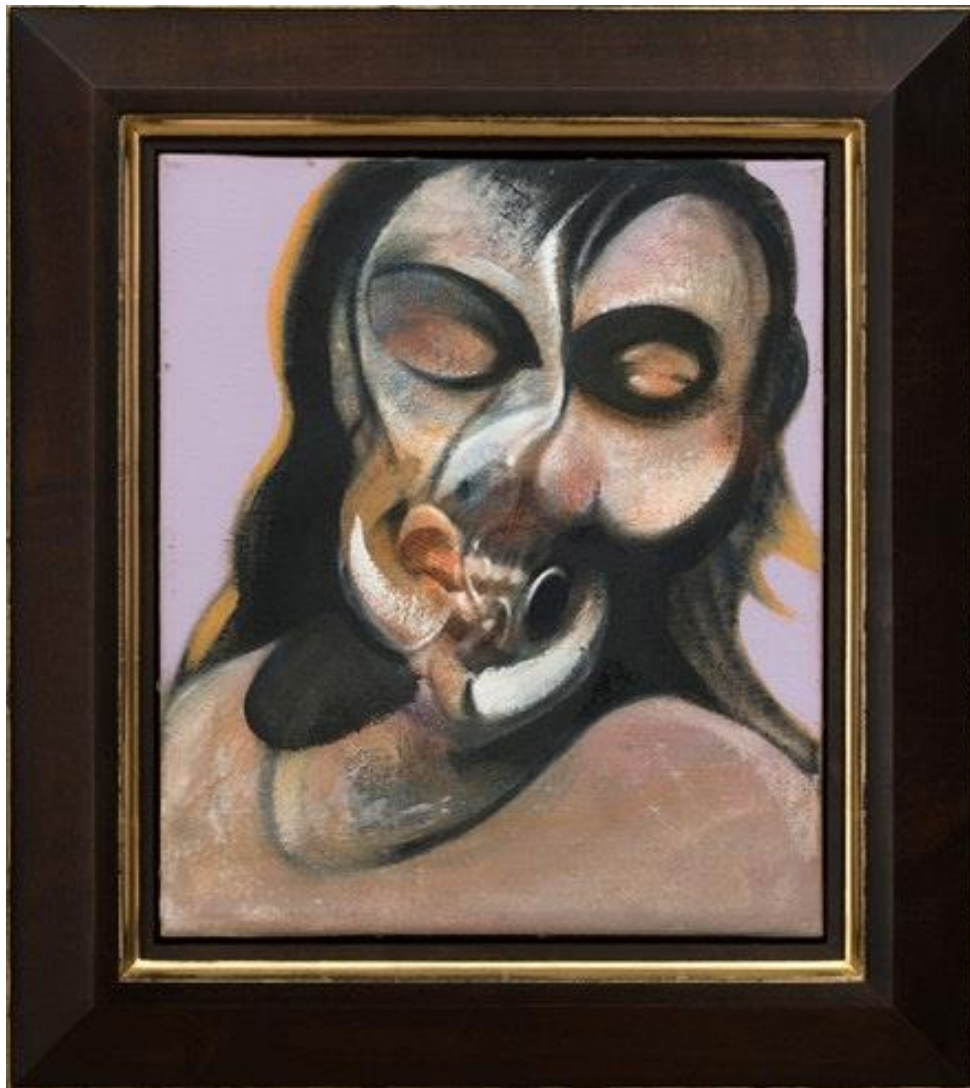


Francis Bacon, *Three Studies for Portrait of George Dyer (on light ground)*, 1964. Oil on canvas, in three parts, 14 x 12 inches each. © The Estate of Francis Bacon. All rights reserved. / DACS, London / ARS, NY 2022.

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The ten oils on canvas here, ranging from the astounding *Man at a Washbasin* (ca. 1954) to *Study for Self-Portrait* (1979), do not pretend to be a comprehensive presentation of Bacon's long career. There are no biomorphic figures, no screaming popes—only explorations of figures within the confines of pictorial space. But that self-imposed limitation is a tremendous opportunity to look closely at superb examples of Bacon's work.

Two studies come to the point: *Three Studies for Portrait of George Dyer (on light ground)* (1964) and *Three Studies for a Portrait* (1976). The six images are all 14 by 12, so despite the twelve-year distance between them, the two series share a genealogy that leads back to Van Dyck's 1635 *Charles I in Three Positions*. That each portrait of the king is slightly different from the others may have appealed to Bacon, who also individualizes each of his images by torquing them in different ways and defacing them with swaths of paint. True, the Dyer images are slightly closer to reality than the 1976 studies, but the face in both instances is no longer human. In the 1976 triptych, the echo of Picasso's mask faces in *Demaiselles d'Avignon* is palpable, and we are staring into an allegory we can never hope to fathom. Bacon leaves Picasso and his bordello far behind and focuses instead on the reality of grotesque distortion.



Francis Bacon, *Study of Henrietta Moraes Laughing*, 1969. Oil on canvas, 14 x 12 inches. © The Estate of Francis Bacon. All rights reserved. / DACS, London / ARS, NY 2022.

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The same applies to *Study of Henrietta Moraes Laughing* (1969) and the three other portraits. The Moraes image is arresting because it might be a death mask, while the *Study for a Head* (1955), the largest of the portraits at 40 by 30 inches, constitutes a parodic version of a conventional portrait—a bank president perhaps now transformed into a leprous demon.

The other four works here, all on a larger scale, involve figures arranging themselves in space. Here Bacon takes cues from a host of antecedents: Goya, Ingres, and Manet, who all painted women reclining on divans. *Man at a Washbasin* (ca. 1954) takes up a Degas theme: a person washing themselves off. But Bacon reduces his figure to a ghostly presence, as if to draw attention away from the central figure to the composition itself: the rigorous geometry of a Dutch interior, static but animated by the nebulous figure.

Figure in Movement (1972), the largest piece in the show at 78 by 58 inches, is the culmination of Bacon's aesthetic of the ugly. Again, a single, writhing figure isolated in a yellow space, perhaps a model on break reading a newspaper and moving around rather than posed. But the torsion and distortion contrast with the control Bacon imposes on the space, with its roomlike geometry enhanced by encasing rectangular outlines. The figure, as in the other two images of seated figures, is both in transit and fixed for all time, captured in an artistic experiment of simultaneity.

This is the way to truly experience Francis Bacon's greatness: a dose large enough to tell us what Bacon was all about and small enough to remain comprehensible.