

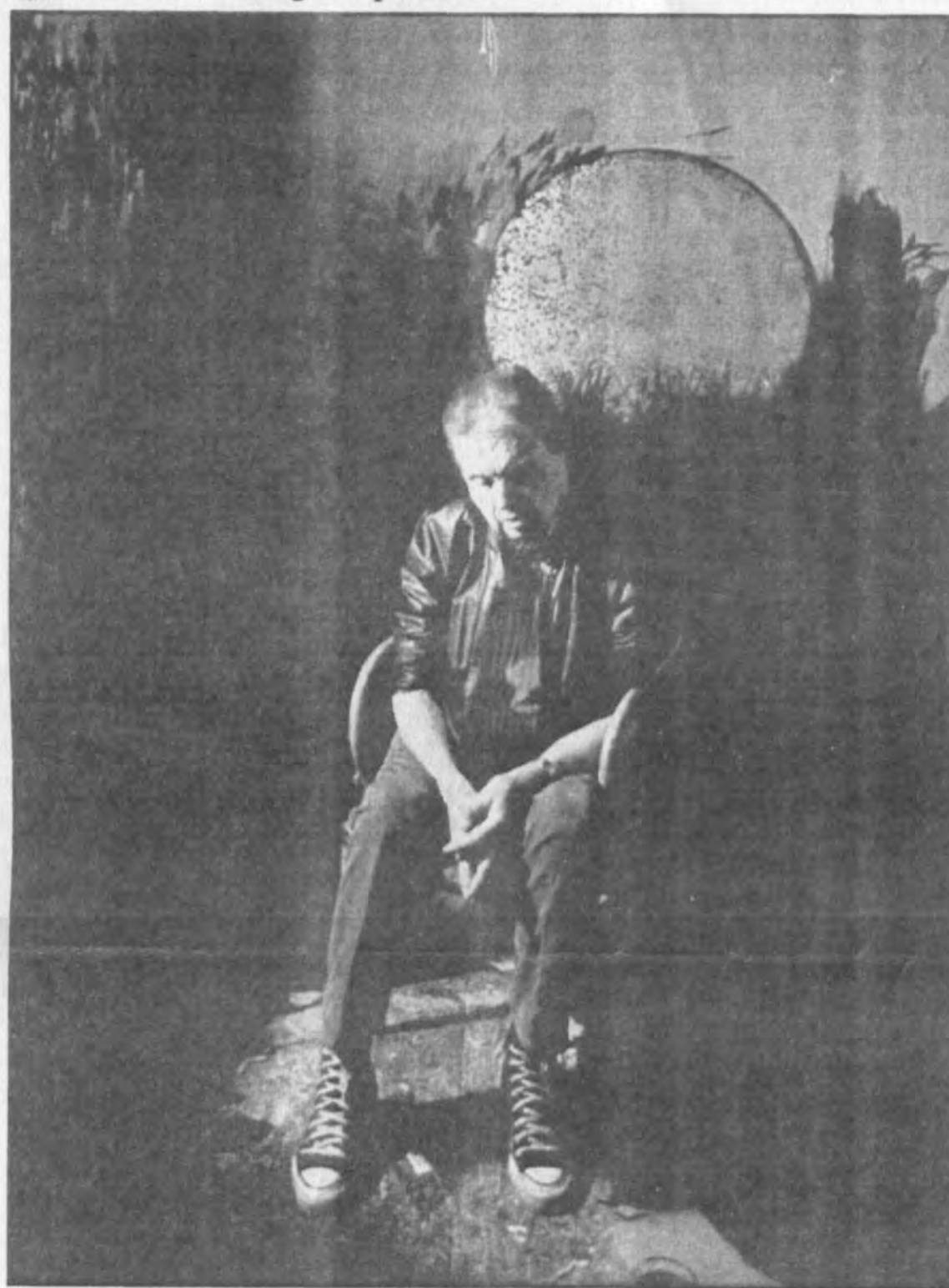
Exclusive

Francis Bacon: I painted to be loved

The last summing up, two months before he died, by the greatest Irish painter of the 20th century in an interview with the photographer, Francis Jacobetti

Francis Bacon died in 1992. All his life he had been fascinated by photographic images, and he himself was photographed again and again—by Cecil Beaton, Bill Brandt, Richard Avedon, John Deakin, to name only the most famous—so it is not surprising or inappropriate that the last months of his life, from autumn 1991 to early 1992, were spent allowing the French photographer Francis Jacobetti, 64, to take experimental photos of him.

Jacobetti learnt his craft as a photo reporter with Paris Match and has become an established portrait photographer (among his sitters, the writer Gabriel García Márquez and the Dalai Lama). The more conventional, posed portrait of Bacon was taken just a week before he died. In the other images, Jacobetti is playing variations on Bacon paintings, with the head of the pope, the carcass, the blurring; he offers a merging of his artistic personality with that of the great painter.



In June, these photographs, as well as a number of previously unexhibited paintings by Bacon, go on display at Marlborough, the London gallery that represented him.

Here we publish extracts of one of the last interviews conducted with Bacon.

Francis Jacobetti: Were you born an artist?

Francis Bacon: I don't think people are born artists; I think it comes from a mixture of your surroundings, the people you meet, and luck. It is not hereditary, thank goodness. But "artist" is a big word; there are very few painters who are real artists, but, on the other hand, there are craftsmen working with wood or glass who are genuine artists. The creative instinct certainly exists. That is what makes me get up every morning and forces me to paint, otherwise I should be a tramp. Picasso discussed this very tellingly in Clouzot's film...

FG: Why do you paint? For whom?

[The creative process] is a little like the physical act of love. It can be as violent as fucking, like an orgasm or an ejaculation. The result is often disappointing but the process is highly exciting.

FB: I paint for myself. I don't know how to do anything else, anyway. Also I have to earn my living, and occupy myself. I think that all human actions are designed to seduce, to please. I don't give a toss about that any more. But maybe at the beginning, I painted to be loved...yes, that's certainly right. It's so nice being loved. Now I don't give a toss, I'm old. At the same time it gives you such pleasure if people like what you do. Today I paint very little, although I do paint in the morning because I'm unable to stop; or I paint when I'm in love, perhaps, but it's too late now, I'm too old.

These days I look like an old bird. I'm nearly 82, I'm losing my memory, I've been seriously ill for two years, I have suffered from asthma attacks since I was a child and it gets no better in old age. Asthma is a terrible complaint; when night falls you are never sure if you will wake up the next morning. It attacks the very foundations of life—your breathing. You always feel as if you are in remission, always ready to die. I should really live in the mountains, but it's impossible to paint in the mountains, at any rate for me. I need the city; I need to

know there are people around me strolling, arguing, fucking—living, and yet I go out very rarely; I stay here in my cage. But I know there are people around me and that is enough.

I often think I am very stupid, I'm often surprised by my optimism. Very often, in fact; it's my nature; and with a nature like this I should never have painted. I should have been, I don't know, a con-man, a robber or a prostitute. But it was vanity that made me choose painting, vanity and chance.

All artists are vain, they long to be recognised and to leave something to posterity. They want to be loved, and at the same time they want to be free. But nobody is free. Some artists leave remarkable things which, a 100 years later, don't work at all. I have left my mark; my work is hung in museums, but maybe one day the Tate Gallery or the other museums will banish me to the cellar...you never know. Although for me personally it is not important, my vanity still tells me that it is. Painting gave meaning to my life which without it it would not have had.

FG: What about the influence of Picasso?

FB: Picasso is the reason why I paint. He is the father figure, who gave me the wish to paint. In 1929 I saw some completely revolutionary pieces, "Le baiser" and "Les baigneuses". The figures are organic. They were my inspiration in "The Crucifixion". Picasso was the first person to produce figurative paintings which overturned the rules of appearance; he suggested appearance without using the usual codes, without respecting the representational truth of form, but using a breath of irrationality instead, to make representation stronger and more direct; so that form could pass directly from the eye to the stomach without going through the brain.

Picasso opened the door to all these systems. I have tried to stick my foot in the door so that it does not close. Picasso was one of that genius caste which includes Rembrandt, Michelangelo, Van Gogh and above all Velázquez. Velázquez found the perfect balance between the ideal illustration which he was required to produce, and the overwhelming emotion he aroused in the spectator. He was not only the photographer of the Spanish court, he was also the psychoanalyst of the human soul of the Spanish court. In each of his portraits you find the life and the death of his characters. Like a line stretching from the beginning to the end. But it was Picasso who overturned the whole thing!

FG: What part does photography play in your work?

FB: I have always been very interested in photography. I have looked at far more photographs than I have paintings. Because their reality is stronger than reality itself.

When you witness an event you are often incapable of explaining it in detail. And also, in police enquiries, all the witnesses have different views of the event. Whereas when you look at an image symbolising the event, you can pause over the event as it happened and feel it more strongly, partake of it more intensely.

Photography, for me, brings us back to the actual event more clearly, more directly. Contemplation allows me to imagine my own truth, and the idea that I get of this truth helps me to discover other ideas, and so on...My work becomes a chain of ideas created by the many images that I look at and which I have registered, often on contrasting subjects. I look for the suggestion of one image as it relates to another.

My principal source of visual information is Muybridge, the 19th-century photographer who photographed human and animal movement. His work is unbelievably precise. He created a visual dictionary of movement, a living dictionary. Everything is stated there, without talent or scenery, like an encyclopaedia of sequences on the movement of humans and animals. Because I work without models, it is an incredibly useful source of inspiration. Images also help me find and realise ideas. I look at hundreds of very different, contrasting images and I pinch details from them, rather like people who eat from other people's plates. When I paint, I want to paint an image from my imagination, and this image is subsequently transformed. I even asked a

photographer friend to photograph some men wrestling, but it did not work. People have always thought that I took my movement from photographs, but it is completely untrue. I invent what I paint. Anyway, often enough it is the opposite of natural movement.

FG: When you paint, what state are you in?

FB: Before I start painting I have a slightly ambiguous feeling: happiness is a special excitement because unhappiness is always possible a moment later. That's like life: it is so precious because death is always beckoning. At that moment I have only

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the vaguest notion of what I would like to do. You could say that I have no inspiration, that I only need to paint. I am in an excited state. I begin by applying the paint manually. In this way, something happens or fails to happen.

The creative process is a cocktail of instinct, skill, culture and a highly creative feverishness. It is not like a drug; it is a particular state when everything happens very quickly, a mixture of consciousness and unconsciousness, of fear and pleasure; it's a little like making love, the physical act of love. It can be as violent as fucking, like an orgasm or an ejaculation. The result is often disappointing, but the process is highly exciting.

FG: Your painting is often described as violent...

FB: My painting is not violent; it's life that is violent. I have endured physical violence, I have even had my teeth broken. Sexuality, human emotion, everyday life, personal humiliation (you only have to watch television)—violence is part of human nature. Even within the most beautiful landscape, in the trees, under the leaves the insects are eating each other; violence is a part of life.



You are born, you fuck, you die. What could be more violent than that? You come into this world with a shout. Fucking, particularly between men, is a very violent act, and don't let's even mention death. In between we fight to protect ourselves, to earn money; we are humiliated daily by stupid idiots for even more stupid reasons. Amidst it all we love or we don't love. It's all the same anyway; it passes the time.

My painting is a representation of life, my own life above all, which has been very difficult. So perhaps my painting is very violent, but this is natural to me. I have been lucky enough to be able to live on my obsession. This is my only success. I have no moral lesson to preach, nor any advice to give. Nietzsche said, "Everything is so absurd that we might as well be extraordinary". I am content with just being ordinary.

FG: What does flesh represent to you?

FB: Flesh and meat are life! If I paint red meat as I paint bodies it is just because I find it very beautiful. I don't think anyone has ever really understood that. Ham, pigs, tongues, sides of beef seen in the butcher's window, all that death, I find it very beautiful. And it's all for sale—how unbelievably surrealistic!

I often imagine that the accident that made man into the animal

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he has become also happened to other animals—lions or hyenas for example—while man remained a primate. What would have happened? It's bizarre, I have never read anything about it, by Darwin or anyone else. Perhaps it's science fiction, but it's very interesting. I imagine men hanging in butcher's shops for hyenas, who would be dressed in fur coats. The men would be hung by their feet, or cut up for stew or kebabs.

We are all meat. All the inhabitants of this planet are made of meat. And most of them are carnivores. And when you fuck, it's a piece of meat penetrating another piece of meat. There is no difference between our meat and the meat of an ox or an elephant.

FG: The scream?

FB: We are born with a scream; we come into life with a scream, and maybe love is a mosquito net between the fear of living and the fear of death. That was one of my real obsessions. The men I painted were all in extreme situations, and the scream is a transcription of their pain.

Animals scream when they are frightened or in pain, so do chil-

dren. But men are more discreet and more inhibited. They do not cry or scream except in situations of extreme pain. We come into the world with a scream and we often also die with a scream. Perhaps the scream is the most direct symbol of the human condition.

FG: And David Sylvester, [the art critic, since deceased, who interviewed and wrote about Bacon]?

FB: I think David Sylvester is a very intelligent man, but I don't think he has a genuine feel for painting because in the book he wrote with me he mentioned all sorts of frightful people, all these painters whom he loved and admired. I think he has no critical sense.

FG: Is death an obsession with you?

FB: Yes, terrible. Once when I was 15 or 16 years old I saw a dog peeing and I realised at that moment that I was going to die. I think there is an equally important difficulty in man's life. The moment when you discover that youth does not last for ever. I understood it that day. I thought about death and since

then I have thought about it every day.

Even as old as I am, it doesn't stop me from looking at men...as if anything might happen, as if life were about to start again; often when I go out in the evening I flirt as if I were only 50. We ought to be able to change our engines.

This is the artist's privilege—to be ageless. Passion keeps you young, and passion and liberty are so seductive. When I paint I am ageless, I just have the pleasure or the difficulty of painting.

FG: How would you like to die?

FB: Fast.

Interview by Francis Giacobetti

□ A longer version of this interview appears in the *livre d'artiste*, with an introduction by Philippe Garner, 484 pp, 250 photographs by Francis Giacobetti, 150 images of Bacon's paintings, that will be published in a limited edition of 3,000 by Turner & Turner in June 2004. Until December 2003, copies may be reserved at the price of €4,850

□ An exhibition (11 June-5 July) of Francis Giacobetti's photographs and Francis Bacon paintings is at Marlborough Gallery, London. This exhibition will go on tour.



These photos of Francis Bacon were taken by Francis Giacobetti from autumn 1991 to 1992, when Bacon died

