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 Giacobetti

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 Giacobetti, 64, to take experimental photos of him. Giacobetti truant his craft as a photo reporter with Paris Match and has become an established portrait photographer (among his subjects, the writer Gabriel Garcia Marquez and the Dalai Lama). The more conventional, posed portrait of Bacon was taken just a week before he died. In the other images, Giacobetti is playing on variations of Bacon’s paintings, with the head of the pope, the carcase, 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In June, these photographs, as well as a number of previously unpublished paintings by Bacon, go on display at Marlborough, the London gallery that represented him.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 Giacobetti: 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 force me to paint, otherwise I should be a tramp. Picasso discussed it so thoughtfully in Chouzot’s film...

FG: Why do you paint? For whom?

In 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...

FR: 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.

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FR: 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 I suppose you like such people 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 photographer friend to photograph some men wrestling, but it didn’t 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?

FR: 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 life: it is so precious because death is always beckoning. At that moment I have only

Picaso was one of that genius caste which includes Rembrandt, Michelangelo, Van Gogh and, above all, Velázquez.
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. Hams, 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 surrealist!

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

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. All 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 most 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 children. 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 pacing 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 30. 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*

Q: A longer version of this interview appears in the film *Artic Fire*, with an introduction by Philippe Garrel, 490 pp, 200 photographs by Francis Giacobetti, 100 Images of Bacon, paintings, that will be published in a limited edition of 5,000 by Towner & Turner in June 2004. Until December 2003, copies may be reserved at the price of £44.49.

Q: 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.