

Francis Bacon: the last interview

Francis Giacobetti

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IN AUTUMN 1991 the Corsican photographer Francis Giacobetti began an extraordinary series of portraits of Francis Bacon. He was introduced to Bacon, a famously reluctant photographic subject, by the artist's close friend, Michel Archimbaud. The two got along famously. "Why didn't you introduce me before?" said Bacon. They met 11 times over the next few months, for lunch or dinner, or for the extensive portrait sessions which took place in suites in two London hotels - 11 Cadogan Gardens and Browns - and a rented studio.

Bacon seems to have warmed to Giacobetti's fluid, low-tech approach. "I had no lights. In the studio I found a strip of neon and I shot a lot of portraits using just that." Giacobetti was inspired by Bacon's paintings, and many of the portraits echo familiar motifs - meat on a hook, a single lightbulb - and colours from the artist's palette. There are triptychs and diptychs, and a fascinating sequence of Bacon painting. And while Giacobetti worked, they talked. In the end they decided to capture their interview on video; some of it is reproduced here.

According to Giacobetti, "Bacon enjoyed the process very much. Usually he hated to pose. He told me, I'm very shy. I hate myself. I'm like an owl.' And he was so sharp. I've photographed everyone - Picasso, the Dalai Lama, Yehudi Menuhin, Einstein ... But I never saw anyone so clever."

The two met for the last time in early 1992. Bacon died that April in Madrid. It was 11 years before Giacobetti was finally able to realise the work and produce the prints, which are currently being shown for the first time at the Marlborough Gallery in London. Time has done nothing to dilute their impact, or the stark honesty of the artist's words.

Francis Giacobetti Tell me about your childhood.

Francis Bacon I remember my shyness above all. I didn't feel good about myself. People frightened me. I felt like I wasn't normal. The fact that I was asthmatic prevented me from going to school; I spent all my time with family and the priest who gave me my schooling. So I didn't have any friends, I was very alone. I remember crying a lot. When I think of my childhood, I see something very heavy, very cold, like a block of ice. I think I was unhappy as a child. I only ever had one view: that of emerging from it. Added to this was my shyness ... it was like an illness. It was unbearable. Later on, I thought that a shy old man is ridiculous, so I tried to change. But it didn't work.

Even though financially we didn't really have any problems (we had a few but not a great deal), I still have the memory of a miserable childhood, as my parents were bourgeois. I am inclined to say that I got the wrong family. I don't think it suited me.

My father didn't love me, that's for sure. I think he hated me. He didn't want to spend

money on me. He was always looking for an excuse to get his servants to beat me. He was a difficult man, very vindictive. He lost his temper with everyone, he didn't have any friends. He was aggressive ... an old bastard. When I was about 15 years old, I got laid by the grooms that worked for him. He was a racehorse trainer, a failed trainer. That's definitely the reason why I have never painted horses. I think it's a very beautiful animal but my childhood memories are quite negative and the horse brings back a distant anguish. And besides, I don't like the smell of horse dung, but I find it sexually arousing, like urine. It's very real, it's very virile. But it's also the reminder of my father, who was an emotionally disturbed person. He didn't love me and I didn't love him either. It was very ambiguous though, because I was sexually attracted to him. At the time, I didn't know how to explain my feelings. I only understood afterwards, by sleeping with his servants.

FG What role did photography play in your work?

FB I have always been very interested in photography. I've looked at photos much more than paintings. Because they are more real than reality itself. When we witness an event, we are often unable to explain the details. In police inquiries, every witness has a different view of the event. When you look at an image that symbolises the event, you can browse through the snapshot of it and experience it in a much stronger way, and embrace it with more intensity. Photography, in my case, reflects the event in a clearer, more direct way. Contemplation allows me to imagine my version of the truth and the image that I have of this truth leads me to discover other ideas, and so on ... My work becomes a chain of ideas created by various images that I look at and that I have often registered with contradictory subjects. I look for the suggestion of an image in comparison to another.

I enjoy looking at images since my obsession is painting in a representational manner, so I need to see forms and representational spaces. That gives me momentum but I don't copy photographs apart from a few Eadweard Muybridge characters that I have integrated into paintings such as *L'Enfant paralitique* or *Les Lutteurs*. It's like cooking. (I was once a chef in a restaurant.) You mix the vegetables, you know the taste of each thing individually, but the blending with herbs and meat, the mixture of different molecules, produces another completely different taste. Every art needs to use images, except for, I think, music.

There are reproductions of my paintings all around my kitchen but I no longer see them. Those that are in the studio help me to imagine details of other images. There are also heaps of illustrated books, magazines, photos. I call it my imagination material. I need to visualise things that lead me to other forms, that lead me to visualise forms that lead me to other forms or subjects, details, images that influence my nervous system and transform the basic idea. It's the same with books or films that I see. I think it's often like that for artists. Picasso was a sponge, he made use of everything. Me, I'm like an albatross: I take in thousands of images like fish, then I spit them out on the canvas.

My principal source of visual information is Muybridge, the photographer of the last 19th century who photographed human and animal movement. It's a work of unbelievable precision. He created a visual dictionary on movement, an animated dictionary. Everything is there, recorded, untalented, without staging, like a sequenced encyclopedia on the possibilities of human and animal movement. For me, who doesn't have any models, it's an unbelievable source of inspiration. The images help me just as much to find ideas as to create them. I look at a lot of very different images, very contradictory and I take in details a bit like those people who eat off other people's plates. When I paint, I have the desire to paint an image that I am imagining, and this image transforms itself. I have also asked a photographer friend to do men fighting but that didn't work. People have always believed that I painted movement directly from photos, but that's completely wrong. I invent what I paint. Besides, it's very often the opposite of natural movement. I have also painted men making love according to Muybridge's images by using images of man fighting. And I have used pornographic images as well. At the time, it interested me. There weren't porno magazines and films like there are now. But I have always been interested in pornography. A painter is alone in front of his canvas; it's his imagination that creates, and sexuality needs to feed on images that you see or invent. By imagining, you transgress all taboos, anything is possible. And pornography helps. I have seen books of Robert Mapplethorpe. It's interesting but too graphic, too plastic. You lose the excitement that only comes from a

crude image. Beauty is the enemy of sex.

FG Picasso once admitted to me that nothing aroused him more than drawing female genitals. When you paint men's bodies, is there a physical arousal?

FB When I paint two men bugging, it's not by chance, it's because I feel some kind of need to do it. A physical need. It's more primitive than crucifixions. Painting is very physical as it is, painting scenes of men in action gives me a great pleasure. It's one of the aspects of human behaviour that most interests me. It's instinct, and it's my instinct to paint it. Men's bodies sexually arouse me so I paint men's bodies very often, it makes up almost all of my works. I have also painted women's bodies, but I have destroyed a lot of the canvases. I've kept very few of them, if any. Henrietta Moraes is perhaps the most successful, the one that has the best market I think.

Hence I've also done very crude canvases, very pornographic, but I destroyed them. I found it too easy. For a painter, moments of sexual fantasy can lead to paintings that are often very banal, and when the arousal fades, you realise that it hasn't done anything. It's like drugs. When you are on a high, the result of your work is rarely something of quality: too many things are exterior. And too many exterior things have disrupted your nervous system, and the result is often disappointing.

FG What do you believe in?

FB I believe in being selfish. I have only myself to think of. I have hardly any family left and very few friends that are still alive. And a painter works with his human material, not with colours and paintbrushes. It's his thoughts that enter the painting. But I don't expect any certainty in life, I don't believe in anything, not in God, not in morality, not in social success ... I just believe in the present moment if it has genius - in the spinning roulette ball or in the emotions that I experience when what I transmit on to the canvas works. I am completely amoral and atheist, and if I hadn't painted, I would have been a thief or a criminal. My paintings are a lot less violent than me. Perhaps if my childhood had been happier, I would have painted bouquets of flowers.

FG Many think that you stand with Picasso as the most important painter of this century.

FB Celebrity bullshit! We die famous instead of being the unknown soldier. And we always talk rubbish in the small world of art. Perhaps what we have in common is the fact that we like life above all. But Picasso invented everything. After him, we can no longer paint without thinking of him. Fame is of no importance but it is important because one needs to live and sell one's paintings. And there is always, in every one of us, the concept of being the best. Hence, it's vanity and also egoism, because your work is you. It's you who sells yourself: your talent, your instinct, your techniques. There are thousands of painters, but very few are the chosen ones. Even if one defends oneself, one still always wants to leave something that will enter the history of art. That is vanity, the driving force of artists. Artists are very vain. We always think we are making the painting that will revolutionise all painting, and that's why we keep going. You never retire from being vain.

FG You hate conventions?

FB I have never made concessions. Not to fashion, not to constraints, not to anything. I've been lucky enough not to have to, but it's in my character to refuse social life, obligations, and to prefer simple people to sophisticated people. And luck has had it that I haven't needed to compromise myself in any way. Perhaps, since I haven't been to school like other people, I have invented my own rules which please me and which above all are more suited to me.

I also think that I have a difficult character. I'm a pain. I say the truth even if it hurts. I have the excuse of liking wine, and when I'm drunk, I talk a lot of nonsense; but, as I have an excuse, I make the most of it. We are all prisoners, we are all prisoners of love, one's family, one's childhood, profession. Man's universe is the opposite of freedom, and the older we get, the more this becomes true. I am a desperate optimist. Optimist, because I live from day to day as if I am never going to die. Desperate because I don't have a very high

opinion of the human being and of me in particular.

FG What is your vision of the world?

FB Since the beginning of time, we have had countless examples of human violence even in our very civilised century. We have even created bombs capable of blowing up the planet a thousand times over. An artist instinctively takes all this into account. He can't do otherwise. I am a painter of the 20th century: during my childhood I lived through the revolutionary Irish movement, Sinn Fein, and the wars, Hiroshima, Hitler, the death camps, and daily violence that I've experienced all my life. And after all that they want me to paint bunches of pink flowers ... But that's not my thing. The only things that interest me are people, their folly, their ways, their anguish, this unbelievable, purely accidental intelligence which has shattered the planet, and which maybe, one day, will destroy it. I am not a pessimist. My temperament is strangely optimistic. But I am lucid.

FG Is death an obsession?

FB Yes, terribly so. One day, when I was 15 or 16 years old, I saw a dog having a crap and I realised at that moment that I was going to die. I think there is a difficult moment in the life of a man. The moment when he discovers that youth is not eternal. On this day I realised this. I thought about death and since then, I think about death every day. But that doesn't stop me from looking at men even of my age, as if everything is still to play for, as if life could have a fresh start and often when I go out in the evenings, I flirt as if I was 50. You should be able to change the motor. That is the privilege of artists, they don't have an age. Passion lasts and passion and freedom is seductive. When I paint, I no longer have an age, just the pleasure or difficulty in painting.

FG How would you like to die?

FB Quickly. E

Francis Bacon by Francis Giacobetti' is at Marlborough Fine Art, 6 Albermarle Street, London W1 (020-7629 5161), until 5 July 2003. A signed, limited edition large-format book containing 150 of Bacon's paintings and 250 of Giacobetti's photographs, edited by Olivier Binst, will be published in 2004, priced EUR4,850.