

Dark Vision

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FRANCIS BACON
Anatomy of an Enigma
By Michael Peppiatt

Farrar, Straus & Giroux: 366 pp., \$30

The more indiscreet you are, the better the book will be," Francis Bacon counseled Michael Peppiatt about this biography.

The English painter believed in laying things bare. The bold brushwork of his canvases presented screaming popes, anguished figures crouched on toilets, nude male wrestlers in a frenzy of violent sex. Discretion, clearly, was not the better part of valor for the octogenarian who, after more than the usual accord that most artists enjoy in their lifetimes—blockbuster exhibitions at the Grand Palais in Paris, the Tate in London, the Metropolitan and the Museum of Modern Art in New York; the sale of one of his paintings at Sotheby's for more than \$6 million dollars—told Peppiatt, "My life hasn't changed much, you know. I still masturbate."

Yet for all of Bacon's license with him, and licentiousness in life, Peppiatt has been remarkably restrained in "Francis Bacon: Anatomy of an Enigma." Five years after the painter's death, and some 20 years since that initial discussion in which Bacon advised indiscretion, the editor of *Art International* and writer on modern European art has produced a balanced, intelligent book that illuminates Bacon's paintings with an objectivity and perceptiveness for which the work cries out.

Bacon's art will never seem the same to us if, instead of thinking of its violence as gratuitous or imposed—as the twisted bodies and howling mouths sometimes seem—we consider the human suffering a result of "the tension that plagued Ireland throughout his childhood." Peppiatt supports the point well. Bacon was Anglo-Irish. His family and his beloved nurse were Protestant, while "their domestic staff and seven of their nine grooms were Irish and Catholic." Bacon's maternal grandfather, a police officer, was a likely target for IRA violence at the time of the Civil War. One evening when Bacon was about 10 years old, the two were driving home when their car got stuck in a bog that conveniently trapped such vehicles for local rebels. Bacon and his grandfather scrambled to a large house whose owners cross-examined them with guns before taking them in. "An awareness of life as a perpetual hunt—the stalker and his prey, the aggressor and his victim—was to be fundamental to Bacon," Peppiatt tells us. That sort of insight helps clarify the art.

The theme of aggressor and victim was crucial to Bacon's sexuality as well. Nearing the age of 50 and living in Morocco, he would periodically be found "beaten up on some street in Tangier in the early hours of the morning." And it wasn't only toward Bacon's person that Peter Lacy, Bacon's lover of the mid-'50s, was brutal. Lacy slashed most of the artist's work of the previous six months with a knife. The assaults prompted the British consul-general in Tangier to ask the police chief to increase the patrol of the city's dark alleys. But after a few weeks, and several more beatings, the police chief came back to the consul-general with the explanation that there was nothing he could do; Bacon liked this state of affairs. That self-destructiveness clearly showed up in his work.

Bacon cherished artifice as well as outra-



From "John Deakin: Photographs," selected and with an essay by Robin Muir (The Vendome Press: 144 pp., \$50)

geousness. These tastes permeated his statements, both verbal and artistic; his personal appearance as well as the look of his art. There were no boundaries. "All life is really ridiculous—ridiculous and futile," the artist declared. So he willingly invented, or re-invented himself, just as he developed a hitherto unknown world in his work.

To demonstrate Bacon's "uninhibited love of original effects," Peppiatt provides a description from one of the artist's close friends, the painter and writer Michael Wishart:

"I enjoyed watching Francis make up his face. He applied the basic foundation with lightning dexterity born of long practice. He was more careful, even sparing, with the rouge. For his hair he had a selection of Kiwi boot polishes in various browns. He blended these on the back of his hand, selecting a tone appropriate for the particular evening, and he brushed them through his abundant hair with a shoe brush. He polished his teeth with Vim. He looked remarkably young, even before this alchemy."

As for lipstick, we hear of another observer "wondering whether she should tell him he must have sucked his paintbrush and got red paint all over his mouth." Peppiatt's skill is that he does not just provide such vivid descriptions but connects them accurately to Bacon's art: "The array of idiosyncratic cosmetics he used to change his appearance was not unlike the variety of personally adapted techniques he came to employ in his paintings."

Sometimes, however, Peppiatt's detached approach and his scholarly art-historical tone are inappropriately clinical for Bacon's deliberate lack of restraint. Time and again "Francis Bacon: Anatomy of an Enigma" meanders from accounts of the artist's preferred perversions to tales of his lavish lifestyle, as he hosted dinners with vintage wines at Lucas-Carton in Paris and the Ritz and the Connaught in London, to descriptions of his paintings—all without either the slightest change of page or any sense of Peppiatt's own reactions. Peppiatt's

account too often sounds like a lab report. "Women's underwear and, notably, fishnet stockings were an essential part of the artist's wardrobe for most of his life. He also became well-versed in the literature of sadomasochism, but theory was the least part of his interest, and at one point he owned a collection of 12 rhino whips." One longs for a bit more style, some Wildean irony, instead of the implicit throat-clearing of words like "notably." And how does Peppiatt get from that description, so lurid in content if dry in tone, to the observation that "Bacon's own preferences . . . can be sensed with such immediacy in his own paintings"? I do not consider myself naive for having known Bacon's paintings for many years without ever before having deduced that he liked to wear fishnet stockings and collect whips.

Given the boldness and directness of his subject, Peppiatt is sometimes far too obtuse. He proffers too many statements of the sort that weigh down art history journals: "Slowly, an effective barrier of non-elucidation grew up around the oeuvre." If you take the time to translate and dissect the claim, it means something, but Peppiatt had already far more effectively made the simple point that Bacon refused to explain his work.

Bacon has been the subject of many books and articles, as well as of some excellent interviews, and this book contributes significantly to the literature. While covering some of the same ground as Daniel Farson's "The Gilded Gutter: Life of Francis Bacon," which appeared in 1994, it is more thorough and informative. But there is still something missing in Peppiatt's effort. It provides ample knowledge of Bacon's life and artistic growth, his tastes and distastes, but nowhere do we adequately feel passion—either the writer's or his subject's. Just as Bacon preferred, strangely, to see Velázquez's work in reproduction rather than in actuality, this book keeps its material one step removed and emotion too distant.

The lacuna is not a flaw one can readily pinpoint; it is not as if Peppiatt has made errors or hazarded risks for which we might call him to task. In fact, unlike Bacon, he has taken few chances; nor has he adequately uncovered the layers. (Why did the artist never want to look at his favorite Velázquez, even when, in 1954, he was minutes away from it in Rome?) This is an interesting, well-ordered biography, but it's too stolid; the writing is too leaden, especially given the vigor of the subject. "Anatomy of an Enigma"? Perhaps, but where is the celebration or dismay, the courage to evaluate, the engagement and imagination essential to a great biography?

Nor have we yet had ample consideration of what Bacon's work unleashed in modern English art. Bacon, Peppiatt conscientiously informs us, was fascinated with "photographs of all kinds of disasters, from a car accident with bodies lying in pools of blood to a huge crowd fanning out in terrified flight as soldiers fire into it." He also loved gazing at meat on display in Harrods' Food Hall. Since then, Damien Hirst has exhibited dissected cows and sharks in formaldehyde; Marc Quinn has incorporated his own frozen blood into his sculpture; and Mona Hatoun has videoed the inside of her body. Most recently, the British sculptor Anthony-Noel Kelly has been using dead body parts, from corpses allegedly acquired from the Royal College of Surgeons, to make plaster casts.

The explanation for the development of this morbidity in the art of our times may lay in an understanding of both the shortcomings and the power of Francis Bacon's work—and a real probing of the mind behind it. Such a penetrating analysis has yet to be written. ■

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