

Primal scream

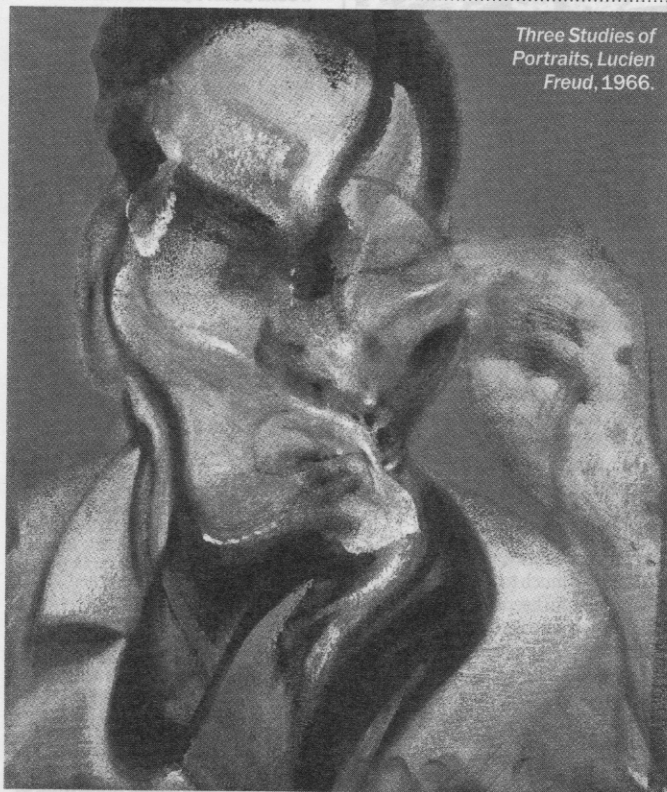
MAM brings home the Bacon. By **Ruth Lopez**

British artist Francis Bacon's twisted, tormented and distorted figures are so distinct and so identifiably his, it's tempting to believe he was as dark as his work. It's surprising, then, to see Bacon in a snippet of a BBC documentary, his round face obscured by shadows, cheerfully critiquing his work. He's bitchier about Jackson Pollock. And if you really want to be depressed, he says, go hang out in front of some Mark Rothko paintings. That video excerpt is part of the exhibition "Francis Bacon: Paintings from the 1950s" at the Milwaukee Art Museum. This tightly focused show was curated by Michael Peppiatt, a French art historian who first met Bacon in the early 1960s.

Peppiatt built the exhibit around a core group of 13 paintings (mostly portraits) acquired by Bacon's principal patrons, Robert and Lisa Sainsbury, during a period considered the artist's most defining and fertile. There are more than 50 paintings here, borrowed from museums and private collectors around the world.

Bacon may not have been the living embodiment of existential dread his paintings emitted, but he didn't have a sunny life. He was fond of drinking, gambling and rough trade. And he had his share of difficulties which had absolutely nothing to do with his art. Or so he says: "My painting is not violent; it's life that is violent."

He was born in Dublin in 1909 but lived mostly in London. As a youngster, Bacon was openly queer (he liked wearing his mother's underclothes), which completely unnerved his military father, who sent him away with an allowance and a nanny to London. For a great read on Bacon's life, get the show's catalog (or rent *Love is the Devil*, the 1998 biopic). Peppiatt describes Bacon's dissecting stare as that of a child who "takes apart a toy or an insect to see how it worked." And you find that intensity in Bacon's paintings, which are ferociously on target in capturing the essence of a person or an animal even if they are inexact representations. There is that unmistakable feral blur of fur in *Man with Dog*, or the golden blob on the head of a portrait of Van Gogh, which



Three Studies of Portraits, Lucien Freud, 1966.

is clearly the straw hat the French painter typically wore.

The artist had decided on a career of designing furniture and interiors, but on a trip to Paris in 1927 Bacon saw the work of Pablo Picasso and changed his course. He taught himself to paint, but it took him almost 20 years before he felt that he had anything worthwhile. In his landmark retrospective in 1962, and in subsequent exhibitions, he did not

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want any work created before 1946 to be shown. (There has never been much of an opportunity to see any of that, however, since Bacon destroyed a lot of it.) Bacon also serendipitously came up with his process, which is characteristically matte and textured: Early on, he ran out of canvas and flipped over a painting to use the backside. He discovered he liked the way the paint sunk into the weave, and so he started painting only on the reverse side of preprimed canvas.

Upon entering the gallery, viewers are confronted by a photo mural of Bacon's famously untidy studio (relocated piece by piece from London to Dublin after his death in 1992). Bacon used the walls of his studio to mix colors, and there are blotches of reds, pinks and blues—oddly bright hues considering the work on display here comprises mostly dark tones. Bacon once told critic David Sylvester that he felt he could make images "much more poignant in the darkness and without color." In later years he would get bored of that and bring back color.

The windowless studio (with a skylight) is filled with piles of papers on the floor as well as stacks of books, clothes, and paintbrushes in dozens of cans, cups and jars. And there in the midst of the debris is a thick art book—a monograph on 17th-century Spanish painter Velázquez. By the looks of this trashed environment it doesn't seem possible that anything Bacon deemed important would be treated this way, but in fact his entire visual universe is here underfoot. Consider the crumpled image of the screaming elderly lady with a bullet in her eye from the Russian film

Battleship Potemkin. It's the image that informed all of his screams. Or notice the copies of movement images by 19th-century photographer Eadweard Muybridge, who inspired Bacon's lumpy, kinetic human forms. The catalogue, published by Yale University Press, reproduces some of the material found on the studio floor. Now considered documents, the flattened pieces of papers—photographs and illustrations torn from books and magazines—show the folds, rips and stains which created casual distortions in the printed imagery. Clearly the chaos was essential to Bacon's process.

Bacon also considered Velázquez's portrait of Pope Innocent X to be one of the greatest paintings ever made, and he attempted to make his own at least 50 times (there are eight of those here). All of Bacon's purple-robed pontiffs are screaming. The scream is part of Bacon's iconography, and Peppiatt introduces a number of theories for it. One of them considers Bacon as an asthmatic who struggled to breathe; another introduces a passage from one of Bacon's favorite books, *Heart of Darkness*, by Joseph Conrad. In it, Conrad describes a monkey, "his mouth wide...as though he wanted to swallow all the air, all the earth, all the men before him." But Bacon was never really happy with any of the screaming pope images. In one interview, he explained that he wasn't a landscape painter, but he wanted the interior of the mouth to have all the dimensions of a landscape; in the end, the scream, he said, wasn't vibrant enough.

As usual, the Milwaukee Art Museum's presentation is excellent, and it has considered all the ancillary details, including having in the gift shop copies of books that Bacon owned (for those of you who prefer items like cheese wedge hats made of foam, there are tins of bacon strip bandages). Among the books are *Heart of Darkness*, James Joyce's *Dubliners*, poems by W.B. Yeats and the Greek tragedy *Oresteia* by Aeschylus. It's the latter that provided inspiration for more than one painting, so on the way out we picked up a copy and opened it randomly, only to be confronted with this: "...raw relentless anguish gnawing at the heart."

"Francis Bacon: Paintings from the 1950s" is at the Milwaukee Art Museum through April 15.