(Non-) Beauty and the Beast--The 2022 Francis Bacon Exhibition at The Royal Academy
Bacon- Man and Beast, 29 January- 17 April 2022, Royal Academy, London

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In Spring 2022, the Royal Academy showcased works from the entirety of Francis Bacon’s fifty-year career, commencing with his first successful painting – the Crucifixion (1933) (https://www.mbartfoundation.com/francis-bacon-the-artist/biography/crucifixion/) - and ending with his final work, Study of a Bull (1991) (https://www.francis-bacon.com/artworks/paintings/study-bull). Aptly entitled ‘Bacon- Man and Beast’, it had something beastly about it: despite the wonders of its scenography, both in its scale and quality, the exhibition felt unpleasant and unkind in the eyes of many visitors, as if Bacon meant to put them off, with a perverse talent for repulsiveness; and above all it placed visitors face to face with their beastliness- at once physical, material and psychological. Against plain, dark walls, the paintings struck a jarring note, often in strident colours, starting with the picture of a ‘one ear’ head, anthropomorphic portraits of animals followed by ‘animal’, as it were, images of men - glaring reds, oranges, and blues among others. It takes some critical distance to see the gains and insights provided by such an animalistic angle.

One of the main contributions of the exhibition is indeed to have taken on animals as a major feature of Bacon’s œuvre rather than as a « walk-on part », as the curator Michael Pepiatt put it. Tackling animals and men together actually helped the least enthusiastic viewers to be reconciled with Bacon’s violent extremes. Indeed it is the distortion of composition and human anatomy that generally causes malaise. Once it is understood that Bacon has done away with beautiful representations and that he is not out there to convey a sense of beauty, it is paradoxically possible to find some intellectual solace, and even beauty, in contemplating his works. Shifting focus away from linear form and seeing the compelling potential of a combined exploration of men and animals, one...
embraces more readily the non-mimetic, exploded shapes and figures. Perhaps it is reassuring to think Bacon’s works are not the product of wild fancy and fanciful artistic visions but constitute in fact a more meaningful quest about the intersections between manly and beastly forms. The ravaged faces, wide-open mouths showing frightening teeth redolent of « alien » creatures are objective correlatives of horror, fear and trauma filtered through the animalistic. To highlight Bacon’s lifelong and enduring concern with animals, the exhibition pointed to his Irish rural childhood, his inspiration from Eadweard Muybridge’s photographs, his collection of books, as well as his own safari explorations of wildlife in Africa.

One particular aspect happily rediscovered in the light of the exhibition is Bacon’s fascination with entrapment – most portraits, self-portraits and figures are framed, caged-in and boxed-in: having animals in mind, this feature now strikes a more profound chord with reference to the animal-like cries and screams that dramatically appear to tear through the canvas. Even when bodies are caught in the act of love making, a savage grin brutally deflates any sense of pathos and sentimentality one might have projected onto the canvas, pushing us back into a state of perplexity and unease. Although there hardly ever was any temptation towards the abstract with Bacon - probably because there is an embedded fabula or storytelling - and this despite all of Bacon’s pronouncements that there is not -, most paintings still have a minimalist quality. They lend themselves to being ‘extracted’ into one feeling or one feature. Thus bodies are less fleshy and ‘embodied’ than could be expected, with the viewer principally retaining their contour, shape and posture. At times, when features are not precisely delineated, human forms are hastily sketched like shadows with animals taking centre ground, as can be seen in Man with Dog, 1953. That human faces are often blanked out also makes greater sense when one has in mind Bacon’s propensity to conflate the human and the animal, blurring their differences in ways which resonate probably even more today, in our present context of reappraisal of animal kingdoms and reconsidered fusion of ‘nature’ and ‘culture’. The curators selected « beast » rather than « animals » for the title of the exhibition and they were well-inspired to do so, as numerous tableaux of monstrosity show men with no sense of dignity or care: such lack of welfare would not be thought today to relate to ‘animals’, but rather to beastliness. The intensity of men’s beastly violence is hard to take for viewers probably because Bacon’s anguish had accumulated over years and years of coming to terms with post-Holocaust trauma as well as his own identity: the bitter end result of such a long-drawn-out process was necessarily explosive, tearing through and shrieking beastily across his canvasses.

It is fitting to reflect here in this French journal on the ways and means of grappling with Bacon the very year the École du Louvre in Paris consolidates its partnership with the F. Bacon MB Art Foundation to develop a new study centre of 1300 m² thanks to the patronage of Majid Boustany.
INDEX

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