

Francis Bacon: five decades

The manuscript for a catalogue these days needs to be completed up to a year before the exhibition opens which means that the writer has not actually seen the exhibition and maybe has only a distant memory of looking at the originals. Writing this article after installing 'Francis Bacon: five decades' is a great opportunity to respond to the things themselves after months and years of looking at inadequate reproductions. When you unpack works like these you get a very close look under good light and you start to see things you never noticed when visiting them in their normal homes. Seeing the cumulative effect of the assembled works on the wall is also invariably a surprise. Most of these paintings have not been in the same room with each other anywhere before and have never been arranged in the way we organised the exhibition for Sydney.

One striking discovery for me was the relation between the canvas structure and the layering of paint in Head II from Ulster Museum. I had looked very closely at it in Belfast and wondered at the strangely horizontal corrugations of the underpainting. In this work he built up the background till it was almost a quarter of an inch deep. The diaphanous curtain is made with long vertical strokes of grey paint. These strokes are drawn over a series of evenly spaced horizontal ridges which I presumed meant he had painted stripes of horizontal paint before coming back with the final vertical strokes.

In the same room we have 'Study from the human body' 1949 from Melbourne. If you look closely at this painting it is not as lightly painted as it at first seems. Again the figure is set against a diaphanous curtain made with long vertical strokes that are also articulated over a horizontal texture. In this case the paint is very thin on the right hand side and indeed part of the image is made with stripes of raw canvas between the painted strokes. When you look at this area the origin of the horizontal structure becomes clear. It is not the result of the brush moving horizontally but as the first thick dry vertical strokes catch on the horizontal weft of the canvas they leave a thin ridge of paint along the thread. The next dry stroke over the top rests upon the first ridge and as the paint thickens towards the centre of the canvas you can see how it builds up into a dense horizontal corrugation. It must have been exactly like this for Head II. Naturally I curse myself for not knowing this at the time of writing, after all this is process and material at work that parallels Stella's use of given brush and canvas dimensions or better still Richter's dragged paint that reveals and dramatises its support.

It was always my intention to find a new way of thinking about Bacon and I have used the catalogue to explore his relation to the avant garde in the late twentieth century. My starting point for this was his continual reference to Marcel Duchamp as one of the only modern artists that really mattered to him after Picasso. Part of my interpretation rests upon his own words spoken in interviews and written in letters but even more importantly on his use of materials as a trace of the real. Examples of this included using dust to make Eric Hall's overcoat look fluffy, and using sand to make the bull ring or the ground underfoot. His chaotic accumulation of images in the studio including photographs, pages and fragments pulled from art magazines, sports and film journals, books on golfing and positioning in radiography, are all material

traces of life that he sought to bring back onto the nervous system of the viewer. These images became compost for his ideas and images. Diverse fragments often merged in his mind so that multiple sources can reasonably be posited for any one painterly image.

Bacon demanded to be understood as a realist his aim was not to illustrate reality but to capture its emanation or to bring back the sensation of the real more violently. Portraits form a very large part of his work even when the subject is not named, for example 'Three studies of the male back' 1970 shows his lover George Dyer shaving. Bacon never painted from life but needed to know his subjects intimately so he could remember the sensation of their presence and try to bring that back. He sometimes used photos as aides memoire but seldom took from them directly.

All of this I knew but when I looked closely at the surface of these images other stranger applications of materials became apparent. I had known that the shadows in the 1950s often seemed more substantial than the figures that cast them but I had not registered that very often the blacks were bulked up with sand to make them even more material. In one case I think he must have added sand and black pigment to stand oil which is a very viscous form of treated linseed oil. The effect was to make a glossy or even slimy paste that in certain lights sparkles slightly. This is not a shadow in the sense of an absence of light it is a sculpture of a shadow.

In the 1970s and 1980s the shadows often become pinkish, looking more like puddles of unspeakable fluids draining from the bodies. In some cases they become emanations that threaten to take on a life of their own. Clearly the black 1950s shadows are already getting ready to take over. Unfortunately this is never quite apparent in photographs of the paintings. What looks to me like stand oil is also sometimes used in the black areas that often frame the figures. The trouble with stand oil is that it can stay shiny and wet looking after it has dried but it may also sink in and become matt so that you get traces of slickness within what might otherwise be a very flat black area of paint. Maybe this was Bacon trying to literally make the slime of a snail trail that he once mentioned. 'I would like my pictures to look as if a human being had passed between them, like a snail, leaving a trail of the human presence and memory of past events, as the snail leaves its slime'

In the later paintings black is used to create voids behind the figures and often these black voids are painted as very matte black very evenly brushed so that no texture is visible. This renders them an optical equivalent of deep space, an absence that is quite different from the textured shadows of the 1950s. Voids did exist in the early works the absent figure of Eric Hall in his overcoat from 'Figure in Landscape' 1945 is a richly painted rather threatening black. There are also doorways and curtains or veils that hint at the void beyond in the 1950s.

The tactile experience of all the works is extraordinary in spite of the thick glass that protects every painting in its gold frame. In some ways the glass makes it more apparent since we are allowed to get close to the protected surface and in any case we duck and weave in front of the paintings to see through the glazing and in the process catch the textures that a shifting light reveals. The use of sand in the paint is very common including in the flesh areas. This clearly is not about simulating the feel of flesh but it seems to bulk up the paint where he wants to make an arcing brushstroke

that stands up as an adamant impasto. Often he comes behind this savage arc of paint with soft dabs using fabric such as corduroy or towelling that leaves its trace clearly in the paint. Sometimes in the face flesh colour is created using a white impasto then stripes of red are applied over it using corduroy.

Fabric is also used to smear the definition of the painted image with a swipe that does not remove but softens the image just like a Gerhard Richter. In later paintings he increasingly used spray paint. Never to draw as in graffiti but to soften colour transitions or more commonly to create speckled areas that came to replace the use of sand as a texture in the late 1970s and 1980s.

For all the fuss about violence or disturbing distortions of the body the assembled body of work in 'Francis Bacon: five decades' is in the end a tour de force of painterly invention. Bacon's accumulated painting is exquisitely beautiful with astonishing passages of colour and mesmerising surfaces and material qualities. His insistence on glazing and gold frames attests to his hope that the grandeur of painting can still be aspired to in the modern era. He at least achieved this challenging goal.