

remain unasked in the case of European art in the United States.

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[HTTPS://DOI.ORG/10.14324/111.444.2396-9008.1539](https://doi.org/10.14324/111.444.2396-9008.1539)

‘Francis Bacon: Man and Beast’, Royal Academy of Arts, London, 29 January–17 April 2022. Catalogue: Eds. Michael Peppiatt and Stephen F. Eisenman, Royal Academy of Arts, London, 2020, 160 pages, hardback, ISBN 1912520559, £35.

Louis Shankar

Ostensibly, ‘Francis Bacon: Man and Beast’ sought to interrogate the influence of the animal kingdom on the legendary painter’s work, and the relationship between the bestial and the humane. The precise logic of the exhibition, organised in a largely chronological manner, falters at times; the overarching theme seemed more of an excuse for, rather than the driving force behind, the retrospective. Visitors were first greeted with an early head (*Head I*, 1948); however deformed and leathery, with the texture of hippopotamus or rhinoceros skin, it is still a decidedly human figure. Why not begin with an animal? Certain portraits are, emphatically, portraits, which negotiate the boundary between individual and collective identities – but these are human identities, nothing bestial in sight. *Study of the Human Head* and *Study*

for a Portrait (both 1953), neatly juxtaposed in a corner, spoke only to issues of animality so general as to be critically irrelevant.

The catalogue, meanwhile, is organised neatly into six sections – ‘Furies’, ‘Wildlife’, ‘The Animal Within’, ‘Bodies in Motion’, ‘The Animalistic Nude’, and ‘The Bullfight’ – each of which interrogated the central theme from a specific perspective. Sometimes, an exhibition’s ideal arrangement cannot be mapped neatly onto its assigned galleries and compromises must inevitably be made. But it is a shame that the exhibition didn’t follow the same structure as the catalogue; I could have done without the room dedicated to portraits.

A room of four triptychs was emblematic of Bacon’s awareness of form, with each composition negotiating its three canvases and the relationship between them. *Three Figures in a Room* (1964) felt most out of place: a work more about architecture and behaviour than the animal kingdom. Hanging four triptychs together created additional rhythms, complicating relationships of figures and forms. Gilles Deleuze dedicates two chapters of his study of Bacon, *The Logic of Sensation*, to the role and the question of the triptych: ‘And in the end,’ he concludes, ‘there are nothing but triptychs in Bacon: even the isolated paintings are, more or less visibly, composed like triptychs.’¹ There is no mention of Deleuze at the Royal Academy, though, likely for fear of over-intellectualising. Instead, Bacon’s own words are given primacy, such as: ‘Bullfighting is like boxing – a marvellous aperitif to sex’.² A marvellous quip, but what does this tell us about his art?

The most powerful room – at the centre of the exhibition, staged in the rotunda – brought together three bullfighting

paintings, specifically described as a series not a triptych. Hanging at right angles from one another, the canvases became choreographed. One canvas meditates upon the horrific power of Nazi rallies and fascist iconographies. Another draws upon the basest animalistic marking of territory, in its resemblance to ejaculation; a spurt of white paint marks where Bacon threw a loaded brush at the canvas. Deleuze, in fact, uses the bullfight as a metaphor for Bacon's practice more generally, his relationship to the natural world: 'It is never a combination of forms, but rather the common fact: the common fact of man and animal. Bacon pushes this to the point where even his most isolated Figure is already a coupled Figure [*sic*]; man is coupled with his animal in a latent bullfight.'³ This argument seemed like the theoretical heart of the exhibition project, with *Study for Bullfight No. 1* (1969) on the catalogue's cover and much of the promotional material. A curated narrative structured around these works might have been more effective overall; these three works represent all of the dominant themes of the exhibition, but were somewhat difficult to place within the confusing chronology of the show.

It's a testament to Bacon's importance and ubiquity that he was featured prominently in two concurrent survey exhibitions in London: *Postwar Modern: New Art in Britain 1945–65* at the Barbican (3 March – 17 June 2022) and *A Century of the Artist's Studio: 1920–2020* at the Whitechapel Gallery (24 February – 5 June 2022). These shows gave greater insight into his broader sociopolitical context and creative process, respectively, but both pale in comparison to the creative contributions of the Royal Academy's monographic retrospective.

A few snippets of Bacon's source imagery were included in reproduction – pages torn from books on birds and big game, a photographic series by Eadweard Muybridge – but always in miniature, as an afterthought. Why was this exhibition organised around a theme limited to a single medium? Prints and drawings, sketchbooks, collected imagery would have added invaluable insight into his process, as at *A Century of the Artist's Studio*.

Admittedly, the quality of the canvases themselves shined throughout the exhibition, assisted in part by the choice of glazed frames, allowing intimate interaction as well as distanced contemplation. Each gallery wall was carefully painted in bold, dark colours to set off the rich, sensuous tones of the canvases. Attention was drawn to Bacon's choice of synthetic pigments, like his famously brash, caustic oranges, unlike anything found in nature, and sickly, artificial greens. A decidedly unnatural pink surrounds a chimpanzee in one of his boldest, most unusual works (*Study for a Chimpanzee*, 1957), which is captivating, lurid, hallucinatory.

The final room of paintings – another triptych, of a bull, and Bacon's last completed painting – revisited bovine violence. A skeletal bull haunts *Study of a Bull* (1991); aerosol paint creates clouds of colour and dust is stuck to the largely raw, untreated canvas. Bacon's failing health became an inescapable presence in his work and final work was a fitting note to end on: an animal as cipher for the artist's own mortality, and humanity.

1 Gilles Deleuze, *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation* (trans. Daniel W. Smith) (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017), 85.

2 Deleuze, *Francis Bacon*, 21–22.

3 Michael Peppiatt and Stephen F. Eisenman (eds.), *Francis Bacon: Man and Beast* (London: Royal Academy of Arts, 2021), 35.

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[HTTPS://DOI.ORG/10.14324/111.444.2396-9008.1540](https://doi.org/10.14324/111.444.2396-9008.1540)

‘Lumen’, Sutapa Biswas, Autograph, London, 4 March 2022–4 June 2022. Catalogue: Ed. Amy Tobin, Ridinghouse, London, 2021, 128 pages, paperback, ISBN 9781909932647, £25.

Elliot Gibbons

Set amongst the dark, moulded wooden interiors of the Red Lodge in Bristol is a female figure doubled in the intersecting reflections of two nearby circular mirrors. This woman, wearing a black sari and reciting a monologue throughout, is the main protagonist in Sutapa Biswas’ film *Lumen*. ‘Lumen’ is also the name of a survey show of Biswas’ work that recently travelled from the BALTIC Centre of Contemporary Art in Gateshead to Kettle’s Yard in Cambridge. In comparison, the final iteration of the exhibition at Autograph in London was considerably pared down, with the film *Lumen* presented by itself. Despite not situating the film in relation to Biswas’ path-breaking oeuvre, one is able to grasp a matured distillation of a practice seeking to centre the experiences of women from the South Asian diaspora. Though the thirty-minute film largely consists of the female actor taking up the role of the artist’s mother within the Red Lodge, the combination of this scene alongside a series of dissimilar images elicits an illuminative journey across space and time.

The actor’s poetic address to the camera is inspired by her mother’s experience of leaving India in the mid 1960s, as well as her own, and her grandmother’s experience under colonial rule. Gilane Tawadros notes in an article looking at Biswas’ early work, along with the work of fellow black British female artists, that the artistic practice of ‘gathering and re-using’ was a common means of reflecting the diasporic experience.¹ Biswas not only gathers the experiences of her female relatives through the long form poem in *Lumen*, but she also enfolds multiple other histories through the use of disparate sources. Archival footage of Indian labourers under the British raj and their white rulers interrupts scenes of present-day Bombay and the actor performing her monologue. This combination causes a temporal disjuncture highlighting the continuation of colonial disruption from India pre-independence to India post-independence and the aftereffects of partition.

Such temporal ruptures are reflected on by the protagonist throughout the film. She details how her daughter’s soul is cast between the future and past because of their journey to England, and later notes a discord between her present and future self. This diasporic sensibility is further evoked through the combination of panning shots over illustrations by James Forbes. Forbes sailed to Bombay as a writer for the English East India Company in 1765 and produced an account of his seventeen-year sojourn in a book titled *Oriental Memoirs* (1834). One image closes in on a black crow perched on colourful drawings of various flora and fauna: a rare moment where the ominous, dark, crow-like presence, spoken of incessantly, is visualised. The crow serves as a synecdoche for Biswas’ own gathering and collation of multiple references within the film. Equally,