

Lying Figure in Mirror
1971

Francis Bacon



Maria Müller

**BILBOKO ARTE
EDERREN MUSEOA
MUSEO DE BELLAS
ARTES DE BILBAO**

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Text published in:

B'06 : *Buletina* = *Boletín* = *Bulletin*. Bilbao : Bilboko Arte Eder Museoa = Museo de Bellas Artes de Bilbao = Bilbao Fine Arts Museum, no. 2, 2007, pp. 181-196.

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On 26 October 1971, the first complete retrospective exhibition of the work of Francis Bacon (1909-1992) in France opened in the rooms of the Grand Palais in Paris. Bacon was the second living artist to be so honoured, the first having been Pablo Picasso in 1966. A survey run at the end of the year by the *Connaissance des Arts* journal confirmed the British painter as one of the leading contemporary artists of the time.

With help from Bacon himself, exhibition curator Blaise Gautier¹ showed ninety-six paintings and twelve triptychs, including a series of works the artist had completed in the weeks and months prior to the inauguration. Besides a second version of *Painting 1946* [fig. 1], this series also included *Lying Figure in Mirror* [fig. 2]². In the first of these paintings, Bacon quoted and paraphrased a key work from his early period, which in 1948 had passed into the collection of The Museum of Modern Art of New York. The second interpreted in a new, disconcerting way, the theme of the lying figure, present in his oeuvre from the early 1950s.

In a room devoid of furniture, delimited in the background by three black roller blinds, lies a voluminous, rather strange-looking creature. At first it's apparently just a mass shaped by a metamorphosing membrane. It's certainly hard to tell whether we're looking at a single figure or if there are two involved locked in a passionate embrace or some kind of existential struggle. All that is identifiable of the human body are bent arms, a nipple and a hairy armpit (or is it an anus?). The head, which is definitely there, disappears behind the curves of flesh. The figure's appreciable heaviness, determined by the partial lack of physical tension and by the members stretched towards the left edge of the painting, recalls a seal moving its heavy body out of the water without the members it needs to do so.

1 After the presentation in Paris, a virtually complete version of the exhibition was mounted in spring 1972 at the *Kunsthalle*, Düsseldorf.

2 The painting (inv. no. 82/215; 198.5 x 147.5 cm) was acquired by the Museum on 15 November 1982 from the Marlborough Fine Art Gallery, London, which had previously purchased it direct from the artist. Set in a gold frame, it is covered with perspex, something the artist did with many of his works. To Bacon, the point of covering over his paintings with glass or methacrylate was twofold: first, to protect the painting and, second, to mark a distance between the painting and the spectator. Sylvester 1975, p. 80.



1. Francis Bacon (1909-1992)
Painting 1946 (Second Version), 1971
Oil on canvas, 198 x 147.5 cm
Museum Ludwig, Köln

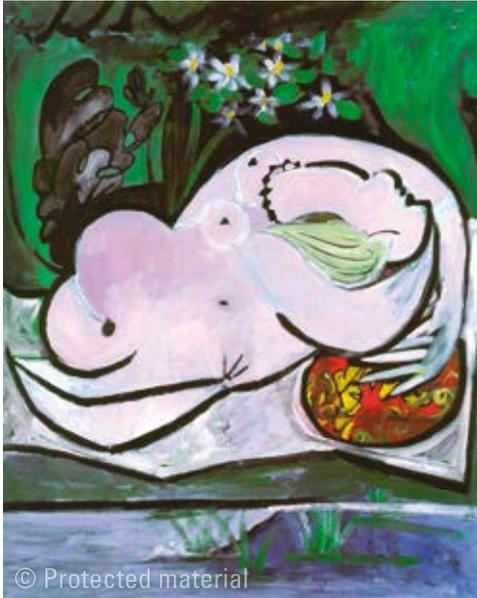
Bathed in brilliant light, and yet casting no shadow, the fleshy body is little more than a biomorphic mass with just the members, the curve of the thighs and a head sketched in or suggested. In the early thirties, Pablo Picasso had condensed the human body into a surface of colour, and in a painting like *Nu au jardin (Nude in the Garden)*, 1934 [fig. 3], he used a few lines and a brief scratch or two to mark the shape of the large body, the breasts, anus and pubis. It was the amazing force of Picasso's works, which Bacon saw for the first time in Paris in the 1920s, that had so impressed the young Irishman then embarking on his own artistic career. It is quite likely that Bacon also saw the large painting of the massively powerful *Figures au bord de la mer (Figures by the Sea)*, 1931 [fig. 4], at least in reproduction. The position of the figures perched on a sort of arched prominence and, above all, the totally liberated interpretation of the physiognomy, freed too from all the conventions governing the representation of the human body, would certainly suggest that he had.

In a lecture entitled "Francis Bacon and the Nude", David Sylvester showed that in Bacon's "Studies of the Human Body", figures from ordinary life are always combined with others taken from the history of art or photography³. That's certainly how he sees it in the voluminously heavy bodies that move with difficulty

3 Sylvester 2005, pp. 30 and ff.



2. Francis Bacon (1909-1992)
Lying Figure in Mirror, 1971
Oil on canvas, 198.5 x 147.5 cm
Bilbao Fine Arts Museum
Inv. no. 82/215



3. Pablo Picasso (1881-1973)
Nu au jardin (Nude in the Garden), 1934
 Oil on canvas, 162 x 130 cm
 Musée Picasso, Paris



4. Pablo Picasso (1881-1973)
Figures au bord de la mer (Figures by the Sea), 1931
 Oil on canvas, 130.5 x 195.5 cm
 Musée Picasso, Paris

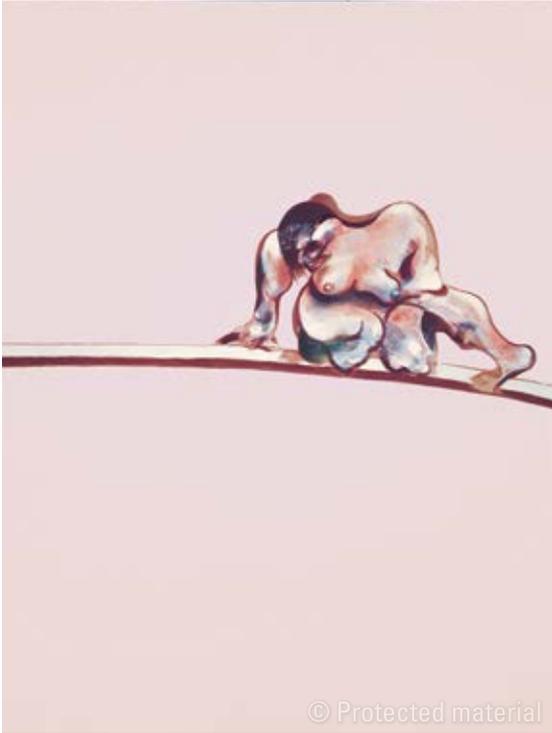
on a sort of ramp, in the triptych Bacon painted just a few months before *Lying Figure in Mirror, Three Studies of the Human Body* (fig. 5, left panel). Sylvester also discerns here the influence of nudes drawn by Michelangelo, Picasso and the early Matisse, in the paintings of Henrietta Moraes lying on a bed. Following this suggestion, Bacon's *Lying Figure in Mirror* is also related to Matisse's key work from 1906 *Nu bleu. Souvenir de Biskra*, (*Blue Nude: Memento of Biskra*) and the simultaneous transfers of this motif to sculpture [fig. 6]. The arm bent above the head, the length of the body and, in particular, the focus on the external form of the volumes, are all comparable.

Matisse and Picasso often tried out their pictorial motifs and formal problems simultaneously in painting and sculpture. In Bacon this approach remains as a witty game. In a conversation in September 1974 with Sylvester, the painter admitted: "I've been thinking a lot about sculpture for some years now". "[...] I imagine sculptures on a sort of very large frame, one where the sculpture slides down and people could actually change the position of the sculpture as they like. This frame wouldn't be as important as the image, but would be there to bring out the image, as I've done so often using a structure to highlight the image in paintings. I think that in sculpture you might be able to do it with more intensity"⁴. When David Sylvester wanted to illustrate this idea, he put a reproduction of *Lying Figure in Mirror* next to the passage quoted above.

Although at first sight the painting seems to be of great clarity, it disconcerts on a more intensive viewing. The room is blurred, the yellow surface adjacent to the lower edge of the canvas seems to act as our entry into the painting. But would we need to get up a sort of slope the figure lies at the top of? Are we seeing a small segment of an enormous ball? Or is it a convex room with purple walls that somehow run strictly parallel to the painting? Do the blinds hang free in the room? And what does the mirror of the title actually show?

Two lines running parallel profile two sides of the mirror, which is placed obliquely in the room and cut off by the work's left and upper edges. Within the painting, containing the highly compressed space in which

4 Sylvester 1975 (1977), p. 108.



5. Francis Bacon (1909-1992)
Three Studies of the Human Body, 1970
 Oil on canvas, 198 x 147.5 cm (left panel)
 Marlborough International Fine Art, Liechtenstein



6. Henry Matisse (1869-1954)
Nu couché I (Aurore) (Nude Lying I (Aurore)), 1907
 Bronze, 36 x 51 x 27 cm
 Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris

the figure lies, only the yellow is more intense. But one does not perceive either the expected distortion of space or the symmetry between room and reflection. The painting's assumed clarity gives way, provoking a permanent sense of insecurity. Here the mirror is not a vehicle for a "distortion or alteration of the figure represented"⁵; the figure is not duplicated either. It is there as a mere affirmation, one for which there are insufficient indications. Gilles Deleuze got to the heart of the matter in 1984 in his interesting study of Bacon's oeuvre: "Everything is possible in Bacon's mirror, except a surface that actually reflects". Talking about *Lying Figure in Mirror* he continues: "The body penetrates the mirror, it settles there, it and its shadow. That accounts for its fascination: there's nothing *behind* the mirror, just *in it*"⁶.

In the mid- to late sixties, for the first time in the 1967 work entitled *Triptych – Inspired by T.S. Eliot's Poem "Sweeney Agonistes"* (fig. 7, right panel), Bacon seems to become interested in misleading spatial projections and mirror effects. In the full-length portrait of George Dyers, painted the year before the death of his friend in 1971, and in the 1970 bullfighting scene, the mirror is omnipresent, or rather, there are surfaces in the paintings that aspire to reflection or which really make it such reflection patently clear.

If we follow the paint layer closely, the painting process explains the genesis of this deceptive mirror image: it's quite clear that Bacon painted the figure first—as is often the case. He applied pastel and dry oil in movements that were often circular on the uncovered structure of the canvas. But the white highlights are applied with a thick pasty paint. As is true of other paintings, only the slightly arched line running horizon-

5 Steffen 2003, p. 280.

6 Deleuze 1984, p. 17.



7. Francis Bacon (1909-1992)
Triptych – Inspired by T.S. Eliot's poem "Sweeney Agonistes", 1967
 Oil on canvas, 198 x 147.5 cm
 Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D. C.
 Gift of the Joseph H. Hirshhorn Foundation, 1972

tally to divide the surface and mark the position of the figure lying on it was predefined. As the soft violet of the upper half of the painting and the yellow in the lower half were applied later, the violet, for instance, in the edge areas also becomes visible below the figure. Both yellow and violet, and the intense black of the blinds hanging from the upper edge of the painting, must have been applied with a roller. Then he traced the lines at an obtuse angle, thereby indicating the frame that fixes the figure on the surface of the painting. Here a simple frame replaces the cage-like structures of the works from the 1950s and 60s, which provide support for which provided the figures inside the space with a frame. A layer of fine sand covers most of the yellow surface, although it hasn't stuck everywhere. Within the supposed mirror, for the reflection of the light, Bacon retouched this rough, brilliant zone with a dirty cloth, taking off some of the sand in the process. Only the darker, more compact area inside the "frame" suggests a mirror reflection.

Lying Figure in Mirror once again highlights the fact that Bacon—who called himself a "grinding machine"—kept in his memory visual information gathered at other times that he continually mixed and remixed. And his memory wasn't just restricted to works from the history of art that had troubled or disturbed him; his own paintings found their way into this "nutritive" solution. As painted reproductions—placed in a row on the rails mounted in the small kitchen—they were always in the painter's line of sight. So each of his paintings referred to the past while simultaneously pointing to the future. The black roller blinds take us back to 1946, when Bacon created *Painting*, undoubtedly one of his most important works. The magenta-coloured blinds hanging from the upper edge of the painting provide a backdrop to a scene of horror and violence. For the Paris retrospective, Bacon executed a second version of this major painting, when the Museum of Modern Art in New York proved most reluctant to lend. However, both works were eventually shown at the Grand Palais: the disturbing motif of a faceless figure before a sacrificed animal, in a darker, fleshier tone, and the "cleaned-up" version of the motif against a brilliant yellow background [fig. 1]. Bacon used this luminous tone and the motif of the three blinds in the study for the lying figure painted at the same time.

Works showing men lying on mattresses or platforms, in amorous embraces, copulating or wrestling, may well have had an influence too, even though here there only seems to be one figure. Bacon's painting from

the early fifties to the last triptych produced in 1991 (see, for instance, fig. 7) traces, like a sort of red line, the motif taken from the photographs of Eadweard Muybridge, “an inexhaustible theme subject”⁷. And it is precisely by virtue of this theme that Bacon’s path to painting becomes comprehensible, determined by superimposed planes of images stored in his visual memory—images of private experience, from the history of art and the huge gallery of photographs in the daily press, magazines and scientific journals.

However, in 1971, the figures are not worked or modelled “as if on a potter’s wheel”⁸, but appear through fine veils or glazes and marks of colour. This form of applying paint anticipates Bacon’s production in the eighties, when he developed figures from fine, occasionally pulverized, layers of colour. Frequently mutilated, the bodies in these paintings are presented to the viewer propped on pedestal or dais. This compression of the body, the concentration on the trunk, alludes to *Lying Figure in Mirror*.

In the “void”⁹ of this cloying room, bathed in an unmerciful light, the lying figure comes across to us as a sort of superimposed plane of existence, at once human and not quite human, totally isolated and involved, while demonstrating great energy and force. Here the individual retreats into the general. The disconcerting sensation caused by the not-quite-right room and the figure in the mirror question the clarity of the composition and the daring complementary contrasts. And although the lying figure seems captive in the narrow room, obstructed by the mirror, there is no doubt that the energy it gives off will continue to fuel its energetic movements, endlessly deforming the body. And that is precisely what links it to Bacon’s other figures.

7 Sylvester 1975 (1977), p. 74.

8 Eduard Beaucamp. «Moralist oder Maler», *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 10 March 1972.

9 Lloyd/Peppiatt 1993, p. 154.

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