

ADDRESS FOR CORRESPONDENCE

Iain Bamforth

86 rue Kempf, 67000 Strasbourg, France.

E-mail: iainbamforth@orange.fr

nemesis' of the 1970s. Medicine, as some of Williams' writings suggest he feared it might, had lost its unforced altruism and become a commodity.

Iain Bamforth,

GP, Independent Scholar, Freelance Public Health Consultant, Strasbourg, France.

Further reading

Williams WC. *Selected Poems (Penguin Modern Classics)*. London: Penguin, 2005.

The Autobiography, The Doctor Stories, Revised Paterson, In the American Grain, and several other titles are all published by New Directions, New York (some are out-of-print).

DOI: 10.3399/bjgp12X636191

A personal recollection

I once taught *Old Doc Rivers* with a literature professor who didn't want to use it because she felt it was not a 'good' story, that is, it didn't meet the English professor's definition of whatever 'good' is — well constructed but soulless, I suppose. In any case, I prevailed, and the story continues to upset/challenge/reveal and humble all of us who have practiced for any period of time. One student said to me, 'I might THINK those things but I would NEVER say them'. Williams did both and going on 90 years later, we still avert our eyes yet remain transfixed at the story of the enormously complex person that lies at the heart of the poor and despairing community who held Rivers to them because he was 'the beloved scapegoat of their own aberrant desires'. Williams was fierce and tender — a tough combination. The book that contains the story is titled *The Knife of the Times*, a title which says everything.

John Frey

E-mail: John.Frey@FAMMED.WISC.EDU

DOI: 10.3399/bjgp12X636209

LUCIAN FREUD PORTRAITS

National Portrait Gallery

9 February–27 May 2012

The careers of artists who live to a great age are especially interesting, because they describe so many different arcs. Titian produced astonishing works in extreme old age, works that represent some of his most profound and powerful painting. Then there are the artists whose career reaches a mid-point of exceptional brilliance before tailing off into mediocrity, such as Picasso. And finally there are those whose finest works come at or near the start of their careers, whose later works all represent decline. Among this last group stands Lucian Freud.

The early works on show here are quite brilliant. They are very flat, very cool, and absolutely convincing as portraits, even though they are far from 'realistic'. The pictures of his first wife, for instance, almost the first paintings you encounter at this exhibition, are compelling. As one moves on, however, things change. Now, Freud's mid and late pictures could not be by anyone else, they have that much distinction of style, but they seem to me to be technically and aesthetically — maybe even morally — flawed.

The figures themselves, often violently foreshortened or cropped, are powerful. Much of the power depends on the way Freud applies the paint, in huge thick smears done with a broad coarse brush. Everyone is also miserable and ugly, even people you know are not: the prime example being the Duchess of Devonshire. Her husband was looking at her portrait with a couple of other men. Finally one said to him, 'Who is that woman?' He replied, 'That's my wife'. 'Well, thank God she's not mine', came the reply. His pictures of children are especially unappealing, indeed, they would have to be characterised as actively bad.

One picture, much commented on as perhaps Freud's most ambitious piece, sums it up, the *Large Interior W11 (after Watteau)*. There are some brilliant aspects — the huge scented-leafed geranium that takes up much of the right hand side of the picture is

ADDRESS FOR CORRESPONDENCE

Frank Minns

24/50 Blackheath Road, London, SE10 8DZ, UK.

E-mail: frank@c21gardens.com

exactly how these plants look if they are allowed to grow old. The figures are unconvincing, however, showing a wild variety of flesh tones that seems more about the artist's virtuosity than the people themselves. They are also set in a rather dubious perspective, and grouped on a metal framed bed that alters its aspect from one end to the other, such that the right hand figure appears to be being tipped off it. This failure to ground the figure can be seen also in a double portrait of two artists, *Two Men in the Studio*, where one man stands on the bedclothes beneath which the other lies. The relationship of the figures is impossible: only the fact that the man standing on top appears to have no weight prevents him from crushing the man asleep beneath him.

There are occasional highlights among the late works — the portrait of David Hockney, for instance — but the chief feeling one leaves with is that not all artistic development is for the better. What makes this show so fascinating is that one can follow this deterioration stage by stage.

Frank Minns,

Landscape Gardener, London.

DOI: 10.3399/bjgp12X636218.

Large Interior, W11 (after Watteau), 1981–3

Private Collection ©The Lucian Freud Archive.

Photo: Courtesy Lucian Freud Archive

