

Out of Hours Exhibition

BRUTAL AND BRILLIANT
Francis Bacon: Invisible Rooms
Tate Liverpool
18 May 2016–18 September 2016

Francis Bacon has come to Liverpool, in a major new retrospective focusing on the shape and structure of his art. As is my wont in galleries, I wander for a while and then choose one piece on which to focus my attention.

Study for a Portrait (1952) (right), which has also been known as *Businessman* or *Man's Head*, is painted predominantly in dark blues and black. It shows the upper body of a man in a jacket and tie, mouth wide open, spectacles dislodged, and right eye smeared, with a curtain rail in the background. I am drawn first to the whites — of the shirt and the teeth. Then I notice the cage-like structure enclosing his head and neck. Is he screaming? Is he shouting for help? Is he gasping for breath, suffocating within an invisible, impermeable layer?

I find this profoundly unsettling. Ideas and images vibrate and multiply around my brain. The distorted screaming face is a recurring motif in Bacon's middle period. In the exhibition it's also in the neighbouring paintings of *Study After Velázquez's Portrait of Pope Innocent X* (1953) and *Study for*

Francis Bacon, Sand Dune (1983). Oil paint and pastel on canvas. 1980 × 1475 mm. Fondation Beyeler, Riehen/Basel. Photograph © Peter Schibli, Basel. © 2012, DACS, London.



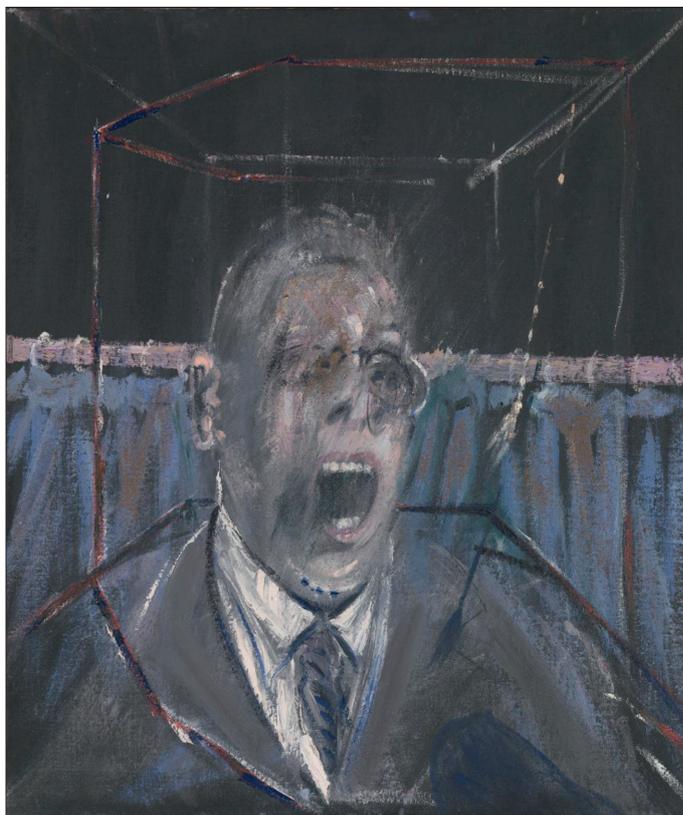
the Nurse in the Film 'Battleship Potemkin' (1957). Like Munch's *The Scream*, it leads us towards big themes: of anguish beneath the veneer of success and civilisation, of isolated souls imprisoned and tormented by existential dilemmas, 'enclosed in the wretched glass capsule of the human individual'.¹

But I can't escape into the distancing realms of philosophy. The painting draws me back into the real world. Is this what it feels like to have an asthma attack?

Bacon suffered severely from asthma as a child, so he would know. Or is the cage the claustrophobic closet of a gay man in England in the days before sexual liberalisation? And then, nearer to home, the curtain looks suspiciously like the one round the examination couch in my consulting room. Might this even be a portrait of me, overcome by the distress and suffering of my patients, to the point where boundaries between self and other start to disappear?

I look for relief elsewhere in the exhibition, but it's hard to find. Gargoyles grimace under crucifixes, a distorted child crawls around a ring, enmeshed and blood-spattered bodies are observed through a window by a man with a phone, a sand dune (left) that might have human form oozes out of its enclosure.

Eventually I do find laughter, in *Study of the Human Body* (1982): a headless and chestless naked man is protected from the evils of the world — by a pair of cricket pads.



Francis Bacon, Study for a Portrait (1952). © Estate of Francis Bacon. All Rights Reserved, DACS 2016. License this image.

Bacon is brutal, bothersome, and bloody brilliant.

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REFERENCE

1. Nietzsche F. *The birth of tragedy: out of the spirit of music*. London: Penguin Classics, 1993 [first published in 1872].