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 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.’

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-splattered 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.


Bacon is brutal, bothersome, and bloody brilliant.

Christopher Dowrick,
Professor of Primary Medical Care, Institute of Psychology, Health and Society, University of Liverpool, Liverpool.
E-mail: cfd@liv.ac.uk
DOI: 10.3399/bjgp16X686905

REFERENCE