

THE FRANCIS BACON INTERIORS

Michael Peppiatt in Conversation with Robert Priseman



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Michael Peppiatt: What I wanted to ask you first of all, Robert, was how your interest in Bacon – you might almost call it an obsession - came about. Did it develop over a long period of time?

Robert Priseman: All my painting projects take years to develop. There's an interest you mull over for a number of years which eventually crystallises into an idea which then just sits there for probably two or three years until you act on it. It's probably just the same with writing.

MP: But before it crystallised, was it simply that you'd seen a lot of Bacon and you'd realised he was an artist who interested you?

RP: I had seen a lot of Bacon. For me he's one of the greatest painters and I'd learned a fair bit before then about his work, and I liked the School of London in a broader sense as well. I suppose when you're looking at a lot of art you become

aware of the conversation that's going on in art and that fascinates you, and then you reach a point where you want to have a go at participating in it. That's really the crux of it. That's why I gave up the portrait painting I'd been doing before. I felt I understood it enough and had enough courage to have a go at it.

MP: So there was a kind of dialogue set up and after a time you felt you'd like to speak, to join in.

RP: It felt like an open forum. And obviously there was also the thing that he had lived in Wivenhoe where I live, and had a studio there. I used to walk past it every day and it always intrigued me. I knew that I liked to work in sets of pictures, so I was thinking, well I'd love to do a painting of that studio but I don't know how I'd do it as a series.... I'm generally interested in what you'd call more anonymous spaces, but I thought

I could do it because I'm not a gestural painter in the sense that Bacon's a gestural painter. If I worked in a gestural sense or any vaguely abstract way then I couldn't do any more than produce a pastiche of Bacon, so I wouldn't have done it at all; it's because I work in a completely different way. But I see lots of overlap, of similarity, between the core of his oeuvre and what fascinates me. I'm interested in rooms that are enclosed, sealed, artificially lit, in places where human trauma takes place. Those are environments that fascinate me.

MP: They're sort of empty but inhabited spaces. They're empty but there are traces....

RP: Yes, traces of the human presence, I suppose. But it's more specific than that for me. I'm interested in places where trauma has taken place or extremes of emotion have happened. I'm interested in the idea that that emotion leaves a resonance behind. And so initially, when I abandoned portrait painting, I began working on these hospital interiors.

MP: And were they empty of people?

RP: Yes, always empty of people.

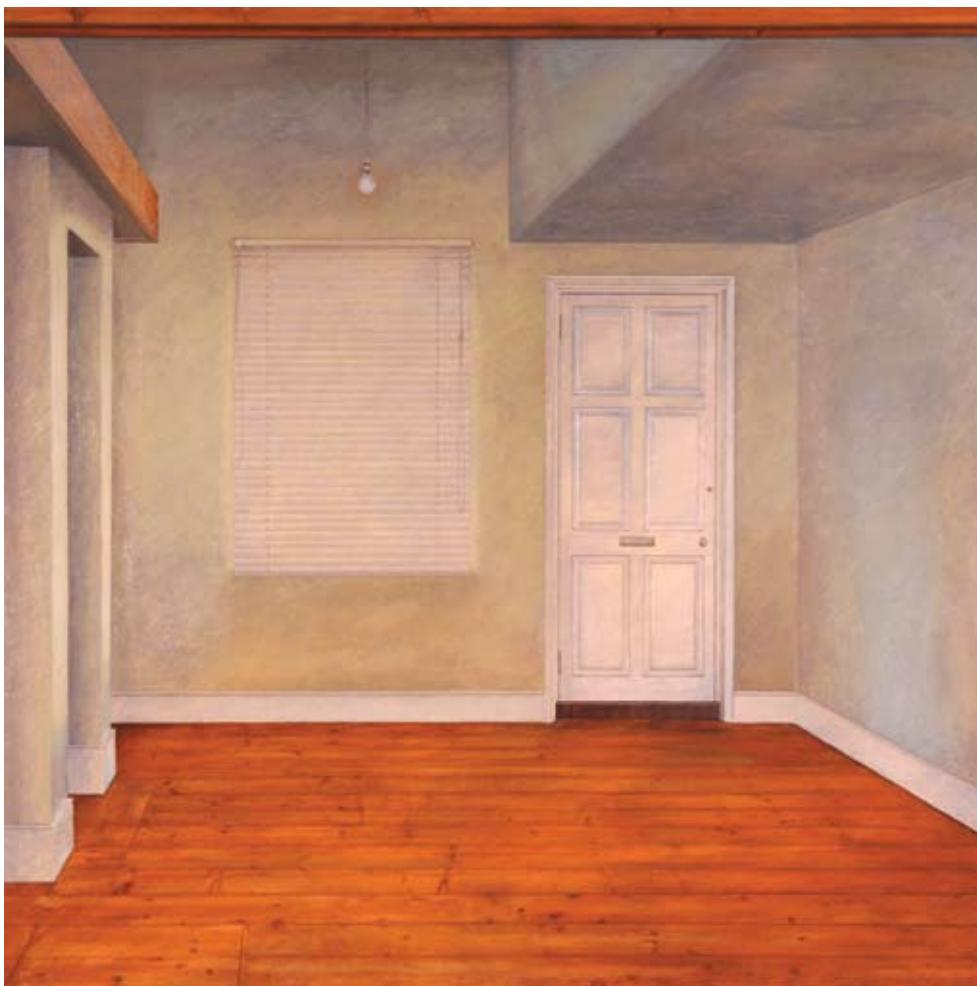
MP: But full of them in a different sense.

RP: Yes, exactly. I'm interested in the idea that these places are clean, clinical, cold and expressionless. They're empty of emotion but they're where extremes of emotion have taken place. But when I was doing the portraits I did a painting of one of the Sheriffs of London and he took me into the condemned cell in the Old Bailey, and it had a really powerful effect on me because I walked into it and I kind of braced myself and I was thinking - it's going to be like walking into a dungeon and you're going to feel the screams coming out of the wall and ... it was just nothing, it was just completely cold. It's the only cell in the Old Bailey that has two doors, one to go in and another one to go out. And you're thinking, well the walls, they're just white tiles - and it's just like walking into a bathroom or a kitchen or something. No feeling, no emotion, nothing.

MP: How strange.

RP: Now that really fascinated me. So I was looking at the way Bacon handled those things.

MP: Let's go back. You were living in Wivenhoe. When you went to live in Wivenhoe you didn't even know Bacon had had a house there, or did you?



68 Queen's Road. Oil on Linen, 60" x 60". 2005 - 2006

RP: I didn't know about Bacon's Wivenhoe house when I first moved there for a spell in 1988-9 – but I did know about it when we subsequently moved there as a family in 2002 – that, and the fact Constable who is another painter I have an enormous respect for, had lived and worked up the road in Dedham - made me feel very comfortable. Because it's like you're living in the same place as friends or familiars. And what particularly interested me about Bacon's house is it's just a little two-up, two-down cottage. And as you walk past it, you'd never know it had been used as a studio. The only clue is that the sash windows have been removed: Bacon took them out so that he wouldn't get a shadow on the canvas while he was painting. So it became really intriguing to me that one of our great artists had worked there - that this great artist had produced great works in this humble little house in the middle of nowhere. I found that quite compelling because it makes you think, you know, yes I could have a go at doing something that maybe would hit the mark, maybe would achieve something. As an artist, what's the point of doing it if you're not going to have a go at doing something....

MP: - You really want to hit as high up as you can.

RP: Exactly. There's no point doing it otherwise, I don't think. I was interested as well in Bacon's asthma and how that might have influenced his work. I mean, reading your book was really interesting, because of the idea of how personal biography affects the public work. Bacon's work is a public aspect of his personal life. And I myself have epilepsy and that affects the way I think about the pictures. Partly that I have this sense that when you have a fit - not that I have many because I'm on medication – but when you have a fit you do have this sense that you have a soul that's being yanked out of your body. It's very disturbing and when you come round from a fit you feel completely disorientated, so you don't know where you are, you don't know what time of day it is, you don't know what day of the week it is, you don't know why you're there. I had a fit once when I was on a ship going over to France, and I came to and I thought where am I, why am I here, what am I doing, you're completely lost and you have to mentally re-construct the world you're in to make sense of it all again. I suppose that is like a real sense of the uncanny.

You know this idea of the uncanny, that really intrigues me because I suppose the uncanny is an artistic exploration of something which through epilepsy I

can feel in a very real sense. So looking at Bacon's work thinking about the screaming and then there's that idea that maybe it's a gasp for life rather than a scream, I mean it's open to interpretation but just the fact that there are those thoughts there interests me. So I've got all those sorts of overlaps of thought that made me think, yes, maybe I would like to tackle Bacon's interiors. The other thing I thought is that, since I don't know enough about painting, if I dive in completely on my own and tackled Bacon's material and spent some time in his world maybe I would learn something. That was another sort of undercurrent of thought I was having at the time.

MP: Like a sub-text?

RP: It's like spending time under the wings of the master, if you like, seeing if you could pick up something from this.

MP: So you used to walk past in front of the house and you managed to get a bit of a dekko.

RP: Oh yes, you can peer through the window. But I didn't want to start work on it because I thought, well, it'll just be a one off and it wouldn't make sense.

MP: You liked the idea of a series.

RP: Yes. I was working on the hospital paintings and I was doing this painting of a critical care bed and then I saw the Arena documentary and it showed the Clínica Ruber in Madrid, where Bacon died. And then I thought: Ah! There are two pictures. And I realised there must be a series I could do: his studio, the room he died in, and I bought some books and worked out a whole list of rooms and came up with about 20. I thought there must be at least half a dozen of these I could get access to, so I decided, well, I'll just get cracking on it.

MP: So to date you've done the studio in Wivenhoe, the staircase in the Hôtel des Saints-Pères in Paris where he and George Dyer were staying in 1971 for the opening of his retrospective at the Grand Palais, the bathroom where poor George was found dead on the lavatory, and then the room at the Clínica Ruber in Madrid where he died, and then finally the transposed studio that's gone to the museum in Dublin with that strange kind of apparatus for listening and the studio sealed off very much like another room that's sort of died.

RP: That's right. You see, I find that really



The Death of George Dyer. Oil on Linen, 72" x 60". 2006

fascinating because it's like looking at a ghost in a box. That's how I feel about it. It's as though his ghost has been trapped and then put on public display. I find it a very strange installation really.

MP: I quite agree, it's sort of sealed it off, like something that's been bottled up.

RP: Yes, that's right ... a genie in a bottle. And everything's so clean and clinical on the outside and sort of chaotic and ...

MP:messy and turbulent and emotional inside.

RP: Yes, that's exactly it.

MP: If one has an interest in a person who has burned a kind of myth into our consciousness, or sub-consciousness, as Bacon has, these interiors reverberate with a presence which is no longer there. But it's his presence alone that makes them significant.

RP: Yes.

MP: And you like the idea of re-creating the traces of somebody in a kind of vacuum? Is it a vacuum?

RP: Yes. For me, it's a kind of vacuum

that you are sucked into as the viewer. So you are stepping into something like an abandoned stage set. The drama has already taken place.

MP: How do you go about recapturing these interiors?

RP: Well, I use perspective in a particular way. I go and visit the rooms, I take photographs of them, and they come out in this slightly fish-eye, fragmented way. I then translate that into a perspective drawing, like a perspective plan, which takes quite a lot of effort. I'm thinking of the early Renaissance perspective windows, that's what I was originally thinking of when I started to do these paintings – the one-point perspective of Alberti's treatise on painting. I like the idea that the perspective creates this sense of drawing you into the image and so opening out the image. There's no block in the foreground, there's nothing preventing you as the viewer from feeling your way in....

MP: Almost toppling in.

RP: Exactly, you're toppling into the picture, you're sort of drawn in, almost compulsively you're being sucked into the space. And so for me the perspective has that quality, there's no barrier there for you.

But, unlike Alberti who sees perspective as a window onto the world, I view it more as a window onto the sub-conscious. Perspective has a way of objectifying the external world whilst placing the viewer at the centre of it. For me this mirrors an idea of both inner and outer concepts of reality and so I suppose perspective is acting as a kind of bridge between these two worlds. And then I'm trying to use the paint as a way to act as a sort of metaphor for the emotional traces – so I'm trying to use the paint in that sense.

MP: What I find very strange and very difficult to define is the way your painting is very clinically exact, there's an almost repellent sense of exactitude - you know you can't touch it, because it's done so perfectly - it draws you in but it also forces you back again because it's so complete in itself.

RP: Well, that's exactly what I'm after. Although I don't know why.

MP: The pull and the push. It's like you go towards it because, as you say, spatially you're drawn in, but there's also a finished aspect to it which actually repels you, so there's a double movement and it's very interesting, it's difficult to put one's finger on why that's fascinating. It's fascinating

beyond the fact that you know this is where Bacon worked, this is where Bacon died, this is where his lover committed suicide, this is where his studio is incarcerated. There's something else, and of course you've done many other things, like with the places of execution which I think have the same thing. They draw you in and it's not even the fact that people are killed there that's repellent, it's the fact that it seems so complete in itself and therefore you can't get a grasp on it.

RP: Yes. Well, I also try to strip out a lot of the detail, so perhaps it's the simplification that enables you to get a mentally easier access. I also try to harmonise the colours – and make them more attractive than they are in reality, more soothing and beautiful. So I'm trying to create the whole environment to be somehow... enticing yet disconnected. I'm thinking also of what Joshua Reynolds said in his 'Discourses on Art', that an artist should paint pictures as they appear in the mind's eye, as he put it – to exclude particulars. He believed that removing details enables the viewer to approach a painting on their own terms, and therefore engage with it more fully.

MP: Do you want something that's both attractive and sinister?



The Turn of the Key. Oil on Linen, 72" x 60". 2006

RP: Well I suppose I want a sort of punchy feel. I want the viewer to get a sense of feeling something. If they're not feeling something then I'm not doing my job.

MP: One of the things that I find slightly sinister is that it's not a kind of neo-reality, it's not a reproduction of something, it's its own thing. It's very, very close to an absolutely visually accurate record, but it's something else. The French have got this word 'décalage', which they use about things that have slipped out of their normal contours. There's a kind of slippage into another kind of universe that is very disquieting.

RP: Well, I'm pleased you say that, because I feel I'm hitting the mark. I go out of my way to try and achieve that. I mean I'm not making a huge effort, because it's something to do with the feeling that I carry inside myself, if that makes sense.

MP: Yes, and you think that's linked to some extent with your experience of epilepsy?

RP: I think it is, yes, I think it's also linked... it's difficult to say, I know the epilepsy is part of that, but I had this experience when I was 8 as well, which I think distanced me from the community I grew up in, so I've

grown up with a sense of disconnection if you like, certainly as a child and young adult, from the adult world. I don't know how related the epilepsy is to that.

MP: Well, I was going to add that if I'm fascinated by these pictures it's because I have that sense of not being related to things, to people and situations. I used to get it much more strongly when I was younger, and it used to worry me enormously, I thought I was losing my mind. I'd be somewhere, for instance, in a crowded restaurant in Paris, and suddenly I'd get this terror of thinking that I wasn't part of where I was, I was sitting in a sort of glass cage, and everything else was happening outside of me and it was unrelated to me. And I was dissociated from it, I was witnessing it but I myself was dissociated from it and therefore I was different and to say it made me feel very spacey is putting it mildly. It made me feel, I wouldn't say paranoid, but it made me feel very afraid.

RP: Yes, that's very much it. I think I've had that feeling most of my life.

MP: Freud wrote a whole essay on this sensation, I think. It's called 'das Unheimliche' in German.

RP: It's dissociation, but it becomes threatening.

MP: It's the slide. I'm sure for a lot of people it's a phenomenon of everyday life. It's an experience.....

RP: What brought that on for you do you think?

MP: Well, one thing that happened to me was that I took some drugs once that made me feel very, very strange. I was doing an interview with a sort of commune of American actors called the Living Theatre and they kept giving me these things and I felt to be cool I just had to keep taking them, and then I just sort of flipped and I thought I'd lost my mind completely. I think that brought to the surface perhaps something that was already there. It took me a long time to recover from that experience – because I was in a state of complete paranoia, I thought that the police were after me and that my head and my whole life had gone wrong. And I don't even know what it was, it was meant to be some sort of marijuana, whether they'd laced it with something or it was particularly strong or whether I had so much, or whether I was simply very tense anyhow because I was meant to be doing this important interview with them.

I was a young man in my mid- twenties and the magazine I was working for in Paris had sent me there, it was one of the first things they'd let me loose on and I thought I'd better make a good story out of it, and I'd half lost my mind with them. And I went back to the flat I shared with my girlfriend and I remember just sort of crouching under the shower for hours and hours, hoping it would all sort of wash away; but of course it didn't. And I didn't dare talk to anyone about it, and it took me years to absorb the anxiety. So that's the strongest feeling I've had like that. I don't get it as much any more, if I get it I treat it with much more distance, and I say you're just having a bit of a funny phase, don't worry. If it comes back, it's usually because I'm under pressure or there's a worrying sense of déjà vu. It's the slippage we were talking about. Things look slightly distorted, slightly unfamiliar. You know, suddenly the walls look rather whiter than they should do, or someone's face keeps reminding you of someone completely different. You start getting more and more anxious. That's what it is in me, I think, a form of extreme anxiety.

RP: Right. That would make sense actually, wouldn't it? That would make sense from my point of view as well.



14, rue de Birague. Oil on Linen, 60'' x 60''. 2008

MP: Would it?

RP: Yes, it would. I'd not thought about it in that way before.

MP: I think being self-conscious and then suddenly it's as though things are continuing to go like a film that's being played but you step to one side, and it continues. You're no longer in the frame; you're no longer part of it even though it's part of you.

RP: That sense of the uncanny is central to me. I realise that a lot of the art I enjoy looking at, or am fascinated by, has or evokes it.

MP: Who else is in that category?

RP: Some of Hopper's paintings, like *Automat* or *Gas*, or Magritte where he has figures looking in the mirror. It's also people like Caspar David Friedrich – *The Chasseur in the Woods* or *The Monk by the Sea*. All those pictures are doing that same sort of job. Actually, in a slightly different way but in a beautiful way, there is a painting by Pisanello, *The Vision of St Eustace*, in the National Gallery, that's both very beautiful but slightly unsettling. So it's those pictures which have that slightly unsettling quality that I'm drawn to. And I suppose when you're looking at art or when you're thinking about art you

come to realise that it's when people push whatever is at the core of what they're doing to an extreme that it becomes more interesting. And then when you look at Bacon it's like he's doing that over and over and over again, over decades, and for me that's what marks him out head and shoulders above all the others.

MP: I see. Do you think part the experience we're talking about is at all what people call an 'out of body' experience?

RP: I would have thought so, yes.

MP: To the side of the body in my case, it's not sort of hovering up over things and looking down.

RP: To me it's like I'm not actually in reality but it's just there in front of me.

MP: I see, you're the observer. When it happened to me, I'm glad it doesn't happen so much any more, it's really, very, very unsettling ... I used to think I was just losing my mind, losing my grip on things. How do you think it comes about?

RP: Have you seen a film called *The Firm* with Tom Cruise – the Sydney Pollack film? I find that quite interesting because there is an uncanny moment in that. Tom

Cruise lands a job in a law firm, he's working hard, doing his exams, and he can't believe his luck: he's landed on his feet, then he goes into the office one day and suddenly there's this moment when he finds out the only client they have is the Mafia. Then he has to walk out of the office, it's the same faces, it's the same building, it's the same furniture, but suddenly everything's disturbed.

MP: How interesting - you mean the set's slightly different, off-key as it were?

RP: No, it's the way it's acted and directed. It's not like the film is distorted in any way; it's all exactly the same, yet the perception is completely different. Everything's changed, and it's become unsettled. And that for me is the uncanny sense.

MP: He has this revelation, it's seen through his eyes, therefore everything's sort of shifted.

RP: Yes, everything has changed and become unsettled. There's the guy who's been mentoring him – suddenly he's seen as being connected to the Mafia and our view of him switches from that of being a benign presence to a threatening one.

MP: Oh yes. Except this is in a different

degree, isn't it? Because it's the whole notion of reality, it's not a situation, not the firm or an interior, it's actually the universe or your perception of the universe that has shifted ... It occurs to me that we go along in our little corridors of space and time and occasionally I try (and this doesn't make me feel unsettled) but I just try and have sort of antennae out because I know there are all sorts of things going on out there, and I have disquieting ideas that something's gone badly wrong. I try to have these antennae out, beyond normal perception, as it were, to try and pick up what's really going on – behind appearance, behind the drone of the day-to-day. In my own little corridor everything seems neat and orderly and happy, but I get the sensation that outside it's quite different - and of course things really do go wrong all the time, terribly.

RP: Yes, but we try not to think about it!

MP: Perhaps that's it. Perhaps that's what Bacon meant when he said that he thought he cleared away a few screens. You know, he said: 'I don't think my paintings are violent, I just think they're about the way things are, the reality of experience, and if people think they're violent it may be that most people tend to live their lives behind screens, a kind of

screened life, and possibly my paintings have removed some of those screens'.

RP: Yes, I think before I started looking closely at Bacon's world I would have said I thought Bacon's work was violent or that there was a violence underlying the superficial appearance of things. But I don't think they are violent any more.

MP: No, they're intense.

RP: Yes, very intense.

MP: And it's strange, we see Bacon's imagery so differently from the way people saw it in the 50s and 60s. You know, they said it was 'grand Guignol' horror, a sort of Punch and Judy show with nothing but blood all over the place and guts and things. There is that, of course, but the real intensity is the intensity of being alive.

RP: I was thinking about that quite a bit. I think what is at the core of Bacon's work is the idea that you explore so thoroughly in your own work on him - that he brings together the two concepts of the sacred and the profane. He seems to be fascinated by Christian iconography and classical myth and what you see in his painting is like a road crash of these

two great strands of western thought. He creates out of it a world which seems to acknowledge the existence of a soul – and I'm thinking here of his 'Three Studies for Figures at the Base of a Crucifixion' where he lifts the head on the left hand panel directly from the Schrenck-Notzing book 'Phenomena of Materialisation'. In doing this, in taking a photograph which claims to show ectoplasm, he acknowledges a soul but then gives it nowhere to go by removing the central icon of Christian hope for a life after death, the crucifix itself. What we see instead are figures locked in a universe without forgiveness or redemption. It is like looking at a post-Christian vision.

I know people found his work difficult when it first came to public attention and it didn't take off initially. And I can imagine that if you'd been through the war you wouldn't want to look at anything else that was horrible or challenging... And I can imagine that's why abstract work would have been so prevalent post-war, because there's not much on the whole to challenge you intellectually or emotionally I wouldn't have thought.

MP: Well, also perhaps the actual disappearance of the figure was

significant. What happened to the human figure? Had it been so badly treated throughout the war that it was generally off-limits - a disturbing subject in itself since it had been so mutilated and tortured and destroyed?

RP: It's something beyond people's ability to deal with, the subject of the past.

MP: What's interesting in your case is that, having painted so many official portraits, commissioned portraits, suddenly you've gone as far away from that as you can, and you've abolished, you've emptied the interiors of any actual human forms.

RP: There is this idea of the 'absent portrait' which I find interesting, I'm thinking of paintings like Van Gogh's boots or the paintings of his bedroom in Arles. But I wish to take this idea a step further and make the viewer the figure.

MP: Ah ... yes, I see.

RP: I'm trying to get you to be an active participant.

MP: So I'm inhabiting these spaces as I look at them?

RP: If I'm getting it right, I hope you are, yes.

MP: And you've put them so that I or any other viewer will walk into them, will be drawn towards this door or this bed in the clinic....

RP: Yes.

MP: The series doesn't stop there because you've got one underway of the studio in Paris which of course I'll be very interested to see. And that's presumably less a thing of extremes of emotion. When you talk about extremes of emotion, of course, both the bed and the toilet are places where a death has occurred.

RP: Yes, I suppose the Paris studio is more of a contemplative piece for me. Because I know from what you've told me that he painted there in the 70s.

MP: From 1974 until the early 80s, yes.

RP: That makes me feel it's a more reflective space. Whereas with these other ones, with the staircase for example, I was wanting to engage directly with his famous triptych In memory of George Dyer. For me that's a direct engagement with one of the greatest paintings in the world. It's my attempt to try and engage and understand more fully what I really admire.



Room 417, Clinica Ruber. Oil on Linen, 66" x 66". 2006

MP: And of course you actually stayed in this hotel, didn't you? You stayed in that particular room.

RP: Yes, I went there with my wife.

MP: Did you take the photos while you were there?

RP: I did, yes.

MP: And did they know in the hotel?

RP: They suspected, yes, and they did ask why I wanted this room particularly. And I just told them that Bacon had stayed there, I just kept it at that. I didn't want them getting too upset about what I might be doing.

MP: Do you think other people have stayed there because of that?

RP: I believe so, yes.

MP: How interesting. Isn't it strange, I was just talking about this yesterday to Peter Conrad who's doing a large article on Bacon for the 'Observer' and he said it's extraordinary that there are all these people who've been in contact with him and for whom he became the most important person in their lives.

RP: Well I wouldn't have done these pictures if I'd ever met him.

MP: Oh, I see - because...

RP: His personality would've been in the way. It's really about my tracing something... my reaction to something.

MP: Yes, of course. So it's a very strange powerful thing that's affected many people who never came across him at all, who know him only through the paintings.

RP: Going back to the uncanny, I'm reading this book of Margaret Iversen's at the moment called 'Beyond Pleasure' where she relates pictures, cinema, things like that to being like mirror recognition that babies have. I thought that was quite interesting – because it gives you a sense of control. Mirror recognition is the moment when babies start to recognise their sense of omnipotence. After that you start to gain a sense of there being an outside world and an inner reality, and that these are two separate things. Your inner reality is contrasted to the outside world, and you also start to build up this sense of a past, present and future. And that gap between outer reality and inner reality is where the imagination takes place – the space that play, the creative arts and

religion occupy as you become an adult.

MP: Are you aiming at a feeling of control?

RP: Yes, I'd say for me painting is about control – taking something that's in some way frightening and having a sense of control over it. I think it's related to the imagination of an outside reality and the threat it poses. And there's this thing that Lacan explores about language – words being labels attached to our memories of things from our past, and that we use language to project an image of ourselves into the future to alleviate the thought of the inevitability of our own deaths. The void in art for me represents that inevitability, and painting as we are talking about it here is an attempt to control our underlying and suppressed sense of dread at that.

MP: You think that's what Bacon was doing too?

RP: I think he's controlling something that is quite terrifying and I think when he talks about removing screens for people, I think what he means is that he is removing some of the illusions we create for ourselves that we are in some way immortal, that death won't visit us and our lives will continue as they always have done.

MP: And you are too?

RP: Yes, I am. And what I most admire about Bacon is that he was able to do that consistently for decades, not just for a few years, not just over a few pictures. And in your book you talk about this, how he grew from a weakling into someone who had the physical constitution of an ox, and I think he must have had the emotional constitution of an ox as well, to have visited that visual world over and over again in that unrelenting way. I have a huge amount of respect and admiration for that. For me, tracing all those spaces has enabled me to think about taking the next step in my own development. So going on to do say the execution pictures, I feel I've drawn from Bacon's strength, from looking at him, admiring him.

MP: His ability to confront, to probe and to control.

RP: Yes.

MP: In a sense encapsulating deep fear and anxiety and horror, extreme emotion – putting it outside himself.

RP: He's putting it outside himself, yes. I don't know quite if I understand it, but it's something about what you'd loosely



7 Reece Mews. *Oil on Linen*, 60" x 60". 2006

describe as the eternal void, when you're looking at pictures, say like Rothko's Seagram paintings. For me they are the ultimate in abstract painting. I don't normally like abstract paintings, but I'm overwhelmed by those paintings and I think that is like an abstract version of looking at the void. And I think if you're looking at say the Automat painting by Hopper, there's a figure in front of the void. So, quite often I think in art where you've got this sense of a void, you've got the figure in front of a void, often contemplating it. And I think what's interesting in Bacon is you've got that void over and over and over again but the figure is being sucked into it – it's like they've stepped over the threshold. So I think that's why they're not violent pictures but they are terrifying pictures. And the figure is cracked open, like an egg with the yolk seeping out, you've got the stuff of the soul seeping out but it's stretched over

the threshold of the void, it's not in front of the void, it's not completely vanished into the void either, but it's being sucked into it. And I think that gives you as the viewer a bit more space to step into the picture, you don't have the proxy of the figure in the picture to take your place. And I think that's what makes them as paintings much more challenging and much more engaging. When I'm thinking of Bacon's paintings I often think of the chaos he was able to live with, with the physical, emotional and sexual extremes he embraced in his life– with his ability to live with huge amounts of uncertainty. It demonstrates his ability to live outside the norms and rules of society. And I think being able to dispense with rules is one of the things that makes Bacon so engaging an artist. He treated painting as a game defined by rules which he wished to either disregard or adapt in whichever way best suited his purpose.

This conversation was recorded in London on 27th June 2008.

NOTES ON THE PAINTINGS

68 Queen's Road

This painting shows the interior of a Victorian terraced cottage Francis Bacon kept as a studio in Wivenhoe, Essex. It is still in its original state with every wall painted in the same sage green throughout, a colour that also matches the walls of his Reece Mews studio. Bacon painted all the rooms he inhabited in this colour, which he felt provided him with a neutral background.

The Michel Leris portraits were painted here, and he used to bring them out from London by taxi. They apparently fitted well on the back seat. Half of the ceiling was removed to provide room for an easel. He also had a settee by the door and when he was working he kept the electric light on.

The cottage is a short walk from a house owned by a close friend of Bacon's, Dennis Worth-Miller. At the back of the cottage there is a small garden he liked to grow herbs in. He loved cooking and his favourite dish was cod which Worth-Miller used to cook for him on his birthday every year.

The Death of George Dyer

George Dyer was a partner and muse of Bacon's. They met in 1963, and their relationship lasted until Dyer's death on the 24th October 1971.

Dyer took a drugs overdose in the bathroom of the Paris Hotel room where they were staying. His body was found slumped on the toilet on the eve of Bacon's major exhibition at the Grand Palais. Many think Bacon's 1963 triptych 'Three Figures in a Room' which shows a male figure seated on a toilet is in some way prophetic of Dyer's death eight years later.

The Turn of the Key

'The turn of the Key' is based on the central panel of Francis Bacon's 1971 triptych 'In Memory of George Dyer'. It shows the staircase in the Hotel Saints-Peres in Paris, which leads to the room Dyer was staying in when he committed

suicide. The title is taken from T.S. Eliot's 'Waste Land' which David Sylvester believes Bacon was thinking of during the painting of his triptych.

14, rue de Birague

This intimate studio was bought for Francis Bacon to use in the early 1970's by his friend and biographer Michael Peppiatt. Comprising of a kitchen, bathroom and one main room which he used to paint and sleep in, it is located in the centre of Paris near the Louvre.

Room 417, Clinica Ruber

Bacon died on the 28th April 1992 in Madrid. His life ended at 9.00 a.m. in a Catholic

hospital run by The Handmaids of Maria. Sor Mercedes nursed him during his final days and the room has changed little since then. It is interesting to note that although an atheist, Bacon who had painted figures at the base of a crucifixion and a series of screaming popes should end his life under a crucifix in the care of nuns.

7 Reece Mews

This painting shows the interior of the Hugh Lane Gallery in Dublin where Bacon's London studio was transferred piece by piece after his death. The Tate had apparently declined the offer of the studio that Bacon's heir John Edwards had made to them, so it went instead to Dublin where Bacon was born. The studio was opened as a permanent exhibit in May 2001.

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