



Portrait of Lisa

Francis Bacon

On display

Title/Description: Portrait of Lisa

Artist/Maker: Francis Bacon

Born: 1957

Object Type: Painting

Materials: Canvas, Oil paint

Measurements: Unframed: h. 597 x w. 495 mm Framed: h. 735 x w. 640 x d. 52 mm

Accession Number: RLS 6

Historic Period: 20th century

Production Place: Britain, England, Europe

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Credit Line: Donated by Robert and Lisa Sainsbury, 1998

Francis Bacon asked Lisa Sainsbury if she would sit for him and thus began a remarkable series of portraits, of which this painting is the second surviving example. After commissioning the portrait of Robert in 1955 (RLS3), Lisa sat for as many as eight versions between September 1955 and 1957. Three of the surviving portraits are in the Sainsbury Centre Collection (see also RLS4; RLS5). [1] One further painting survived (*Lisa Sainsbury [?]*, c.1955, Private Collection) but the rest were destroyed in the rather ritualistic way Bacon would routinely cull his work during this period. This series of portraits is also significant as it was the first time Bacon chose to depict a woman as the subject of a painting.

This example Portrait of Lisa was painted 1957, when after years of a nomadic existence, Bacon found refuge with his friends, Paul Danquah and Peter Pollark. He settled in their flat at Overstrand Mansions, overlooking Battersea Park in London. The cramped living/studio room in the flat was recorded by Cecil Beaton in 1960. This painting dates from the final sessions of Lisa sitting for him.

Lisa Sainsbury later recalled, 'It was rather difficult to sit in that room. There was so much on the floor it was jolly difficult to get to the chair without being covered in paint. He dried his hands on the curtain but there were always things on the floor everywhere - tubes of paint, brochures...'. [2] When David Sylvester asked Lisa if Bacon had work from photographs at all, as he usually did, her answer was emphatic, 'Never. They were done from my face'. [3] Remarkably, apart from when travelling, Bacon would stay in the spare bedroom of his friend's apartment until 1960 when he moved to Reece Mews.

Lisa Sainsbury would tend to sit in the mornings, which was Bacon's preferred working time and each session would last an hour to an hour and a half during which the conversation would flow freely. Often Lisa would return only to find the previous work had been destroyed. Bacon preferred that Lisa did not see the paintings during creation, but on one occasion she did catch sight of one

that she considered the very best before Bacon admitted “it’s gone”, meaning that it was destroyed and lost forever. [4]

The subject of the painting is shown against a black background, like most of his paintings from the period, demonstrating Bacon’s artistic debt to the Old Masters. The handling of paint is also characteristic and with an economy of strokes, Bacon was capable of creating the illusion that the viewer is witnessing the sitter, rather than simply a painted likeness. The focus is the face and neckline. The elongated head and neck are richly painted in strikingly bold colours, which are fleshy and raw and reminiscent of Soutine. The greater control of paint, even when applied thickly and in relief, demonstrate Bacon’s growing confidence in handling paint. The resulting form is finely sculpted, but Lisa later claimed of the portraits, ‘I could never see myself in them’.

Bacon once said of Picasso that he absorbed everything and Bacon likewise fused multiple and varied sources and references into each image. Even when painting from life, David Sylvester states that when he sat for Bacon the artist was also looking at other found imagery. He would later claim in an interview in 1966 that he found it inhibiting to have the subject sitting there in front of him. ‘They inhibit me because, if I like them, I don’t want to practice the injury I do to them in my work. I would rather practice the injury in private by which I think I can record the fact of them more clearly’. [5]

Calvin Winner, January 2020

[1] Steven Hooper (ed.), *Robert and Lisa Sainsbury Collection, Vol. I* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), (cat. 57), p.108.

[2] David Sylvester, *Trapping Appearance* (Sainsbury Centre for Visual Arts, 1996), p.30.

[3] Sylvester, p.30.

[4] Sylvester, p.31.

[5] David Sylvester, *The Brutality of the Fact: Interviews with Francis Bacon*, (London: Thames and Hudson, 1987), third edition (first published 1975), p.41.

Provenance

Gift from the artist to Robert and Lisa Sainsbury in 1957.

Donated to the Sainsbury Centre, University of East Anglia in October 1998.
