



Study for Portrait of P.L., no. 2

Francis Bacon

Not on display

Title/Description: Study for Portrait of P.L., no. 2

Artist/Maker: Francis Bacon

Born: 1957

Object Type: Painting

Materials: Canvas, Oil paint

Measurements: Unframed: h. 1518 x w. 1185 mm Framed: h. 1660 x w. 1325 x d. 80mm

Accession Number: 32

Historic Period: 20th century

Production Place: Britain, England, Europe

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Credit Line: Donated by Robert and Lisa Sainsbury, 1973

Peter Lacy ('P.L. '), a fighter pilot in the Battle of Britain, was Bacon's partner from 1952 until Lacy's death in 1962. The relationship was complicated, violent and emotionally charged. Bacon's sadomasochistic desires were often revealed in the subjects of his paintings and Study for Portrait of P.L., no. 2 explores the physicality of the masculine body.

Lacy is portrayed in a confident watchful pose that verges on the menacing. This is one of two portraits he made of Lacy in 1957 before returning to the subject for a posthumous study in 1963. The composition makes an early break from the dark brooding interiors of the 1950's with the top third of the interior bathed in light. The familiar space frame device is present and focuses attention on the head, underlying Bacon's statement, 'I use the frame to see the image - for no other reason'. [1]

The head or more specifically the face is the focus and the power and technical virtuosity of the modelling in paint is striking. The fluidity of paint, and greater control even when thickly applied, demonstrate Bacon's growing confidence in the medium. The pale green painted background is rich in debris and studio detritus.

Bacon has conjured a haunting life mask of Peter Lacy. Rather than diminishing the overall affect, the truncated torso intensifies the magnetic sensation of Lacy's gaze. Bacon stated, 'it's not so much the painting that excites me as that the painting unlocks all kinds of sensation within me which returns me to life more violently' [2]

Bacon had met Lacy in the Colony Room in 1952, a private members club in Soho, London. They embarked on what Bacon's biographer Michael Peppiatt described as, "the most exalted and most destructive love affair he was ever to know." [3] Bacon stated, "I couldn't live with him, and I couldn't live without him." [4] The situation was no doubt made worse given that Bacon's domestic arrangements was fragile during this period. He eventually settled with his friends Paul Danquah and Peter Pollark in their flat at Overstrand Mansions, overlooking Battersea Park in London, in 1955. Lacy was one of the most, if not the most, significant loves of the artist's life. He held Bacon in a perpetual emotional and physical vice that verged on cruelty. Bacon later lamented in conversation with Peppiatt that: "Being in love in that way, being absolutely physically obsessed by someone, is like an illness." [5]

Lacy had in fact moved to Tangier in the mid-1950s, where he played the piano in a local bar. Tangier was well known as a more tolerant destination for homosexuals, offering escapism that was liberating for the gay ex-pat community. Bacon made frequent trips to Tangier during the summers and continued to paint.

Writing to his gallerist Erica Brausen he stated, "I hope to come back with about 20 or 25 paintings early in October... I feel full of work and believe I may do a few really good paintings now." [6] This proved optimistic as only six paintings remain from his time in Tangier. And even these owe their survival to his friend Nicolas Brusilowski, who was given the works so that he could reuse the canvas but decided to preserve them instead.

Almost inevitably, the tempestuous affair with Lacy was ultimately calamitous. Tragically, Lacy took his own life on the eve of Bacon's first retrospective at the Tate Gallery, London in the May of 1962. [7]

Interestingly, Frank Auerbach observed that one of Bacon's portraits of Lisa Sainsbury was transmuted into a portrait of Peter Lacy. Martin Harrison proposes that this painting is the strongest candidate which is prescient given its acquisition by Robert and Lisa Sainsbury. [8]

Calvin Winner, July 2020

[1] David Sylvester, *The Brutality of the Fact: Interviews with Francis Bacon*, (London: Thames and Hudson, 1987), third edition (first published 1975), p.22.

[2] Sylvester, p.142.

[3] Michael Peppiatt, *Francis Bacon in the 1950s*, (Yale University Press, 2006), pp. 57-58.

[4] Peppiatt, p.42.

[5] Peppiatt, p.40.

[6] Michael Peppiatt, *Francis Bacon: Anatomy of an Enigma*, (Weidenfield and Nicolson, 1996), p.175.

[7] Peppiatt, 1996, p.211.

[8] Martin Harrison, Francis Bacon: Catalogue Raisonné (London: The Estate of Francis Bacon, 2016), p.520.

Exhibitions

Elevation B-B: Lying Figures Gallery 3

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London Art Fair, Business Design Centre, London - 22/01/25 - 26/01/25

Provenance

Purchased by Robert and Lisa Sainsbury in 1957 from the Hanover Gallery, London.

Donated to the Sainsbury Centre, University of East Anglia in 1973 as part of the original gift.
