



Three Studies for a Portrait of Isabel Rawsthorne

Francis Bacon

Not on display

Title/Description: Three Studies for a Portrait of Isabel Rawsthorne

Artist/Maker: Francis Bacon

Born: 1965

Object Type: Painting

Materials: Canvas, Oil paint

Measurements: Unframed: h. 356 x w. 305 mm Framed: h. 510 x w. 1205 x d. 65 mm

Accession Number: 37

Historic Period: 20th century

Production Place: Britain, England, Europe

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Credit Line: Donated by Robert and Lisa Sainsbury, 1973

Isabel Rawsthorne was an artist and friend of Bacon and they had known each other since the late 1940s. Rawsthorne attended Liverpool Art School and won a scholarship to the Royal Academy Schools. In London, she met Jacob Epstein, entered his household as a studio assistant and modelled

for him. Determined to be an artist in her own right, she left London for Paris. In 1935, she met Alberto Giacometti and they became close friends, resulting in the first sculpture bust of her made in 1936. [1] Isabel's remarkable beauty was both an asset and a distraction from her own quest to become an artist and she frequently gained the attention of other artists who wished to paint her, notably Andre Derain and Pablo Picasso who both painted multiple portraits of her in 1936. During the Second World War she worked in intelligence and black propaganda for a clandestine department of the British government.

After the war, she briefly returned to Paris before settling in London and subsequently met Bacon and they became friends. [2] They may well have met at the famous private members club *The Gargoyle* which was still popular with artists and writers in post-war London. Or perhaps they were introduced to each other by Erica Brausen of the Hanover Gallery, where both artists showed in the late 1940s.

This painting is the second of fourteen portraits of Rawsthorne that Bacon painted. It is the first triptych, of which he went on to produce five (three including this one in 1965). This is also the year of Alberto Giacometti's first Tate gallery exhibition and Bacon and Giacometti met on several occasions with their mutual friend Rawsthorne. [3] However, Bacon used photographs taken by John Deakin as source material rather than working from life. He commented to David Sylvester that, 'I find it easier to work than actually having their presence in the room'. [4]

The small-scale triptych of heads became an established format in the 1960s and Bacon went on to produce more than forty claiming that the inspiration was police file photographs [5]. As well as Rawsthorne, a number of other close friends were painted in this format including George Dyer, Lucian Freud, John Hewitt, Henrietta Moreas and Muriel Belcher. Bacon confessed that 'I see every image all the time in a shifting way and almost in shifting sequence. [6]

The painting presents three views of Rawsthorne; the centre panel a frontal, the left the head is turned towards the centre and the right panel is in profile. Photographs of Rawsthorne by Deakin in the Francis Bacon Studio Archive (Hugh Lane, Dublin) demonstrate how Bacon could physically manipulate photos of the sitter, selectively torn, creased, folded and crumpled distorting the features in way Bacon could transfer to paint. But despite the distortions it is remarkable how Bacon was able to retain a likeness of his subject. The painting shows Bacon at the height of his powers combining masterly technique whilst locking-in the essence of the sitter. The application of paint and brushwork is assured and confident often showing the imprint of a cloth. Each canvas has pinholes at each corner suggesting they were painted prior to stretching.

There is an Inscription on the back of the left canvas, 3 studies of portrait Isabel Rawsthorne 1965, in Bacon's hand.

Calvin Winner, September, 2020

[1] Calvin Winner, *Alberto Giacometti: A Line Through Time* (Bloomsbury, 2016), p.57

[2] Andrew Sinclair, *Francis Bacon: His Life and Violent Times* (Sinclair Stevenson, 1993) p.115

[3] Winner, p.75

[4] David Sylvester, *The Brutality of the Fact, Interviews with Francis Bacon* (London, 1990), p.40

[5] Sylvester, 1993, p.86

[6] Sylvester, 1993, p.21

Exhibitions

'Francis Bacon: Human Presence', National Portrait Gallery, London, 10/10/2024 - 19/1/2025

Provenance

Purchased by Robert and Lisa Sainsbury from Marlborough Gallery, London in 1965.

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