



# Alan and Barbara (Double portrait with window)

Isabel Rawsthorne

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## On display

**Title/Description:** Alan and Barbara (Double portrait with window)

**Artist/Maker:** Isabel Rawsthorne

**Born:** 1967 c.

**Object Type:** Painting

**Measurements:** h 1760 mm x w 1130 mm (framed h. 1170 x w. 810)

**Accession Number:** 50694

**Production Place:** Britain, England

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**Credit Line:** Donated in memory of Warwick Llewellyn Nicholas, 2016

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*Alan and Barbara (Double portrait with window)* is one of several double portraits Isabel Rawsthorne (1912-92) made of her husband and his sister in the 1960s. The portrait is painted in what we can recognise, at this point in her career, to be Rawsthorne's signature style: ghostly figures are formed from thick paint, physically standing out from an otherwise smooth canvas. The paint has a grainy, matte texture, having been mixed with sand. At first glance the colour palette is monochromatic, in different shades of grey. Upon closer inspection, however, it is possible to see pink, blue and white paint used to articulate the window and the shaft of light it appears to cast on the left-hand side of the painting. The surface of the background, unlike the figures, is flat and smooth, indicating that these different colours have been scraped across the canvas in thin layers.

This contrast between the thick paint of the figures and the flatness of the background is similar to a quality the writer Michel Leiris recognises in the paintings of Francis Bacon, in which the figures appear as a frenzy of movement against the stillness of their surroundings. [1] The result is that the living quality of the figures, captured in motion, is intensified when juxtaposed to such an empty setting. This reading is made more likely by Rawsthorne's close friendship with both Leiris and Bacon.

Unlike Bacon's figures, however, who are depicted with fleshy tones and texture, Rawsthorne's subjects are skeletal: thick knots of paint articulate the ears, eye sockets, nose and collarbones of her subjects. This echoes her comments on her drawings of dancers in which she is "aware of the skeleton beneath the form". [2] Carol Jacobi adds another reference to the skeleton in her analysis of the painting, noting Rawsthorne's appreciation *The Ambassadors* by Holbein. [3] Jacobi suggests

that the mysterious, shadow-like form spread out along the lower half of the canvas is an elongated face, echoing the distorted skull at the bottom of Holbein's double portrait. [4]

On the one hand, therefore, we see a work which reduces the figure to its most skeletal form, and on the other, a work which shows the movement and life within these figures. This is, perhaps, one of the most characteristic features of Rawsthorne's work: her portraiture defines her subjects as both human and animal. By focusing on double portraits Rawsthorne is also able to bring into play the idea of the encounter, acknowledging the way we recognise the person within the flesh and bones. By this point in her career, Rawsthorne had experimented with different ways of expressing this juxtaposition, and this painting is not only an example of the visual language she had developed to illustrate this distinction but also a demonstration of her creativity with composition.

Georgia Kelly, April 2023

[1] Michel Leiris, *Francis Bacon* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1988).

[2] Isabel Lambert, 'A world of movement' in *Dancers in Action: Drawings, Paintings, Stage Designs* (London: The October Gallery, 1986). Exhibition catalogue. Note that Isabel Lambert is the name under which Isabel Rawsthorne exhibited.

[3] Hans Holbein the Younger, *The Ambassadors*, 1533, oil on canvas, The National Gallery, London.

[4] Jacobi, Carol. *Out of the Cage: The Art of Isabel Rawsthorne* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2021), p.336.

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## Further Reading

Suzanne Doyle and Karen Southworth, *Isabel Rawsthorne 1912-1992: Paintings, Drawings and Designs* (Harrogate: The Mercer Art Gallery, 1997). Exhibition Catalogue.

Carol Jacobi, *Out of the Cage: The Art of Isabel Rawsthorne* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2021).

Calvin Winner, 'Alberto Giacometti in Britain' in *Alberto Giacometti: A Line through Time* ed. by Claudia Milburn and Calvin Winner (London: Bloomsbury, 2016), pp.54-81.

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