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Francis Bacon and the practice of painting

What makes painting such a determined survivor and insistent practice in our contemporary world and culture? What causes such a handmade practice to be still relevant? Why does it persist in so many guises, especially given the multiplicity of media available to the contemporary artist. It is, perhaps difficult for us to appreciate the extent to which painting practice was a key focal point of contestation in the nineteenth century. Indeed Clark argues that,

For a while, in the mid-nineteenth century, the state, the public and the critics agreed that art had a political sense and intention. And painting was encouraged, repressed, hated and feared on that assumption. (Clark:1982:249)

In addition to the broader cultural and political importance of painting in the nineteenth century it is also necessary to look carefully at the very means and materials of painting in order to ascertain why it has continued to persist as a vital practice. As painting was perhaps *the* significant artistic practice of the early nineteenth century, then any attempts to subvert it were viewed with distinct suspicion. In 1840 for example, the painter Paul Delaroche had announced that with the new and revolutionary appearance of the photographic image, 'from today painting is dead.' (Crimp:2002:96) Such anxieties were understandable as the new photographic technology and the photographed image with its smooth surface and texture, was perceived as capable of supplanting the similarly smooth, almost featureless brushwork of academic painters like Delaroche and his peers, and could be executed much more quickly.

However, painters like Courbet can be seen to actively challenge such misgivings because of their recognition that a painting could still achieve and aspire to a vision of the world that was not as readily accessible in a photograph. In a way, Courbet's painting can be viewed as an affirmative statement made about the efficacy of 'painting' over and beyond any questions of social and political context. For example, if Courbet's arrangement of figures in the 'Burial of Ornans' of 1849-50 had been photographed (provided that the technical means were sufficiently capable to depict such a large group) then the same arguments about the importance of the social context and its depiction of the different classes as intermingling would still prevail. Wherein lies the continuing significance of painting practice?

The answer to this can be found in a number of key factors, one of which is the utilisation of the material stuff of paint and the other being the persistence of the handmade and bodily origin of painting as opposed to the more mechanical technologies coming into prominence. The specific practice of Francis Bacon and the way he embodied the material of paint into his images can allow us to address the continuing persistence and significance of painting. James Elkins sees the process of painting as one of alchemy and as a transforming of base materials into something transcendent, that although a substance like earth pigments mixed with oils is a lowly and basic material, that it can also 'be unnatural and divine.' (Elkins:2000:188)

Elkins argues that,

what matters in painting is pushing the mundane towards the instant of transcendence. The effect is sublimation, or distillation: just as water heats up and then suddenly disappears, so

paint gathers itself together and then suddenly becomes something else – an apparition hovering in the fictive space beyond the picture plane. (Elkins:2000:188)

It is this quality of transformation that gives the practice its alchemical character. How does paint act upon us in this way? A key aspect of the physical and often revelatory power of painting lies in its capacity to bypass and short circuit our normal cognitive perceptual mechanisms, to enact itself directly upon us and our bodies, instantaneously overriding all the ‘clearing house’ mechanisms of intellect and reasoning. As Francis Bacon remarked, the peculiar resonance of a painting lies in the attempt to bring it ‘up onto the nervous system more violently and more poignantly.’ (Sylvester:2002:12)

Even for the most experienced practitioner it is a process fraught with difficulty and a practice constantly eluding one’s control and mastery. Bacon talks repeatedly about the processes of painting and it must seem astonishing to non-painters that so much of what he is describing can be ascribed to accidental discoveries more than systematic analysis. As, he expresses it,

You know in my case all painting – and the older I get, the more it becomes so – is accident. So I foresee it in my mind, I foresee it, and yet I hardly ever carry it out as I foresee it. It transforms itself by the actual paint. I use very large brushes, and in the way I work I don’t in fact know very often what the paint will do, and it does many things which are very much better than I could make it do. (Sylvester:2002:16)

It is as if the paint has an independent life and can conjure up all kinds of effects unintended by the painter. As Bacon points out, much of the process is accidental and the artistry then can come down to a question of what one leaves out, destroys or includes. It is little wonder that Stephen Newton contends that, ‘the early, primitive stages of a painting can provoke intolerable feelings of persecutory anxiety and guilt in the painter,’ (Newton:1998:16) or that the over anxious painter, ‘who is unable to tolerate the raw and fragmented nature of the early creative stages, might be too constrained to make even the most rudimentary of marks.’ (Newton:1998:16)

This quality of accident is key to Bacon’s practice and, from the experience of looking at other painters is more important than is normally recognised. This is because it becomes a habitual part of the discerning painter’s armoury. The skill, knowledge comes not so much from knowing how to paint some thing, a head, skull or hill etc. but from one’s discernment in accepting (or rejecting) what one has done with an open mind and little regret, so that something can genuinely surprise you. This tacit mastery comes from an instinctual perception of how to utilise and somehow ‘cash in’ upon something found, perhaps some unruly aspect or behaviour of the pigment, which is accidentally revealed during the process.

As Susan Rothenberg admits, I’m not a clear thinker, but I find things out by stumbling upon them.’ (Whitfield: 2003:3) Similarly, Bacon discussed his early *Painting* of 1946, that ‘I had no intention to do this picture; I never thought of it in that way. It was like one continuous accident mounting on top of another.’ (Sylvester: 2002:11) He talks about the difficulties of painting because ‘it is really a complete accident.... Because I don’t know how the form can be made.’ (Sylvester: 2002:12)

In a significant passage he describes painting a head in which

the sockets of the eyes, the nose, the mouth were, when you analysed them, just forms which had nothing to do with eyes, nose or mouth; but the paint moving from one contour into another made a likeness of this person I was trying to paint. (Sylvester:2002:12)

It is as if the visual impression of someone or some thing can only be *realised* or brought into being, by means of configurations of paint moving from one contour to another. Bacon then talks about his feelings in front of the painting,

I thought for a moment I'd got something much nearer to what I want. Then the next day I tried to take it further and tried to make it more poignant, more near and I lost the image completely. (Sylvester:2002 :12)

In his attempt to bring the image into being (Bacon's frequent use of the word 'poignant' registers a more emotional engagement with his subject than the blandness of 'real') the image was lost. Bacon describes the process as being like 'a tightrope walk between what is called figurative painting and abstraction.' (Sylvester:2002:12) The process of trying to depict something in paint which acts as an equivalent or something closely resemblant to what is seen, touched or felt, is an experience commonly felt by most painters.

When Bacon talks about 'abstraction' he is, I would argue, referring to the general abstractness and indifferent structure of the brushstroke and collection of brushstrokes which create the factual presence of the painting and which, as an ensemble goes to constituting the required subject matter. What is significant for Bacon is the 'attempt to bring the figurative thing up onto the nervous system more violently and more poignantly.' (Sylvester: 2002:12) When he talks about the 'figurative thing' he is referring to the pre-existing subject of head, body or object being rendered by the 'abstract' materials of paint and its inherent factual qualities of thickness so *closely* to that pre-existing 'image,' that it resonates with a jolt of recognition which reverberates throughout the whole bodily system.

In Bacon's *Seated Woman (Portrait of Muriel Belcher)* (Fig 1) of 1961 the composition is closely related to a sketch of a seated woman with the right hand side of the body almost in profile, with the head turned to her left and attached to a longer left leg and foot which twists and turns towards the other leg. (Fig 2) In the painting, however, there are two conjoined profiles constituting the head. The basic composition is similar with the shapes of body and legs roughly the same. The woman is seated upon a long sofa with three cushions projecting obliquely. Her feet 'rest' on the surface of a green floor. The body of the woman seemingly 'crouches' before us. The shapes of left leg and thin right arm echo one another and contribute to the overall awkwardness of the pose. There is space around the figure. Behind the furniture is a flat background lilac colour. The oblique angles of cushions and horizontal lines of the sofa are unruly accents undermining the stability of the figure and accentuating the feeling of incipient movement, emotion and energy.

Figure 1

Francis Bacon 'Portrait of Murial Belcher' 1961
Oil on canvas 165 x 142cm

Figure 2

Francis Bacon
Sketch of seated Woman c1961

A close up of the head and body sections reveal a key aspect of Bacon's technique. There are rich and complex textures across the painting. The arms and legs contain mechanical imprints of a cloth or perhaps, scrubbing brush which has been covered in paint and 'printed' onto the surface. The head contains marks tracing the course of a loaded and large paintbrush being dragged across the surface in quick, rapid movements. This dragging of, in places, 'dry' paint across different passages of under painting accentuates the rapidity of a movement of a head or body arrested in its own corporeal movement.

It is the transformative power of paint in the construction of such typical images that continues to make painting so valuable and resonant. Bacon describes the difficulty of this because as any painter knows, it is sometimes problematic to reason out why some passages of painting 'work' or are more effective than other passages. Often it is a matter of instinctive feeling rather than a process of logical reasoning. Bacon talks about this being the difference between what he terms as 'paint which conveys directly (ie onto the nervous system) and paint which conveys through illustration (ie which is prosaic, dull and meaning-less),' (Sylvester:2002:18) and that

it is something to do with instinct. It's a very, very close and difficult thing to know why some paint comes across directly onto the nervous system and other paint tells you the story in a long diatribe through the brain. (Sylvester:2002:18)

Here, the acknowledgement of the importance of 'feel' for paint and of the instinctive knowledge which derives from familiarity with the material, is seen to take precedent over and above any kind of logical reasoning thought process. The sensory responses for the painter and for the viewer must be activated immediately or else it will not be effective. If one has to rationalise the process or to somehow explain the procedure or 'story' to oneself, then the painting has basically failed.

Martin Hammer states that this

impulse towards technical experiment, in the pursuit of conveying feeling without the mediation of the intellect, continued to be a pressing concern. (Hammer:2006:17)

An example of such an impulse is the literal 'throwing' of paint onto the canvas that is described by Bacon as almost a last resort when an image resists more conventional means. (Sylvester:2002:160)

Now clearly, Bacon's particular impulse will not be necessarily shared by every painter, especially in a postmodern context when the medium of paint is part of a whole repertoire of effects and techniques available to any artist. However, I would contend that Bacon's idea about conveying emotion through the material of paint is fundamental to how painting as a practice continues to be of crucial importance and is a philosophy shared by a whole lineage of painters going back to Giotto and beyond, even to icon painters. For example, Stephen Newton refers to the analogy made by Didi-Huberman between the painted panels of the early Renaissance and abstract expressionism, that,

in effect the altar is a portable work of abstract expressionism for personal spiritual usage. To the early religious painter, the abstract, wildly painted

panel, which might be juxtaposed alongside, or incorporated within figurative narratives and iconography, embodied the psychic experiences which were then symbolised in the figurative parables of the Passion. (Newton:1998:20)

There is a belief here that to be successful, painting must touch the nerve of the body, must engage with the body and that this can only be manifested through the material itself. The notion of embodiment itself would suggest that the material becomes the body itself, in a process akin to transubstantiation. In order for this to occur in practice there needs to be a conjunction of technical awareness and imagination with the feelings towards things and objects of the world which are not only 'seen' but 'felt' bodily, and so strongly that it can bypass the intellectual, rational side of thinking altogether. In an interesting criticism of some paintings by Balthus, Bacon laments what he sees as a failure of this conjunction between a technical awareness and the feeling world of the painter.

they are no good. He is trying to get the tenderness which we would all love to get for a change, but it can't be done that way, it can only come as a technical thing and not as illustration or at least I feel that. I feel more and more that nothing matters or will happen until someone makes a new technical synthesis that can carry over from the sensation to our nervous system. (Hammer:2006:17)

A good comparison can be made here with Merleau-Ponty's analysis of Cezanne's working procedures when he demonstrates how an interpretation should not be distinct from the act of seeing, but rather how the actual technical means should *create* the act of seeing. He quotes Cezanne's as saying about a portrait,

If I paint all the little blues and all the little browns, I capture and convey his glance. Who gives a damn if they have any idea how one can sadden a mouth or make a cheek smile by wedding a shaded green to a red. (Merleau-Ponty:1993:66)

Merleau-Ponty argues that Cezanne is making a point not only about how one perceives something in the world but how, in painting that act of seeing is bound up with the technical mechanisms for seeing and recording it, that

One's personality is seen and grasped in one's glance, which is, however, no more than a combination of colours....Cezanne returns to just that primordial experience from which these notions are derived and in which they are inseparable. (Merleau-Ponty:1993:66)

Bacon's quest for painting might appear to be an existential one, a lament and nostalgia for the passing of time with the realisation that, for the painter, the possibility of cheating time and death with the material certainties of pigment is, at least temporarily, a possibility.

Bacon's thoughts about painting continue to have relevance as he is referring to the way we humanly perceive the world. His painting might, like Cezanne's be defined as 'phenomenological' in that it goes beyond a superficial description of appearance, to a

description of the way the things and objects of the world are ‘originally given.’ (Wentworth:2004:xiii) Robert Sokolowski defines phenomenology as an all embracing process, ‘which recognizes the reality and truth of phenomena, the things that appear.’ (Sokolowski:2000:14) He contrasts this with the traditional Cartesian approach whereby things and objects of the world are perceived only with the mind.

It is not the case, as the Cartesian tradition would have us believe, that ‘being a picture’ or being a perceived object’ or being a symbol’ is only in the mind. (Sokolowski:2000:14)

He argues that their ‘being’ encompasses more than the intellect and must embrace that of bodily perception and orientation as well.

They are ways in which things can be. The way things appear is part of the being of things; things appear as they are, and they are as they appear. Things do not just exist; they also manifest themselves as what they are. (Sokolowski:2000:14)

Through such a perceptual schema, ‘when we make judgements we articulate the presentation of parts of the world; we do not just arrange ideas or concepts in our mind.’ (Sokolowski:2000:14) Brendan Prendeville notes that ‘Phenomenology has special relevance for visual art, which more expressly than the other arts addresses us in corporeal terms.’ (Prendeville:2004:41) Painting is an activity that articulates itself from within the body, an act whose physical manifestation of the ‘painting’ is a visualisation of a fundamentally bodily and ‘felt’ apprehension of the world. Merleau-Ponty talks about how ‘we cannot imagine how a *mind* could paint’ (Merleau-Ponty:1993:123) and that,

it is by lending his body to the world that the artist changes the world into paintings. To understand these transubstantiations we must go back to the working, actual body – not the body as a chunk of space or a bundle of functions but that body which is an intertwining of vision and movement. (Merleau-Ponty:1993:123-4)

Frederique Desbuissons underlines the connections that can be made between the bodily experience of the artists and the visual products of his labour. He argues that, in speaking about the ‘figure’ of the artist, such a discourse must encompass a wider frame of references than that of the reception and visual analysis of particular works. He states that, ‘if the artist personifies the art which he produces his body becomes the most eloquent allegory of this.’ (Desbuissons:2008:258) Although Desbuissons is focussing upon the ways in which contemporary criticism associated Courbet’s art and its production (for example, his use of the palette knife as a predominant tool for painting) with the actual uncouth persona and personal habits of the man, the overriding connection between a painter’s everyday practice and his or her holistic bodily engagement with the materials of that practice, is of significance.

Wentworth, for example sees that our ‘perceptual experience is primordially of ourselves as a body situated in the world, one that extends all around us, and through which we move.’ (Wentworth:2004:xiv) It is as if our capacity for reasoning and organizing our perceptions

comes *after* this initial 'primordial' perceptive experience of the world. Therefore, with phenomenology the key lies in

the nature of our experience as it is originally given *prior* to reflection – what can be called pre-reflective experience, (and) is thus quite different from the nature of our experience once we start to reflect upon it.
(Wentworth:2004:xiv)

It is this quality of pre-reflective experience which, I believe Bacon continually struggled to achieve in his painting. For him, once the mind too literally took over the process (as he felt with Balthus) and began to tell a story, then this sense of original perception was lost and with it the potential of the paint to 'embody' the authentic perception.

Merleau-Ponty's description of a body being 'leant' to the world tends to indicate that the painter's activity is somehow involuntary and not willed, but rather an act whereby one's apprehension of the world is somehow heightened by the act of painting, that it is an act of sensitive appreciation rather than a self conscious *willing* of something into existence.

It is interesting that Cezanne was so much the focus of Merleau-Ponty's writing about art because, ironically, his was a deliberately logical and determined quest to render the things of the world according to how these objects were apprehended. Basically there was nothing 'involuntary' about his practice but contrarily it was a painting practice demanding an extreme discipline and self will to be articulated. Similarly, Bacon's practice demanded a discipline about what could and could not be accepted during the painting process, and maintained a tenuous balance between success and failure. He mentions modestly that in his perception of how the 'accident' can be used, 'one becomes more alive to what the accident has proposed for one.' (Sylvester:2002:53) That is, his experience of painting allowed him a greater sensitivity to how critical moments and passages can be exploited and he was attempting in painting, 'to set a trap with which one would be able to catch the fact at its most living point.' (Sylvester:2002:54)

A discussion about how paint operates and behaves is extremely important in locating reasons for its continuing relevance, and for that reason, Bacon's analyses, during his interviews with David Sylvester remain pertinent. Although Bacon eschews abstraction and is at pains to discuss his figurative intentions he is, at the same time acutely aware of the visceral effect which a material like paint can potentially arouse, and how it can become a potent vehicle for expressing emotion. Through his own appreciation of how emotive the material of paint can be 'in itself', Sylvester maintains that,

the thing that's difficult to understand is how it is that marks of the brush and the movement of paint on canvas can speak so directly to us
(Sylvester:2002:58)

Bacon rejects abstraction on the grounds that 'it always remains on one level,' (Sylvester:2002:59) and that it 'is an entirely aesthetic thing' (Sylvester:2002:58) which does not emanate from a scrutiny of the lived, corporeal world. Bacon's view of painting is that it should have a duality and that the aesthetic qualities of paint and facture should serve an end of expressing something felt and seen, of what is perceived as the 'facts' of the world and its objects. When he says that, 'I think that the mystery of fact is conveyed by an image being

made out of non-rational marks,' (Sylvester:2002:58) he is coming near to explaining this odd duality which resides in the irony that one's success in achieving a more 'real' or visceral image, one which impacts directly upon one's nervous system, might be dependent upon the psychological impact of the way in which the material of paint is placed and transformed upon the surface of the painting, and that what is most 'real' can be activated by a material substance that is, in itself wholly without meaning.

In discussing technical issues so much, Bacon might be seen to be focussing his attention very much on the artist as 'author' because it is the painter's sensibility which is continually 'on a tight rope' and, in his case, always on the watch for the 'trap' which he describes.

However, if painting is able to be derived from one's primordial and pre-reflective responses to the world then it is reasonable to assume that the viewer's responses can be engaged as well, and that the painting can somehow become part of the viewer's whole lived and embodied response to the world in turn. This idea is developed further by Parveen Adams when she opens out the discourse between the painting as made object and the painting as received by the viewer. In her psychoanalytical reading she starts from 'Lacan's insistence on the fact that perception is not just an issue of vision but an issue of desire.' (Adams:1993:53) The bringing forth of a painting into the world must necessarily elicit a reciprocal process of vision for the potential viewer and,

the question of perception must take up the problem of what I want to see, and the way in which it structures the gaze which captures me. Instead of thinking of perception as just a visual field, it must be thought of as the field that is structured by the relations and forces of objects and desires. (Adams:1993:53)

Barbara Bolt also opens out the discussion about the larger field of perception. She argues that what Bacon describes as 'fact, or rather, 'matters of fact', emerges out of the thickness or fuzziness of the practice.' (Bolt:2004:144) She maintains that, 'the work of art exceeds its own structures in a radical performativity,' (Bolt:2004:190) and that 'in the heat of practice, the body has the potential to become language and the work may take on a life of its own.' (Bolt:2004:190) She locates the potential reciprocity of such a process, between artist and object, artwork and viewer, artist and viewer and so on, to the ways in which the artwork can create its own signifying field. 'Through process, the outside world enters the work and the work casts its effects back into the world.' (Bolt:2004:190)

It is the painting that constitutes this 'field' of relationships.

So what relevance has Bacon's comments for painting now? I would argue that, with the ending of abstraction as the primary Modernist idiom for painting in the nineteen-sixties, that the potential for all kinds of painting were released and enhanced. Bacon's comments about abstraction and figuration and the 'accident', if only at the level of helping to detach painting techniques from their Modernist connotations, can be seen as instrumental in enabling contemporary painters (like Fiona Rae for example) to joyously embrace the myriad technical possibilities that painting can now legitimately offer.

As I have indicated above, a number of writers have drawn attention to Bacon's ideas about painting as the locus of different claims that can be made about the practice. Gilles Deleuze makes perhaps the most complex analysis where he discusses different aspects of Bacon's art, themes of athleticism, body, meat and spirit, painting and sensation, and the diagram,

among others. (Deleuze:2004) A recurrent motif and one which makes a discussion of Bacon so relevant to our contemporary world, is the problem for the painter of how to handle the plethora of images already in the world, especially the ubiquity of the photography, both in terms of its own history and stock of images, and the way in which the photograph as an entity both mediates our perception of the world but also our perceptions about art. As Deleuze puts it,

not only has there been a multiplication of images of every kind, around us and in our heads, but even the reactions against clichés are creating clichés. Even abstract painting has not been the last to produce its own clichés. (Deleuze:2004:89)

The recent history of painting can bear this last point out as we have seen a succession of painters like Richter and Tuymans, Peyton, Carnegie and Raedecker using photographs as source material for their work and virtually presenting the ‘photograph as painting’ as a philosophical proposition, while many others, like Jason Martin, Bernard Frize and Ian Davenport utilise the traditional tropes and gestures of modernist abstract painting as a starting point for their own compositions without the need to insert any mark or ostensible features of individual authorship which would make their work engage ‘in’ painting as opposed to ‘with’ painting as a practice.

One can detect in Bacon’s attitude towards photography something of the same feeling he has towards abstraction, that fundamentally, although photographs have an aspiration towards the aesthetic, they cannot compete with painting

because he thinks the photograph tends to reduce sensation to a single level, and is unable to include within the sensation the difference between constitutive levels. (Deleuze:2004:91)

It is as if the viability of painting must lay elsewhere, and that, in the avoidance of cliché and of falling into the trap of mere ‘illustration’ the painter must go beyond, or at least supercede the total reliance on another image.

Bacon’s comments are critical in that they refer to the practice of painting as a continuing discourse. In discussing the primacy of the painter’s awareness of his or her technical means and how the very ‘accidents’ as well as ‘deliberateness’ can be exploited, he focusses upon how this technical awareness and sensitivity can be brought to bear in the expression of something which is almost intangible and eludes their mere description in words. In his case it is something to do with emotion and feeling, an awareness that the material of paint can express the deepest feelings which makes painting potentially such an important practice and tradition.

A close scrutiny of painting practice reaching back to the pre-Renaissance and the subsequent Western tradition of painters like Titian, Rembrandt, Goya, Courbet, Manet, Guston and Baselitz reveals a connected lineage of fascination with and utilisation of the material substance of paint. With all of these painters the viewer must come to terms with the signature qualities and array of markings and factual characteristic which animate the surface of different paintings and which ultimately allows the subject matter to be expressed. In looking at these painters of this long Modernist tradition we scrutinise carefully how the materials of paint, brushstroke, and rendered surface correspond or co-operate with the

specific subject being depicted, be it figure, object, landscape or abstraction. It is perhaps the extent of the correspondence, or the *duality* mentioned above, between content and material, that enables us to judge whether a painting is finally a success or failure.

In a postmodern climate, however it could be argued that painters are freer to explore to the limit the entire formal (and informal) repertoires of painting, to make painting about painting, to juxtapose various stylistic characteristics altogether or to use painting to describe their own confessional and frankly autobiographical positions in the world. It is not even necessary for there to be a conjunction between content and material as was the case before. As such, we can see that Bacon's two essential areas of exposition, the technical and the emotional, affective aspects of painting are both available for painters to develop and exploit to their limits. What is perhaps at stake however, is the extent to which painters feel compelled to express their ideas and emotions in paint or whether, in fact, paint is the only vehicle through which, and by which, such emotion can be supplied.

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Further works (illustrations)

Figure 1 Francis Bacon *Seated Woman (Portrait of Muriel Belcher)* 1961 oil on canvas 165 x 142cm

Figure 2 Francis Bacon *Sketch of Seated Woman* c 1961