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New catalogue raisonné sheds light on Francis Bacon's art and controversial life

Five-volume publication reveals artist's unseen works—and his sadomasochistic side

by [MARTIN BAILEY](#) | 25 May 2016



Francis Bacon's Triptych (1987) is on show today (25 May) at Lexington St, London.
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The forthcoming Francis Bacon catalogue raisonné will offer an unprecedented view into his art—and his controversial private life. Bacon’s surviving oeuvre, totalling 584 paintings, is catalogued in 1,538 pages. Less than a third of the pictures are in museums, with most hidden away in anonymous private collections. Thanks to colour reproductions, some available for the first time, it is now possible to clearly see the development of Bacon’s art.

Although the catalogue will not be published until 30 June, it was launched yesterday (24 May) in London’s Soho—the quarter where Bacon drank and felt at home. Martin Harrison, the editor, has devoted 10 years to the project. He travelled endlessly, failing to locate only one painting, *Head with Raised Arms* (1955), which was last recorded in Turin more than fifty years ago. The catalogue was funded by the Francis Bacon Estate and although the cost is not being disclosed, it probably amounted to several million pounds.

Harrison believes his catalogue will provide a much more nuanced view of the artist’s work, showing us “what Bacon painted, rather than what people imagine he painted”. He points out that there are only 11 pictures of copulating males, compared with 18 female nudes (although Harrison admits that some are androgynous, making it difficult to give precise figures). The paintings also offer a view into Bacon’s private world, including his complex relationships with male lovers.



Francis Bacon's *Self-Portrait with Injured Eye* (1972). © The Estate of Francis Bacon. All rights reserved, DACS 2016. Photo: Prudence Cuming Associates Ltd

The sadomasochistic side of Bacon’s life emerges in *Self-portrait with Injured Eye* (1972). According to Harrison’s entry, “Bacon reputedly suffered many beatings, which as a masochist he may not have found entirely uncongenial”. The injured eye in his painting stands as “an autobiographical symbol”. At the catalogue launch, Harrison said that when it came to George Dyer, a long-term companion, Bacon “wanted to be raped by Dyer, whereas Dyer wanted to cuddle Bacon”.

Harrison also discusses the “complicated” relationship between Bacon and Lucian Freud. Bacon painted Freud 16 times between 1951 and 1973, although they fell out after Freud saw the injuries sustained by Bacon after he was beaten by his friend Peter Lacy. Freud retaliated by twisting Lacy’s collar around his neck.

Among the more surprising images in the catalogue is a privately-owned triptych of Mick Jagger (1982). Although no rock and roll fan, Bacon was fascinated by the lead singer of the Stones. *Three Studies for a Portrait (Mick Jagger)* (1982) was painted from photographs.

The catalogue also includes numerous portraits of Robert and Lisa Sainsbury, who were among his early patrons. Harrison suggests that one of Lisa (1955), now at the Sainsbury Centre for Visual Arts, was based on the bust of Nefertiti and “bore only a slight resemblance” to the wife of the supermarket chairman.

Harrison also deals with the controversial question of Bacon drawings. He describes the status of 40 works on paper dating from 1958 to 1961 acquired by Tate in 1997 as “problematic”. They are not drawings, in any conventional sense, but “rapid sketches”, he says.

Notable for their absence are the 600 drawings which some claim Bacon gave to an Italian lover, Cristiano Lovatelli Ravarino. Ten were on sale at the Herrick Gallery in London last month, at prices of up to £750,000. Harrison has not authenticated the Ravarino works.

The final painting in the catalogue raisonné is an unfinished portrait done shortly before Bacon’s death in 1992. The work, which is now at Dublin City Gallery, was found on Bacon’s easel in his studio. Although usually described as a self-portrait, Harrison admits that “some uncertainty surrounds the identity of the man”. Bacon’s world still remains shrouded in layers of mystery. Although the catalogue raisonné represents an astonishing achievement, it cannot be the last word on the artist’s legacy.

- *Martin Harrison (ed.), Francis Bacon: Catalogue Raisonné, 5 vols., Francis Bacon Estate (distributor Heni Publishing), 30 June, £1,000*
- *A one-day exhibition of six major Bacon paintings is being held today (25 May) at 6-10 Lexington St, London W1F 0LB, 10am-9pm*