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Francis Bacon: final painting found in 'very private' collection

Study of a Bull, 1991, has never been publicly seen, reproduced, discussed or written about



Francis Bacon: Study of a Bull. Underneath the bull Bacon has used real dust from his famously shambolic studio in South Kensington. Photograph: The estate of Francis Bacon All rights reserved, DACS 2016

Mark Brown Arts correspondent

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It could be a bull backing in to a burning, black void or one escaping it, moving hopefully into the heavenly light. What seems certain is that this final, extraordinary painting by [Francis Bacon](#), unseen and undocumented until now, is by an artist who knows he will soon die.

The art historian Martin Harrison on Tuesday revealed Bacon's final completed painting – a work that has never been publicly seen, reproduced, discussed or written about. Residing in a “very private, private collection” in London, Study of a Bull. 1991, only came to light as Harrison worked on editing [a catalogue of every work by Bacon](#), due to be published in April.

Harrison said it was Bacon painting his own death, just as he was in his final [Triptych 1991](#), which is in the collection of MoMA in New York. “Bacon is ready to sign off ... he was so ill,” he said. “He knew exactly what he was doing here. Is the bull making an entrance? Is he receding to somewhere else? To his cremation?”

Most of the two-metre-high painting is deliberately raw canvas. Underneath the bull Bacon has used real dust from his famously shambolic [studio in South Kensington](#). “To me that is terribly poignant,” said Harrison. “He often used to say: ‘Dust is eternal, after all we all return to dust.’”

The bull also testifies to Bacon's enduring fascination with bullfighting, a subject he first addressed in 1969 and returned to a handful of times until 1987 when he made his only triptych on the theme. Bacon's introduction to bullfighting was probably through the writings of his great friend, the French surrealist Michel Leiris, and it is no coincidence that Leiris died a year before Bacon completed this final bull painting.

The artist was 82 when he finished Study of a Bull and after a lifetime of, by any standards, extensive debauchery, things were catching up with him: he

was dying and he knew it. “Everything was wrong with him, he was clapped out,” said Harrison. “The drinking, the lifelong asthma. He had a lot of operations but he never made a fuss, he never wanted sympathy, hated hospitals ... he knew his time was up. He always looked younger than he was except for that last year.”

In 1992, against the advice of friends, he went on holiday to Madrid, where he died on 28 April.

Harrison has spent the best part of a decade working on the catalogue and more than 100 Bacon paintings, out of the 584 total, will be seen for the first time. “One of the jobs preparing the *catalogue raisonné* is finding stuff. [Art](#) doesn’t come into it really, watching Sherlock Holmes is the only help ... you have to find the paintings.”

Harrison has conducted successful and unsuccessful searches all over the world. He said: “These people who have them ... It is not their job to tell me about their paintings, they are very rich and have lives to lead and they don’t care. You need a slice of luck.”

He first got on to *Study of a Bull* about two years ago discovering that it was only a mile and a half from where he lived in London. “It was the last painting he finished and there is no documentation for it and it is far too late for him to have spoken about it in interviews and it has never been shown before.”

Harrison called it an “absolutely magnificent painting” and it will be a star of a Bacon exhibition he is curating for the [Grimaldi Forum in Monaco](#) exploring how important France and Monaco were to Bacon. He said: “His main cultural orientation was always to France. He deprecated almost all English artists and dismissed most English painting ... Paris and France-based artists were his key influences.”

Bacon particularly loved Monaco, living there after the war as a slightly odd trio with his partner Eric Hall and childhood nanny Jessie Lightfoot, attracted by its fresh air, sunshine and plentiful gambling opportunities. It was where Bacon became Bacon, said Harrison.

Also in the show will be Bacon's first known work, a watercolour from 1929 – a period when the young [Bacon](#) was more occupied with working as a male prostitute, interior decorator and furniture designer.

That work is owned by [Francis Bacon Foundation](#) in Monaco and the fact it exists is remarkable given Bacon got rid of so many of his works from that and other times. “He had this strange, staccato early career,” said Harrison. “Not many of his early works survive because he tried to destroy them. It's really because they stayed in the collection of friends and relatives that we have any.”

Harrison has managed to track down every Bacon work for the catalogue apart from – to his immense frustration – one, Head with Arm Raised, 1955. “We don't know where it is on earth ... it is still missing.”

The deadline for its inclusion in what will be [a lavish, cloth-bound £1,000 publication](#) has now passed. He warned the Guardian: “You better not bloody find it ... just to mock me!”

- Francis Bacon, Monaco and French Culture is at the Grimaldi Forum Monaco 2 July-4 September. It will then travel to the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao 30 September-8 January.