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The Guardian

Recording reveals how Francis Bacon was rushed to finish paintings

Pictures at 1957 exhibition in London were still wet and stained attendees' clothes after they leaned against them

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Francis Bacon in his studio around 1960. Photograph: Paul Popper/Popperfoto/Getty Images

There is nothing more dull than watching paint dry, but great art cannot be rushed. [Francis Bacon](#) was irritated that his dealer put him under huge pressure to finish paintings inspired by Vincent van Gogh for his London exhibition of 1957, according to a previously unheard recording that has come to light.

It reveals that the artist got his revenge because his pictures were still wet when guests leaned against them at a crowded preview event, ruining their clothes. His dealer had to pay for dry cleaning and replacing a dinner jacket covered in streaks and smudges of red, blue and yellow oil paint.

The recording, which dates from 1985, was shared with the Guardian by Bacon's friend Barry Joule. In their taped conversation, the artist can be heard telling Joule about his unhappiness over the tremendous pressure from his dealer, Erica Brausen, to finish paintings for an exhibition at the Hanover Gallery in [London](#).

With mischievous chuckles, Bacon says: "Two of the [Van Gogh](#) pictures were still freshly wet when delivered ... and later several people came away from the opening bitterly complaining they had paint smeared all over the back of their jackets ... They sent Erica the dry cleaning bill. It serves her right for putting so much pressure on me to finish up."

Joule recalled that Brausen's partner, Toto Koopman, later joked about the episode with Bacon: "Koopman told us how displeased Erica was with the painter for having to fork out for the cleaning bill. Amusingly ... Francis's hands shot up, declaring his innocence: 'Nothing to do with me – it's all Erica's fault for bombarding me with hurry-up non-stop messages.'"

She also had to buy a new dinner jacket for one of the guests, Kensington Davison, Lord Broughshane, who had been pressed up against the picture. Glistening oil paint created long streaks and smudges over his jacket, Joule said. "An immaculate dresser, he was oblivious to what had happened, except for the giggling party and stares coming his way – then turned furious when Koopman pointed it out to him. He stormed up to Francis and told him off. Bacon just sat there red-faced and took the abuse until rescued by Erica Brausen.

"Davison tried having the oil paint clean off with turps. It didn't work."

"Francis went into the closed Hanover the very next day with his paintbox and perfectly touched up to 're-figure' – Francis's own wording – the two messed-up Van Gogh paintings and Koopman duly put a fencing-off cord around the area of the two still wet pictures as the Hanover had to reopen the next day."

Joule lived near Bacon's studio in South Kensington. They struck up a friendship from 1978 until the artist's death in 1992. Bacon agreed to a series of recorded conversations, insisting only that Joule wait 12 years after his death before making them public. The artist also gave him artworks, including 1,200 sketches from his studio, whose value was estimated at £20m in 2004 when Joule donated them to the Tate, one of its most generous gifts.

Some of the material is in Tate Britain's [new Francis Bacon Archival exhibition](#). It includes a handwritten note that Bacon gave to Joule in 1978 to explain how he felt about Van Gogh because, he said, "it will be much better if I write it down".

