



Woven under Glass: Francis Bacon's Linen and the Queerness of His Materials

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Abstract

Though often mentioned only in passing, the linen fabric Francis Bacon used as a ground for his paintings from 1948 until his death in 1992 (technically the unprimed side of commercially primed canvas), is a determinant factor in the perception of his paintings. The rough linen strongly impacts the distribution of paint and thus the perception of Bacon's "touche" as scattered, as well as—by extension—its perception as violent or deforming. In addition to choosing a raw ground, Bacon at times physically raised the fibers of the linen to awaken the *nubuck* of the canvas and included weave pressings over previously applied paint. This paper discusses the presence of

raw canvas and weave in Francis Bacon's paint(ings). It will first outline some of the fundamental ways in which Bacon relies on the canvas in portrait paintings, addressing the relationship between canvas fabric and skin, between paint and (wiped?) makeup, through a close-up analysis of some of his early and mid-career portraits. Then, it will examine the consequences of Bacon's preference for a systematic presentation of his unprimed canvas behind reflective glass. My conclusion is that, once his paintings are under glass, Bacon retains an imprint or *image* of the woven structure of the canvas.

Keywords: Francis Bacon; oil and acrylic painting techniques; unprimed ground; canvas; fiber; portraits; make-up; reflective glass frames

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As an artist and as a scholar, Hannah De Corte seeks to understand Western painting techniques, particularly the fabric nature of canvas paintings and its effects. To do so, she looks at encounters between paint and canvas and how painters have organized them. This includes the study of absorption and adsorption processes, for instance, that occur when canvas is used without coating—a minority in Western art history and the subject of her doctoral dissertation. She has recently published on David Hockney's hybrid canvas preparation technique in *Art & Perception*, and on painting without stretcher after 1945 in *The Image*. She has given conferences at the Institute of Fine Arts in New York (US), at the INHA in Paris (FR), at the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam (NL), at STUK Museum in Leuven (BE) and has exhibited recently at the Museum of Contemporary Art (OGR) in Turin (IT), the Abbaye Saint André-Center d'art contemporain CAC in Meymac (FR), and at the Musées Royaux des Beaux-Arts de Belgique, Museum of Costume and Lace and the Patinoire Royale in Brussels (BE).
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Turnaround

In 1948 (poor, in Monte Carlo¹), Francis Bacon began painting on the back of commercially primed linen. Initially he painted on the reverse of his own, unsuccessful canvases—paintings he disliked, because he could not afford to buy new canvas (Peppiatt 2006, 24). Fastening his canvases as to have the crisp white primed side facing away, toward the stretcher, Bacon applied (oil, and sometimes acrylic, house and spray [Russell et al. 2012]) paint to this “wooly” side, directly onto the brownish linen that was now the recto of the painting. It would be Bacon's blank canvas for the rest of his life².

Bacon's canvas fabric is plain-weave linen, a traditional support for oil painting³. Its one-sided primed linen is not that porous and absorbent; the back's preparatory layer tightens the pores of the whole canvas, including the unprimed side, restraining its propensity for absorption and insuring better odds for conservation (Yacowar 2008, 42; Russell 2010, 207). These factors combined with limited dilution of his paints⁴ caused the canvas to adsorb⁵ the paint rather than absorb it; the color is deposited against the linen and merges superficially with it.

Canvases had been overturned before, when painters chose to start over on the reverse of an unfinished or abandoned painting, or when they resorted to found or discarded canvases as supports. Bacon specified various reasons for choosing the raw

side: he “discovered that the unprimed side was much easier to work on” (Sylvester 1993, 195–196), it “holds (the oil) better”⁶ and “Degas did it.”⁷

In photographs of Bacon's studio such as “Francis Bacon's 7 Reece Mews studio, London 1998,” the primed reverses stand out (Figures 1 and 2). Only the thin edges of raw canvas tacked over the stretcher at the back expose the color of the front of his support. This presentation (raw canvas edges with white back) is an unusual sight.

From photographs of his studios it also appears that Bacon sometimes used the primed reverse of canvases as palette and testing grounds. Anything he could put his brush against in his studio—the walls, furniture, easels, cloth and cardboard, could become a palette. Stacked canvases on the left side of a photograph of Bacon seated in his studio (Figure 1) show two dots of black spray paint⁸—a technique also visible in the center of the on-going picture. It is surprising that a painter would use such diverse “testing” grounds as plaster, wood, primed canvas and cardboard—none of which resemble that of linen, his actual painting ground, though adsorption might have been remotely similar on cardboard as to the unprimed linen. One addition to this list of testing grounds which does not appear in any of the studio photographs and which may have been the closest in texture to that of the linen, is the painter's own

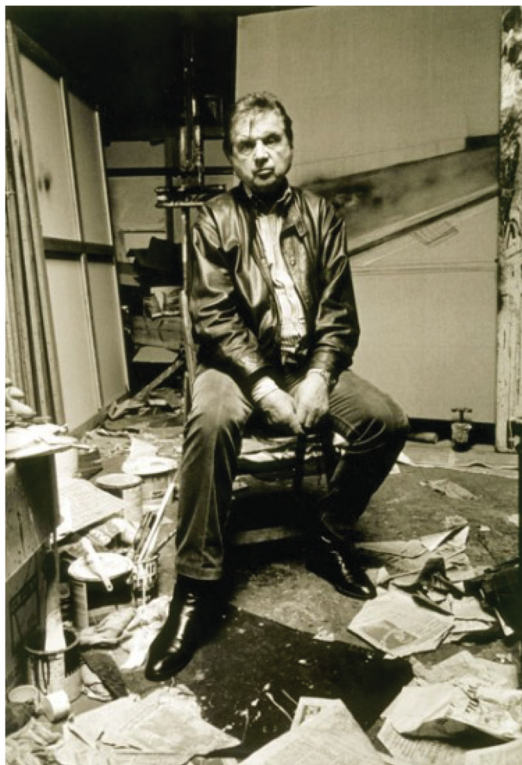


Figure 1

Bruce Bernard, *Francis Bacon*. 1984. Silver gelatin print. 71.5 × 61 cm. © Estate of Bruce Bernard (Virginia Verran).

body, particularly his arms (Tate Conference Audio Recordings 2008, 1:28:08) and face (see below).

This paper discusses the presence of raw canvas and weave in Francis Bacon's paint(ings). It will first outline some of the fundamental ways in which Bacon relies on the canvas in portrait paintings, addressing the relationship between canvas fabric and skin, between paint and (wiped?) makeup, through a close-up analysis of some of his early and mid-career portraits. Then, it will examine the consequences of Bacon's preference for a systematic presentation of his unprimed canvas behind reflective glass. The aim is to show that the fibers of his ground were fundamental to his technique and have molded

the appearance of his paintings: not just their physical state, but how they relate and have helped to suggest the themes that dominate Bacon's oeuvre such as the deformation of the human figure.

A Brush with the Canvas, Bacon's Touche

Above all else, Bacon encountered in the raw linen a certain resistance. The irregular ground resisted his application of paint; it defied his brush and the other tools he used. In many instances, the wooly canvas resisted the paint itself, leaving the weave of the canvas visible almost everywhere. Only occasionally covered in paint, the weave has often left an imprint in the whole of Bacon's paint film

"skin." Though the canvases are presented under reflective glass in exhibition context, very close-up the texture of the canvas is palpable, sometimes even despite and *through* thin impasto or smears of paint. Where the stubby linen resisted the undiluted paint, it left an imprint and molded the applied oil, literally shaping the paint. In his early periods (1940s and 1950s) especially, Bacon's brushstrokes are often traces of these processes of *adsorption*, that is: traces of the encounter (and resistance) between canvas and paint.

Take his *Head and Pope* series for example. The fibers at once grasp and repel. If one compares the same brushstroke or cloth wipe over a primed surface and over unprimed



Figure 2

Perry Ogden, *Francis Bacon's 7 Reece Mews studio, London, 1998*. 1998. Photographic print. The Estate of Francis Bacon Collection. © The Estate of Francis Bacon. All rights reserved, DACS/Artimage 2019.

fabric, the raw fibers indeed “hold the oil better” as Bacon had remarked about his preference for the unprimed reverse. In some sense, the paint adheres better as the fibrous surface catches more matter from the oil paint. Yet, compared—again—to the passage of the same brushstroke over a primed surface, the paint is less evenly distributed as the surface does not capture the paint uniformly. In *Head VI*, for example (Figure 3), some relief occurs as the brushstrokes distribute the paint in ripples. In short, the canvas against Bacon’s brush snatches more matter but in a more scattered way. As a consequence, one line in Bacon’s painting is often made up of multiple, different-size, *specks of paint* (Figures 4 and 5). What identifies as Bacon’s *touche*⁹ equates the resistance of raw canvas against (more or less dry) paint. Particularly in the 1940s and 1950s, Bacon’s *touche* corresponds in large part to the imprint of the weave of the canvas in the adsorbed paint. Aligned and repeated, speckled vertical brushstrokes become a motif in

series of paintings like in the *Head*, *Pope* and *Man in Blue* series. These have been interpreted as thin veils or curtains. If they are interpreted as thin and transparent, it is the absent paint—the paint that was not caught on the linen under the passage of the paint laden brush—that provokes this impression. Bacon described those brushstrokes like the frames and glass he placed his paintings in: as devices to introduce distance between the onlooker and the (figure in the) painting¹⁰.

The distortion, the violence even¹¹, perceived in Bacon’s work comes in part from this *touche*; the paint is dragged at different paces over the irregularities of the canvas. (Bacon may have exacerbated its irregularities by irritating the fibers to raise them [Russell 2010, 139, 195, Appendix 135, Appendix 136], see below). In dry strokes, little paint is adsorbed by the canvas. Take the grayish white brushwork of a Pope’s heavy sleeve and in the yellow line underneath the sleeve (Figure 5), for instance. Inside the painted yellow line, dry strokes

coexist with much thicker specks of paint. The line was applied with a ruler which caused extra paint matter to adhere to the canvas near the bottom of the line, where the ruler was placed¹². The dispersed aspect of the paint suggests chafing and scraping. The fibers divide up the brushstrokes and the intended drawn shape or stroke, deforming it; “What I want to do is to distort the thing far beyond the appearance, but in the distortion to bring it back to a recording of the appearance,” Bacon said (Sylvester 1993, 40).

Weave Pressings and Raised Fibers

Just as wiped and smeared paint still lets the weave through (Figure 6), multiple applications of more diluted paint (as in the chin of the MoMA self-portrait, Figure 7) do not always suffice to cover the weave. To top that, at times Bacon introduced the trace of another weave. In paintings of the end of the 1960s and the beginning of the 1970s, the weave of the canvas is echoed in the pressing



Figure 3

Francis Bacon, *Head VI*. 1949. Oil on canvas. 91.4 × 76.2 cm. Arts Council Collection, Southbank, London. © The Estate of Francis Bacon. All Rights Reserved. DACS 2019.

by Bacon of a paint-imbued piece of cloth over previously applied paint. This seems to occur mainly in portraits.

In the Lucian Freud triptych, for instance, dabbed blue and red paint appears with a grid-like imprint, only a few inches away from areas of blank linen (Figure 8). Bacon mentions the pattern left by textile imprints: “I use anything. I use scrubbing brushes and sweeping brushes and any of those things that I think painters have used ... I impregnate rags with color, and they leave this kind of network of color across the image” (Sylvester 1993, 90). Studio photographs show color-impregnated towels dispersed around the room (Figure 12). The blue “network of color across the image” in the Freud triptych and in other

portraits of the same time resembles that of a fuzzy towel or dishcloth (Russell 2010, 130). In portraits like *Henrietta Moraes* (Figures 9–11), however, the imprint comprises diagonal parallel lines (instead of a grid). The lines have a chain-like pattern and probably stem from a corduroy weave. It is thought that Bacon habitually applied paint to the door of his Mews Studio, pressed corduroy fabric in the paint and then applied it to the canvas¹³. These dabbed applications of paint with cloth reiterate, on the surface—on the skin—the weave that lies beneath. That first weave often remains visible through and around the imprint which allows the eye of the onlooker to perceive the layering. A detail of *Henrietta Moraes* (Figure 9) of the corduroy print reads as four

layers: fleshy pink lies in the canvas, under white (less dilute) paint, under the blue-purple corduroy print, under a (prolongment of a) short black curved line. The print seems to contain traces of purple, gray and blue. Even though the amount of applied paint is minimal, the combination of linen weave seen *through* the corduroy, and *over* the top layer of paint accumulates in stratified patterns and colors (increased also by different dilutions of paint). The corduroy traces recall parallel lines of hatching, a common technique in painting and drawing to suggest shading¹⁴. Here, just like the vertical curtain-like brushstrokes in the *Head* and *Pope* series, the “hatchings” veil the figures, particularly their eyes or mouths. The weaves are pressed over the eyes in



Figure 4

Francis Bacon. *Study for Portrait V*. 1953. Oil on canvas. 152.7 × 117.1 cm. Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC. © The Estate of Francis Bacon. All Rights Reserved. DACS 2019.



Figure 5

Francis Bacon, Detail *Study for Portrait V*. 1953. Oil on canvas. 152.7 × 117.1 cm. Photograph by the author. © The Estate of Francis Bacon. All Rights Reserved. DACS 2019.



Figure 6.

Francis Bacon. Detail *Self-Portrait*. 1958. Oil on canvas. 152.1 × 119.3 cm. Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC. Photograph by the author. © The Estate of Francis Bacon. All Rights Reserved. DACS 2019

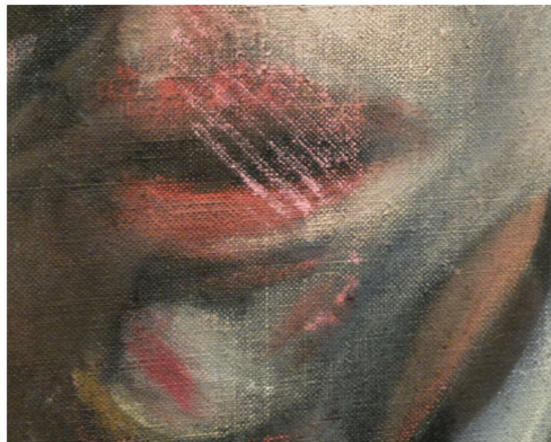


Figure 7

Francis Bacon. Detail *Three Studies for Self-Portrait*. 1979-80. Oil on canvas. 37.5 × 31.8 cm each. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Photograph by the author. © 2019 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. © The Estate of Francis Bacon. All rights reserved. DACS 2019.

both the Moraes portrait and the Freud triptych. The placement, color and form of the imprints evoke bruises. Like an old accumulation of blood just below the skin, in a sporadic aspect that bruises can have, the

imprints add volume/substance to the face, and evoke swelling in various areas. The weave pressings have a distortive effect also because they suggest continuation of the pores of the skin, sometimes on the limits or

beyond the limits of the drawn face, making the contour of the face appear less contained.

In addition to imprints of corduroy, diagonal lines appear elsewhere in another form and produce a similar



Figure 8

Francis Bacon. Detail *Three Studies of Lucian Freud* 1969. Oil on canvas. 197.8 × 147.5 cm each. Private Collection, USA. From Christie's e-Catalogue: 26–27, <http://www.christies.com/sales/postwar-and-contemporary-new-york-november-2013/bacon/>. © The Estate of Francis Bacon. All Rights Reserved. DACS 2019.

effect. Bacon used a comb-like tool (Russell 2010, 183) to scratch or carve streaks, sometimes just removing a bit of previously applied paint, and other times applying color with it, as in the pink claws over the mouth of MoMA's *Self-Portrait* (Figure 7). They are distinct from the cloth prints because, unlike traces of other parallel lines, the claws appear with the same number of lines (five or six).

Similarly, Bacon leaves cotton wool and canvas fibers protruding (Tate Gallery Liverpool 1990, 12). The linen Bacon used was coarse. Restorer Joanna Elizabeth Russell remarks that fibers may have been “roughened” as they appear raised on the bare canvas and within paint²⁵.

In *Three Studies for a Portrait of Isabel Rawsthorne*, for example, some red paint in all panels is located on raised fibers (Figures 13 and 14) (Russell 2010, A.135). Not against the green area of paint that functions as a background, but over and above the green (further removed from the canvas, closer to the onlooker). This thus situates the red caught on the fibers above the pictorial plane of the green ground (it has some white impasto too, notes Russell, warning not to put the frame face down as not to press the raised paint into the canvas [Russell 2010, A.135–A.137]). This difference in relief of those pictorial planes opens up a very thin space between what is perceived to be in

the canvas (stained paint), on the canvas (applied paint with a higher pictorial plane) and even higher up, almost against the glass—paint caught on the tips of the raised fibers. It partakes in making the figures appear pressed in a sliver of space, the faces taking place/space somewhere between the green background and the red areas (closest to the viewer).

If Bacon indeed scratched the linen to raise its fibers before painting, awakening the *nubuck* of the canvas, it confirms he sought (to augment) resistance in the canvas. On the other hand, the catalogue raisonné lists several works of the 1940s and 1950s as “cotton wool and

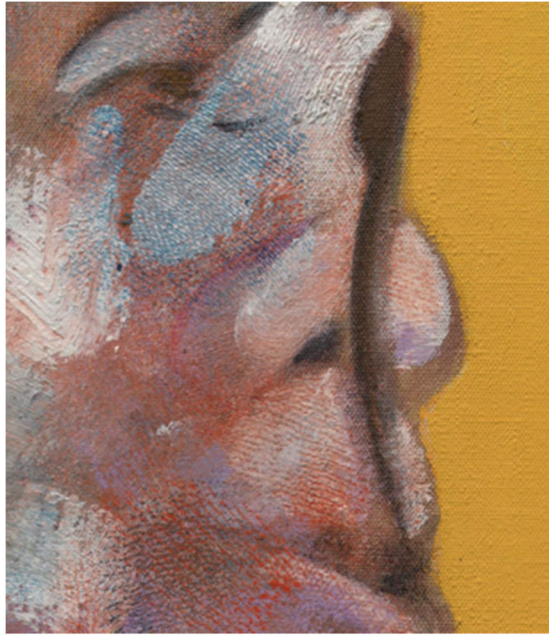


Figure 9

Francis Bacon. Detail *Portrait of Henrietta Moraes*. 1969. Oil and acrylic on canvas. 35.5 × 30.5 cm. Private collection. From Garage Vice's website, https://garage.vice.com/en_us/article/wj3edx/francis-bacon-women. © The Estate of Francis Bacon. All Rights Reserved. DACS 2019.

oil(/wax) on canvas.” In British English “cotton wool” refers to “linters,” remnant fibers after the picking of cotton and, by extension, excess fibers that dissociate from textiles and cluster in the washing machine. Like the raised linen, added “cotton wool” fibers as in *Head II* (Figures 15 and 16), supplement texture and mold the subsequent paint. As previously noted for some of his other *Heads*, they form the veils or curtains that appear behind or in front of the figures.

With both technical details, the exacerbated presence of fibers increases the “wooly” and knobby aspect and thus the resistance of the canvas. Adding fibers on the support, whether canvas or panel, was a common practice in preparations for

paintings, in the past, to fain or play up texture in the paint (Townsend and Doherty 2008). It allowed painters to combine the benefits of a preparation and a textured ground. In a similar manner, Bacon further increased the texture and *low relief* of his raw ground.

Skins: Sorption Processes (Soaked Grounds and Punctual Impasto)

Together with its resistance, Bacon also discovered the raw linen's absorbent quality with properly diluted paint. For some of his grounds, he infused the raw canvas of paintings (like his *Man in Blue* series and self-portraits of the 1950s) with dark washes (Figures 17 and 18). Fluffy, the fibers appear raised in

these details. Bacon applied the oil paint in thin, diluted washes¹⁶.

He applied the paint like a dye for grounds around the time that—across the Atlantic Ocean—others such as Morris Louis, Mark Rothko and Helen Frankenthaler were soaking the canvas in this manner. We know Bacon was aware of American painting from dismissive comments he made. Though he disliked contemporary American (and British) abstract painters, it has to be remarked that he shared technical aspects with their practices, not the least of which is the choice of an unprimed support (albeit linen as opposed to cotton duck). Bacon also shared with some North American painters an attention to the weave and its imprint in the paint film, weave pressings of other fabrics



Figure 10

Francis Bacon. *Three Studies of Lucian Freud*. 1969. Oil on canvas. 197.8 × 147.5 cm each. Private Collection, USA. From Christie's e-Catalogue: 26–27, <http://www.christies.com/sales/postwar-and-contemporary-new-york-november-2013/bacon/>. © The Estate of Francis Bacon. All Rights Reserved. DACS 2019.



Figure 11

Francis Bacon. *Portrait of Henrietta Moraes*. 1969. Oil and acrylic on canvas. 35.5 × 30.5 cm. Private collection. © The Estate of Francis Bacon. All Rights Reserved. DACS 2019.

(which Jackson Pollock included in at least two paintings [Coddington 1999, 107–108]) the inclusion of foreign elements in paint (including studio dust, also echoing Pollock's studio trash enmeshed in his drips), the search for

a wide variety of textures in the vicinity of one another. Small blobs and details involve stains and splashes in some portraits like in *Portrait of Jean-Pierre Mœux* and feature possibly thrown paint. The staining of large

areas with one color, particularly in the *Man in Blue* series, evoke Mark Rothko's luminous fields. Also reminiscent of certain American painters is Bacon's gestural application of paint; The application of a single color as a



Figure 12

Fabrics on Francis Bacon's studio floor in front of back shelves. Photograph by Johanna Russell (Russell 2010, 129).



Figure 13

Francis Bacon. Detail *Three studies for portrait of Isabel Rawsthorne*. 1965. Oil on canvas. 35.6 × 30.5 cm (each panel). Sainsbury Center for Visual Arts, Norwich. Photograph by Johanna Russell (Russell 2010, A134).

thin acrylic film in a geometric shape (as the colored circular floors of his (triptych) portraits, or the yellow plane of *Henrietta Moraes*, Figure 11) even recall considerations on edges discussed at the time. Influence of post-war American and British painting of the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s—from action painting to color field, geometric and minimal tendencies—on Bacon's work should not to be

excluded and might be a fertile angle to reexamine his corpus of paintings¹⁷. Here, the influence I am concerned with is the prominence of the canvas weave, its fibers and related staining techniques.

Details of *Man in Blue VII* show the woolly aspect of the linen and soaking of the paint like a dye (Figures 17–19). Some lighter strokes may stem from removal of

paint and have been made through dilution of the already infused paint with a turpentine-soaked brush, with turpentine burns. The largest strokes, one in two stripes, seem to be dissolved with turpentine and come from a larger brush (they recuperate some light from the raw canvas), and the thinner lines in-between that are slightly more yellow, appear to be added paint which creates a



Figure 14

Francis Bacon. *Three studies for portrait of Isabel Rawsthorne*. 1965. Oil on canvas. 35.6 × 30.5 cm (each panel). Sainsbury Center for Visual Arts, Norwich. © The Estate of Francis Bacon. All rights reserved. DACS 2019.



Figure 15

Francis Bacon. Detail *Head II*. 1949. Oil and acrylic on canvas. 80.5 × 65 cm. Ulster Museum, Belfast. Photograph by Johanna Russell (Russell 2010, 169).

distinction in layers of paint application and a ghost-like appearance of the removed paint.

In the dark blue and black ground series, Bacon first relies on the canvas's capacity for absorption by applying liquid paint and turpentine washes which the linen soaks up. The canvas is dyed blue. It becomes a dark wooly ground over which he then applies paint exactly like he does his blank canvases (as in *Head*

VI, Figure 3), utilizing the “toothy” grip of the canvas. In that sense the linen is dyed because it retains its raspiness and reacts to paint in a similar manner to a raw canvas as there is no layer of paint to neutralize the fibrous weave. The dark soaks tend to enhance the legibility of the weave. The stained weave in *Portrait of Sainsbury (Robert Sainsbury)* (Figures 20 and 21) is so defined in its tiny relief on the surface of the

canvas that the portrayed face and its light painted parts (which for the most part cover the weave), up-close, seem sunken into the black ground. The application of paint over the weave has flattened its lightly enhanced relief. The weave even (re)appears raised between the lips of the open mouth, suggesting (missing?) teeth, a gridded guard or something inside the mouth sticking out. Evoking a cage-like pattern, the



Figure 16

Francis Bacon. *Head II*. 1949. Oil on canvas. 80.5 × 65 cm. Ulster Museum, Belfast. © The Estate of Francis Bacon. All rights reserved. DACS 2019.



Figure 17

Francis Bacon. Detail *Man in Blue VII*. 1954. Oil on canvas. 152.7 × 116.5 cm. Private Collection. From *Christies* website, https://www.christies.com/img/LotImages/2016/PAR/2016_PAR_13572_0016_000. (francis_bacon_man_in_blue_vii).jpg. © The Estate of Francis Bacon. All rights reserved. DACS 2019.



Figure 18

Francis Bacon. Detail *Man in Blue VII*. 1954. Oil on canvas. 152.7 × 116.5 cm. Private Collection. From *Christies* website, https://www.christies.com/img/LotImages/2016/PAR/2016_PAR_13572_0016_000. (francis_bacon_man_in_blue_vii).jpg. © The Estate of Francis Bacon. All rights reserved. DACS 2019.



Figure 19

Francis Bacon. *Man in Blue VII*. 1954. Oil on canvas. 152.7 × 116.5 cm. Private Collection. From *Christies* website, https://www.christies.com/img/LotImages/2016/PAR/2016_PAR_13572_0016_000. (francis_bacon_man_in_blue_vii).jpg. © The Estate of Francis Bacon. All rights reserved. DACS 2019.

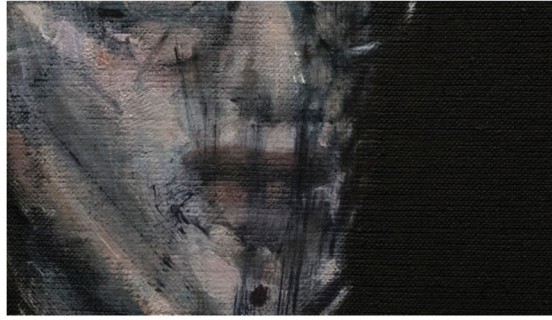


Figure 20

Francis Bacon. Detail *Portrait of Sainsbury (Robert Sainsbury)*. 1955. Oil on canvas. 114.7 × 99.3 cm. Private collection, Sainsbury Center for Visual Arts. Photograph by Martin Beek, <https://flic.kr/p/Cu6KLT>. Cropped from original, used under CC BY-NC-SA 2.0. © The Estate of Francis Bacon. All rights reserved. DACS 2019. Photograph Martin Beek.



Figure 21

John Donat. "Sainsbury residence, 5 Smith Square, London: paintings by Francis Bacon." Exhibition view Sainsbury Center for Visual Arts including *Portrait of Sainsbury (Robert Sainsbury)* 1955 by Francis Bacon. Negative. © John Donat/RIBA Collections.

structure of the canvas increases the perceived distortion of the face. And again, just like in the raised fibers near Isabel's face, Bacon manages to create confusion about the localization of the paint. The textured ground changes the perception of where the

paint is, since applied paint as on and around the lips, can appear as lower or behind the pictorial plane of the soaked canvas in between the lips. The localization of the applied paint in relation to the weave is confused in the eye of the viewer.

(From around 1951 [Russell 2010, 170]) Francis Bacon used the absorption of the liquid washes to obtain a dyed canvas and work it as usual except that his figures now emerged from a dark ground or were drawn into it (with *Portrait of Lucian Freud* of



Figure 22

Francis Bacon. Detail *Self-Portrait*. 1958. Oil on canvas. 152.1 × 119.3 cm. Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution, Washington. Photograph by the author. © The Estate of Francis Bacon. All rights reserved. DACS 2019.

1951 as a transitional work as it combines uncovered canvas with stained background and sand applied in the face). Looking back to this period, Bacon explained, “then I used to put on very thin washes of color. The paint was just mixed very thinly with turpentine and I put the whole wash on before I started putting the images down. But now I nearly always use acrylic paint for the backgrounds, and I don’t want to work on the top of the acrylic because I like the absorption that the raw canvas has for the image” (Sylvester 1993, 195). As he indirectly says, the thinned down oil paint allowed him to maintain the absorptive qualities “that the raw canvas has for the image” and work on top of the soaked paint which he could no longer do once he used more opaque acrylics like the yellow in the Freud triptych and in the Moraes portrait, a paint that was applied around the figures afterwards; the yellow acrylic is not a ground like the deep blues and black of his

1950s portraits, it covers the weave more opaquely and is a form applied afterwards, next to and around the figures. It sits on the same physical plane or higher than other elements (where the soaked blue sits below, in the canvas). And the acrylic film forms a sort of *skin* that sits atop the canvas (itself a sort of woven skin which has imprinted pore-like marks into the acrylic).

It has often been remarked about Bacon’s technique and portraits that “the medium became an equivalent to flesh” (Gale and Stephens 2008)¹⁸.

Paint and canvas indeed became skin and flesh-like. But “medium” mainly seems to refer to paint. Canvas appears to be left out of the equation—for starters by Bacon himself when he says that his “ideal would have been a portrait that creates itself from the paint.” (Hamburger Kunsthalle 2005, 110). It is an interesting sentence because, on the one hand, it does not correspond to the reality of his practice,

which heavily relies on the effect of raw canvas. On the other hand (and at the same time), through the placement of reflective glass in front of his linen surfaces, Bacon tempers his use of raw linen and its textured skin. Through the glass, he unifies the variety of methods of applying and pressing paint unified. Yet, as I will discuss a little further, the weave is still—most often, and particularly in the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s—everywhere in the paint, albeit in a remnant “image” form.

Before addressing the use of reflective glass, let us first examine the relationship between canvas and skin, medium and flesh, by taking a closer look at one of Bacon’s dark ground paintings from the late 1950s: the Hirshhorn Museum’s *Self-Portrait* of 1958 (Figures 21 and 22–25). Here, Bacon carves a face and hands with little means. Black, white and three shades of pink—a dark pink (close to red in the lips and in the contour of the chin), a brighter pink and that



Figure 23

Francis Bacon. *Self-Portrait*. 1958. Oil on canvas. 152.1 × 119.3 cm. Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution, Washington. © The Estate of Francis Bacon. All rights reserved. DACS 2019.

same pink mixed with white paint (the only flesh-like color)—make up a restricted palette of the figure. Bacon relies on the canvas dots to stand in for the pores of the skin, mobilizing the weave which can be felt almost everywhere; in some places of the surface of the *Self-Portrait*, the pores of the canvas transition to a carnal impasto. This is the case for instance from the bridge of the nose, over the forehead, to the cheekbone (Figure 24). The smearing gesture delineates the temple and encompasses and scoops the eye. With the back of a paintbrush, in a comma over the left nostril, Bacon recuperates the black soaked ground underneath, taking away previously wiped paint with a swiping motion. The black comma mirrors the right nostril

while gray-black paint smeared from the nostril across the mouth suggests the indentation above the lips. Canvas and paint form a skin and flesh to be worked and transformed. He dabs and smears paint, redistributing what he has applied, using his palette knives, the reverse of paintbrushes, his hands, fingers and cloths as tools to smear paint and wipe away excess.

Paint and canvas, together, also suggest the facets of the face. Protruding elements of and near the face of the sitter (nose, eyebrows, hands) are physically protruding impasto. The sitter's forehead merges with his right-hand fingers: the latter are a thick blob of paint literally over and in front of the other elements of the face (Figure 25). On

the contrary, receding facets of the face (jawline, eyeballs, ears) are rendered flat in the canvas. Apart from the pink encompassing stroke on the right, the contours of the sitter's face dissolve into the background. They merge with the ground. A paintbrush hair just underneath the right eye is deposited on the paint like a fallen eyelash (Figure 21). Tension is high, in Bacon's pictures, between sheer materiality (of canvas, paint, and foreign materials like corduroy and paintbrush hairs) and the image put forth.

Looking at the difference in relief over the surface of the self-portrait, the crust of the painted picture appears interrupted or fissured in places. It is as though, by dismissing layers of preparation, the painter

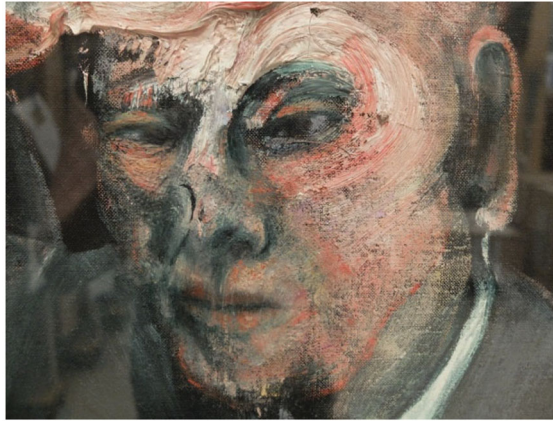


Figure 24

Francis Bacon. Detail *Self-Portrait*. 1958. Oil on canvas. 152.1 × 119.3 cm. Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution, Washington. Photograph by the author. © The Estate of Francis Bacon. All rights reserved. DACS 2019.



Figure 25

Francis Bacon. Detail *Self-Portrait*. 1958. Oil on canvas. 152.1 × 119.3 cm. Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution, Washington. Photograph by the author. © The Estate of Francis Bacon. All rights reserved. DACS 2019.

suggests what is *underneath* or *behind the paint*. The surface looks as if the film of paint may once have been hermetic but has been abraded. As if something had caused the paint film to be vulnerable to cracking or stretching: acid poured over to dissolve part of the paint matter. Or as if pressure had been applied on the

reverse of the canvas and had pressed the weave through the paint crust. In that sense, Bacon's paintings on day one looked aged like primed canvases often do after many decades or centuries—their blank canvas yellowed and their textile surfacing through the paint layers despite proper priming¹⁹. Bacon intended his

paintings to look the way old masters' paintings are presented in museums; in the same way that he liked his paintings encased in gilded frames and under glass, a prematurely aged paint skin may concur with that intention.

Like in many Bacon portraits, dry pores contrast with grease patches in

the Hirschhorn's *Self-Portrait*. Most often the protruding matter is oil impasto, rarely it is wax. Oil and wax have an inherent sheen to them but (ab/ad)sorption by the canvas renders them matte (except in the punctual application of thick impasto). It is this combination of matte and sheen—drought and grease—into a surface that is both dusty and oily that writers conveyed when they compared his surfaces to rhinoceros skin (Deleuze 1981, 65–66; Deleuze 2002, 100), dusty black snakes²⁰ and even to the stubbled skin of his own (round) face;

It has been told that Bacon practiced applying brushstrokes to his face, specifically to his—purposefully left unshaven—chin and jaw. And that he sometimes applied (Max Factor brand) makeup to the brush as a stand in for oil paint on his skin and beard²¹. In light of Bacon's fascination with Eadweard Muybridge's movement photographs²² (Peppiatt 2006, 31, 65), it is not surprising that he often portrays faces from the front and in profile, adjacent, in one and the same portrait (in every panel of the Freud triptych, for instance). I imagine Bacon applying the brushstrokes to his face exactly in this manner: placing the brush against his skin and moving his face front to profile against the brush rather than the other way around—the way one normally applies makeup, by moving the brush against the skin. With this in mind, the colored traces that extend from front to profile in his portraits take on a more literal presence (as some traces may be reproduced on the frontal and profile image, representing them as they may have presented themselves on the skin).

His stubbled skin formed an ideal testing ground for the fibers he would encounter in the field—his linen

ground²³. The relief of pores and stubble as well as the volume of his face against his brush stood in for the added cotton wool and raised fibers of the canvas. It enacted a form of resistance that a flat, smoothly primed surface does not have. Moreover, depending on the type, makeup has different consistencies. Dusty passages in Bacon's surfaces evoke powdery makeup whilst Bacon's adsorbed paints evoke the cakey aspect of makeup (not for nothing called “pancake” makeup). The hand in the detail photograph of *Study For A Pope I* (Figure 5) resembles an unblended application of foundation makeup. The partially lit half-faces in his self-portraits like the Metropolitan triptych *Three Studies for a Self-portrait* also often resemble a poorly applied foundation layer, evoking a mask or sad-clown make-up, with an open but silenced mouth (Figure 7).

More than just the application of makeup, some of the faces and hands in Bacon's portraits evoke the removal of makeup. Take the cheek, mouth, nose and brow in the Hirschhorn *Self-Portrait*: Bacon paints as if he had applied a substitute for flesh or flesh-toned makeup and had begun wiping it off the contoured face, on the canvas skin (Figure 21). Black makeup from the eyes is smeared around them. The eyes and cheeks are accentuated like one accentuates features of a face with makeup, the bridge of the nose is thinned out by the black shadows on either side. Finally, the mouth in Bacon's portraits, especially in self-portraits (Figures 6 and 7), often also appears somewhere between made up and *undone*, with lightly wiped or veiled lip color.

French philosopher Gilles Deleuze wrote a seminal book about Bacon whom he thought was the most important painter of his time (Deleuze 2002). Though it is called *Logique de la Sensation* (*Logic of Sensation*), Deleuze never mentions the raw canvas in it; he remarks, generally, about the painter's “blank” canvas that its surface is (metaphorically) “never white” in the sense that it is never empty (Deleuze 2002, 86–98). In the more than one hundred densely written pages, Deleuze does not once mention or describe the actual brownish and textured ground Bacon not only painted on but left blank in many paintings such as *Dog* (Figure 31). Color is a key notion throughout the *Logique de la Sensation*; Deleuze includes a separate chapter of “Note on Color” (Deleuze 2002, 144–153). Color in Bacon's work is widely discussed in the literature, often without mentioning the fundamental effect that comes from the unprimed linen. Perhaps an explanation for these oversights could be that Bacon canvases seen in exhibition context are (almost²⁴) always placed under reflective glass.

(Before any esthetic considerations, the prime reason for the use of glass over paintings is conservation; the framed glass protects them. This was certainly a motivation for Bacon's choice. Varnish, too, has important conservation purposes.)

Woven under Glass. Perception of the Unprimed Linen in Exhibition Context

Under reflective glass, the perception of Bacon's paintings changes considerably.

The glass modifies the perception of certain key features of the surface. The textile of the canvas is hidden,



Figure 26

Exhibition view *Study for Chimpanzee* by Francis Bacon. From Arte Italia's website, <http://www.arte.it/art-guide/venice/pictures/immagine-francis-bacon-study-for-chimpanzee-march-1957-peggy-guggenheim-collection-venice-16427>.

and touches of paint appear more blended. The perception of space inside the paintings is also upset.

To see the textile in Bacon's paintings or to capture it in photographs, one needs to be very close to the glass. Needing to remain only centimeters away, one's eye or lens moves across the surface slowly and can only see a small part of the grainy surface at once, as the rest is hidden by distance or by reflections in/of the glass.

Through photography, it is possible to observe more of the grainy surface at one time: in up-close details captured through the glass or, to see the whole painting, through photographic reproductions taken of his paintings uncovered. Although they are small in size, reproductions of Bacon's paintings in the catalogue raisonné (Harrison and Daniels 2016) and in its online form²⁵, for example, are shown unframed and bare—without glass in front of them. It may be useful to point out that alternate photographs (of the paintings under glass, without reflections) are either taken with anti-reflective devices or

retouched afterwards to remove reflections. With reflections artificially withdrawn, these photographs do not represent what Bacon's paintings look like in reality.

Comparisons of photographs of the same paintings with and without glass enlighten us a little about the impact of the glass (Figures 20, 21, 26–28). The glass pours a recessive space in the picture and blurs the grain of the canvas.

First, the glass flattens the subtle relief of the canvas and of the paint. The textural depth and volume made possible by the incursion of weave in paint—though still appreciable from up-close in Bacon's surface, are undone behind glass. From a normal viewing perspective (and even up-close), the room surrounding the painting is reflected in the glass, across the painting (Figures 26 and 27). This introduces into the painting a form of perspectival space foreign to it when bare.

Straight lines around Bacon's figures often evoke the edges of geometric volumes that the figures appear encased in (these have been

called glass cages [Domino 1997, 75]) or of the room they appear to occupy. The traced lines suggest a summary perspective, said to enclose the figures in a suffocatingly shallow space (Peppiatt 2019; Francis Bacon Website 1980). Over that, the glass pours into the picture the perspective of the room it is in. It opens up the picture and introduces (a) clear focal point(s), recreating a recessive space inside Bacon's frames.

Comparative photographs—with and without glass—of *Three Studies for Self-Portrait* and *Study for Chimpanzee* from the Peggy Guggenheim collection²⁶, for example, show this effect (Figures 26–30). A matte, opaque surface with a (soaked or) pastel ground becomes sheen; colors appear more saturated. In *Study for Chimpanzee*, the three main elements in the picture—the chimpanzee, bench and pink surface—also take on a slightly different organization: the pink application of paint appears more like a background to the chimpanzee and the bench (it appears “behind” them) than in the bare version. With no glass, it is clear



Figure 27

Exhibition view *Study for Chimpanzee* by Francis Bacon. From ePic's blog, photograph by Francesco Cardia, <http://epicph.blogspot.com/>.

that the pink shape is applied around the figure and perceived as such by a viewer. The blue lines that barely appear through the pink also enhance space perception once they are behind glass, suggesting a(nother) focal point.

The comparison of *Three Studies for Self-Portrait* with and without glass, particularly illustrates the type and quantity of light that are brought inside the painting through the glass: the smooth glass produces *specular reflection*, in addition to the diffuse reflection which his irregular surfaces produce when bare²⁷. While the glass opens up the painting to a more traditionally optical space, it renders the painted surface ungraspable in its

entirety. From most angles, the painting itself always escapes the onlooker in one area or another, omnipresent reflection preventing proper view of its entire surface. This is manifest in detail photographs wherein only a part of the canvas surface is visible, the rest hindered by reflection of the room and viewers (Chatzicharalampous 2015).

Second, the presence of the glass greatly diminishes the visibility of the grain of the canvas.

A simple shift between two detail photographs of adjacent paint of the Hirschhorn *Self-Portrait* (Figures 29 and 30) shows how quickly one loses the material of the canvas even when looking extremely close up: the grain

in the area of the right eye is completely lost from one point of view to the next; paint in the same eye area appears much more blended and is already reflecting the room again, just from looking a few centimeters higher up. Even though it is possible to see the weave from very up-close, it is constantly countered by the glass. The unprimed quality of the linen is toned down, barely visible in certain areas. The details were photographed in storage at the Hirschhorn, which made possible an extreme proximity between the lens and the glazed canvas—a proximity viewers in exhibition context are not allowed to experience.

It may seem that Bacon does away with the weave of the canvas he



Figure 28

Francis Bacon. *Study for Chimpanzee*. March 1957. Oil and pastel on linen. 152.4 × 117 cm. The Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation Peggy Guggenheim Collection, Venice, 1976. © 2019 The Estate of Francis Bacon. All rights reserved./ARS, New York/DACS, London.

had relied on during the making process. However, the peculiarities of the linen exploited in Bacon's technique remain active in a new dimension. Take, again, the yellow line from *Study for Pope I* applied with a ruler and a dry brush (Figure 5): Bacon makes the canvas appear at the surface, he makes the weave emerge in the paint, higher than where it is elsewhere hidden under the glass in the soaked dark ground (where it is partly nullified or absolved by the glass and by the uniform application of paint—the same can be said about the brownish linen ground of areas of unprimed canvas left blank in large

parts like in the Tate's *Dog*: its weave is also partly absolved by the glass, Figures 31 and 32).

Rather than to say that Bacon does away with the grain of the canvas it may be more accurate to say that, through the glass, he retains an *image* of the grain of the canvas. The distribution of Bacon's painted line into specks of paint is how the weave lets itself be known from afar and through the glass. While the source of the imprint is veiled under glass, an imprint of the woven material is there, in (parts of) the paint. The trace of paint being dragged over the dry linen and the scattering and adsorption it

provoked remain. Since it conceals the weave which is present all-over and is the source of particular distributions of the paint of Bacon's strokes but does not conceal the distribution itself, the glass only further intensifies the identification of the weave-affected distribution of paint with Bacon's *touche*. The weave is still—particularly in the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s—very much in the paint, albeit in a remnant form²⁸.

The glass renders the perception of the painting close to that of a high-quality photographic reproduction in which the weave is lost. Bacon preferred to paint from photographs (he



Figure 29

Francis Bacon. Detail *Self-Portrait*. 1958. Oil on canvas. 152.1 × 119.3 cm. Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC. Photograph by the author. © The Estate of Francis Bacon. All Rights Reserved. DACS 2019.

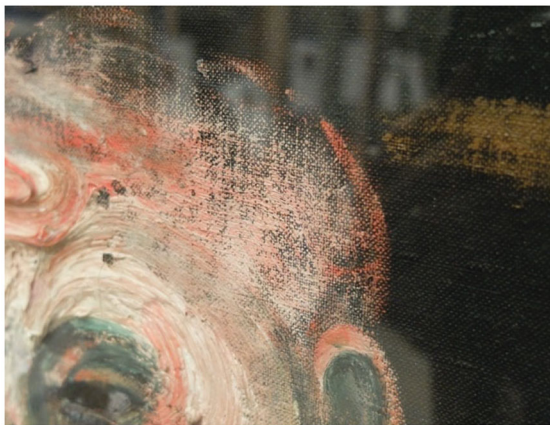


Figure 30

Francis Bacon. Detail *Self-Portrait*. 1958. Oil on canvas. 152.1 × 119.3 cm. Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC. Photograph by the author. © The Estate of Francis Bacon. All Rights Reserved. DACS 2019.

rarely worked from nature) and held a particular relationship with photography and with the (developed) *images of paintings* rather than the paintings themselves—including his own.

Bacon based more than thirty paintings on Diego Velázquez's

Portrait of Innocent X. He collected photographs of the portrait and never saw it. Even when he stayed in Rome for two months, he never went to see the painting (Peppiatt 2006, 28) (Bacon later said it was out of “a fear of seeing the reality of the Velázquez after [his] tempering with it” [BBC

Television 1966]). Bacon's series of Popes which spans decades with the variations made between 1946 and 1971 (Harrison and Daniels 2016) was thus based solely on reproductions of the Velázquez. In studio photographs, it is visible that Bacon surrounded himself in his studio and the studio's

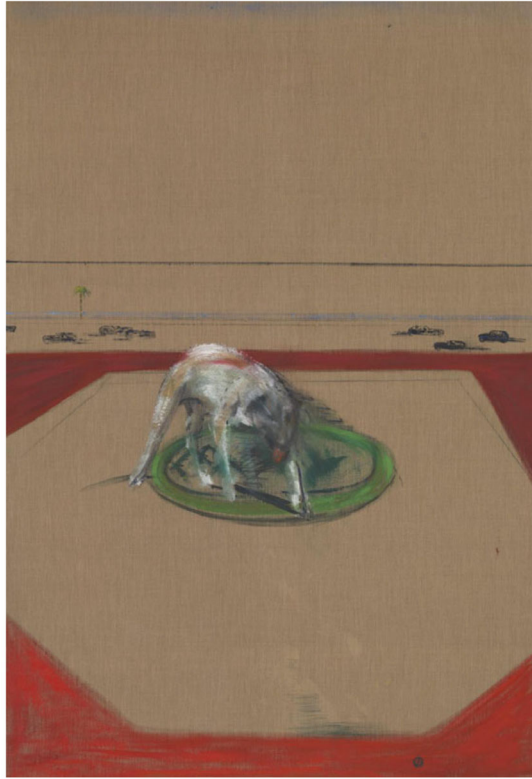


Figure 31

Francis Bacon. *Dog*. 1952. Oil, charcoal and sand on canvas. 198 × 137 cm. Tate. © Estate of Francis Bacon. All Rights Reserved, DACS 2019. Digital photograph: © Tate.

kitchen with reproductions of images he took inspiration from (such as other paintings by Velázquez and images of Muybridge's photographs, for example) as well as reproductions of his own paintings. In a photograph of a group of images of his own paintings hung above the kitchen sink (Figure 33), several of the reproduced paintings appear framed and behind glass in the printed images. Bacon's interest in the reproductions of painting may explain why it would not bother him in the least to (almost fully) do away with the direct tactility of his surface. Paradoxically, so might his desire to borrow certain features

from the way old masters paintings are presented in museums, under glass and frame.

What does Bacon himself have to say about the glass? In a series of interviews conducted at various times over almost three decades (Sylvester 1993, 7), he and David Sylvester briefly discuss the question:

DS Speaking of the way the work is shown, how about the glass? I know you always like to have the paintings under glass, but, when there are those large dark areas, and one sees oneself reflected in them—and also

furniture and also pictures on the opposite wall—it does become very difficult to see what's there. Are the reflections something you positively want to have, or are they something to be put up with?

FB I don't want them to be there; I feel that they should be put up with. I feel that, because I use no varnishes or anything of that kind, and because of the very flat way I paint, the glass helps to unify the picture. I also like the distance between what has been done and the onlooker that the glass creates; I like, as it were, the removal of the object as far as possible.



Figure 32

Installation view of “Francis Bacon- A Centenary Retrospective,” at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, cropped from original. From Artnet website: Ben Davis “Bacon half-baked.” © Artnet/Ben Davis.

DS So it’s not that you feel that the reflections add something by adding to the scrambling of the forms?

FB Well, oddly enough, I even like Rembrandts under glass. And it’s true to say in many ways they’re more difficult to see, but you can still look into them.

DS Do you feel, perhaps, that having to look through the reflections forces one to look harder? Is that a factor?

FB No, it isn’t. It’s the distance—that this thing is shut away from the spectator ... to want the person reflected in the glass of a dark painting is illogical and has no meaning. I think it’s just one of those misfortunes. I hope they’ll make glass

soon which doesn’t reflect ... There’s very little reflection in Perspex, but it sucks the paint off the canvas ...

DS I’m told that a lot of private collectors of your work remove the glass.

FB Yes. It’s the fashion to see paintings without glass nowadays. If they want to remove it, it’s their business. I can’t stop them (Sylvester 1993, 86–87)²⁹.

According to Bacon, the glass thus helps to unify the picture and shut away the object “as far as possible” from the onlooker. Let’s examine these next and last two aspects: finish and unification of a “flat” surface, and distance.

The reflective glass adds a finish over the whole of the painting uniformly and thus unifies the paint. It dampens the matte, dry and adsorbed paint, adding sheen to the colors. The flatness Bacon characterizes his way of painting (related to the type of paints he used and adsorption by the canvas) is indeed countered by this device. As he alludes to in the cited text, Bacon’s glass overlay recalls the use of varnish and glacis in which the whole surface is covered. Glacis and varnish also introduce a different light and offer a unified finish. Jan Van Eyck possibly did this as well—over a wooden and primed support—with glazes and he applied a layer of varnish to the whole surface when the painting was almost complete for



Figure 33

Perry Ogden. *Kitchen at Francis Bacon's 7 Reece Mews Studio, London 1998*. 1998. Photographic print. The Estate of Francis Bacon Collection. © The Estate of Francis Bacon. All rights reserved, DACS/Artimage 2019. Photograph: © Perry Ogden.

protective and unifying purposes³⁰. Some painters—like Dutch seventeenth century painter Nicolaes Maes in *De spinster*, for instance—laid down glazis layers over the whole surface of their painting. Maes purposefully applied his paints on canvas or panel with *high contrast*. He applied exaggerated highlights and shadows before finishing off the painting with a dark tinted layer of glaze which effectively soothed the contrast and unified the surface³¹. Closer to Bacon in time, Edgar Degas's glazing of large format pastels recalls similar strategies. It has been suggested that Degas's glazing may have motivated Bacon's choice of glass over his (dry) paints (Hammer 2012) which the above quote regarding not using varnish seems to hint at, too.

It needs to be noted that the raw canvas has a similar ability as the glass to unify a painting but does so with very distinct effects, quite opposite to those produced by the reflective glass. The unprimed canvas can unify the painting by rendering the paint "flat" and matte, providing an

undertone or a potential midtone and an irregular fibrous surface which diffusely reflects light and generally emphasizes the flatness of the canvas support. Bacon's unprimed linen would also unify a variety of techniques, say spray paint, pastel and oil paint, which are adsorbed and appear quite similar to one another. On the contrary, the glass produces a smooth, deep surface, which has a clear focal point and introduces a recessive perspectival space. If Bacon feels his painting is unified, it is likely in the sense that it resembles the rendering of a more traditional type of space in painting.

Lastly, Bacon states the same thing about the heavy Renaissance-type frames as the glass: they both serve to introduce as much distance as possible between the surfaces and the viewers—to "shut away" the object. Both elements intend to present what is inside their borders as precious and distinct from daily life, from the space that surrounds the viewer, and the viewer himself (already removed in a particular

exhibition context). Elements that may be recognizable and reveal the way the paintings are made are placed at a distance. The familiar element of the weave—omnipresent in the paintings without frame or glass—is tempered when they are under glass.

Conclusion

Bacon, who worked as an interior designer before he began painting in 1944, seems ambiguous about the decorative in painting. On the one hand, he adorns his canvases with gilt frames and glass. On the other, he abhorred the decorative in painting and used the term "decoration" pejoratively associating it systematically to abstract art (Sylvester 1993, 58). And about the paintings of the other painter who was using unprimed canvas at the same time he was, he had this to say: "Jackson Pollock's paintings might be very pretty but they're just decoration. I always think they look like old lace." (Farson 1993). Though Bacon may have referred to the entanglement of

paint thread as “old lace,” he may also have (inadvertently or not) pointed toward the strong textile component of Pollock’s cotton canvases. In some cases, these indeed have a tinted appearance which may make them look aged (sometimes the cotton was yellowish, sometimes brownish—it is visible in photographs of the time they were exhibited, they look aged already if we think of the blank canvas as white—their yellowing has only increased with time as restorers show us in before and after images of cleaning). From this comment and his use of glass, it is clear that Bacon did not want his paintings to look “textile.” It seems he wanted to do away with any associations between his surfaces and tapestry or woven surfaces. Possible references to arts and crafts and to the quotidian that might be alluded to by the raw canvas, Bacon silenced behind glass.

What bothered Bacon in Pollock’s canvases is probably less the decorative than the tactile component—the isness of the materials, bare and accessible for the eye of the viewer to behold. With strategies like heavy Renaissance type frames and glass Bacon rendered his paintings sacred, precious, encased—removed from the viewer, almost like a reliquary. He chose to give primacy to recessive depth perception over tactility.

Bare, they expose the drought of the canvas and most importantly their *textility*³²; beyond their woven ground, they expose the way they were made. Beneath glass, he shut away that textility.

Looking at Bacon’s paintings from a painter’s perspective, one cannot help but notice how paradoxical his attitude was; on the one hand, his attention to detail and the consistency of his techniques (from weave

pressings to choosing the rear side of primed linen as a substrate for over 40 years) are extreme; on the other, he felt the need to place the traces of these carefully orchestrated encounters between fibers and paint matter under glass. Bacon destroyed paintings *en masse*, purposefully disfiguring them before throwing them out. It seems that, for those paintings that he chose not to discard, he was pulled to conceal under a translucent layer the most intimate and *epidermic* parts of his process, in effect downplaying the peculiarity (the queer-ness?) of his materials.

In conclusion, through the placement of the glass, Bacon discarded some features the unprimed surface offers and retained only the effects he wanted from the linen (the way it grips the paint and distributes it, the coloring of the surface, etc.). In a poetic turn of events, the glass recreates qualities that preparation is usually able to install in the first phases of the painting. Here, the glass coats the raw canvas a posteriori. It deepens the colors that were muted through (ab/ad)sorption by canvas and brings in specular reflections of the light over the object, a physical phenomenon that it was incapable to produce as such, without the glass “coating.” It installs a renewed sense of distance between viewer and canvas by idealizing the surface, just like preparation tends to do, making the viewer forget its materiality, its skin.

Notes

1. Sources vary between 1947 (Farson 1993) and 1948 (Cappock 2005, 225–226, note 106); *Head II* of 1949 is cited as the first surviving work to use the unprimed side of the canvas (Russell

2010, 107, 168). However, earlier Bacon used “an absorbent wood-fiber board called Sundlea, recommended by Roy de Maistre and Graham Sutherland,” according to Farson (1993). Sutherland used unprimed canvas, too, as a support for his portraits, for example. He drew a graphite grid on his canvas before painting thinly with oil.

2. Bacon answered “Yes,” when David Sylvester asked him if, starting in the late 1940s, he had continued working on unprimed canvas “always with the other side primed?” Bacon insisted, “[a]nd since then I have always worked on the unprimed side of the canvas.” (Sylvester 1993, 195–196). See also Russell (2010). After examining 21 paintings and 17 additional destroyed paintings by Bacon, Russell concluded: “All but three of the works examined were painted on the reverse side of a commercially-primed canvas. Two early works were painted on a soft fiberboard.” (Russell 2010, 139).
3. The canvas always appears to be linen, with plain-weave pattern. The weave density varies, at times with a rather coarse canvas (Russell 2010, 142).
4. Barring small drops, stains, and very dilute paint soaked into the canvas for dark backgrounds, most of

- Bacon's paint is oily but rather dry/undiluted.
5. In physics, to "adsorb" (of a solid) means to hold molecules (of a gas or liquid or solute) as a thin film on the outside surface. Absorption on the contrary involves the whole volume of the material. Adsorption is a surface phenomenon and thus a superficial form of absorption. The term "sorption" encompasses both processes (Oxford University Press 1989, s.v. "adsorb" and "sorption").
 6. Bacon about oil pastel (Farson 1993).
 7. When someone told him paint on unprimed canvas would "rot it," Bacon shrugged and said: "Degas did it." (Peppiatt 2006, 64). On Francis Bacon's artistic dialogue with Edgar Degas, see Hammer (2012).
 8. Spray paints are apparent on paintings from the late 1970s up to the final Triptych of 1991 (Russell 2010, 122).
 9. *La touche* in French refers to the quality of the stroke of a brush: it is the way a painter applies paint; one can speak of a painter's touch in English.
 10. Bacon adapted the Old Master's device to isolate and distance the sitter from the viewer (van Alphen 1992, 108). The painter had begun his career as an interior decorator and designer of furniture and rugs in the mid-1930s, and later said that he liked "rooms hung all round with just curtains hung in even folds" (Russell 1971, 35). Veils or curtains appear in Bacon's earliest works, always in portraits and always in front of, rather than behind, the figure (Zweite and Müller 2006, 208).
 11. On conveying the violence of reality in paint, see Bacon with Sylvester (Sylvester 1993, 81–82). Book titles alone reflect the omnipresent notion of violence in the interpretations of Bacon's works, think *The Violence of the Real; Francis Bacon: a Terrible Beauty; Francis Bacon: his Life and Violent Times*, ...
 12. It is likely that Bacon worked with rulers. Several were found in his studio after his death (Russell 2010, 173).
 13. There were corduroy imprints on the door (Dawson and Cappock 2001, 55; Cappock 2005, 208).
 14. Bacon used corduroy "to impose a cross-hatching impression by pressing it against a face on the canvas" (Domino 1997, 107).
 15. "In many cases the canvas surface appears to have been roughened before painting commenced" (Russell 2010, 139).
 16. It seems Bacon still used oil paint for the backgrounds in the dark ground paintings of the 1950s; Later, in the 1970s and 1980s, he used acrylic and house paints in the "backgrounds" yet continued to use oil for the rest (mainly the figures) (Russell 2010, 175).
 17. Linda Nochlin on Francis Bacon and Abstract Expressionism, which "Bacon ostensibly hated, [but which] obviously exerted a certain seductive power on his formal language" (Nochlin 2008).
 18. In a statement from a tribute to the painter Matthew Smith, Bacon said, "the image is the paint and vice versa" (Peppiatt 2006, 65). For more on flesh in Bacon's paintings, see Gilles Deleuze's *La Logique de la Sensation [The Logic of Sensation]* (Deleuze 1981; Deleuze 2002).
 19. Natural ageing of the painting constituents and conservation-restoration practices like cleaning and lining the canvas have often caused the weave to pierce through paint layers even when this was not the initial state of the canvas or the intention of the artist. Revolute lining techniques requiring heat and pressure to be applied on the back of the canvas (to glue an additional canvas lining to their backs) have pressed the fibers and the weave into the paint layer, at times producing an imprint of the structure of the weave (Kirsh and Levenson 2000, 33–38).
 20. Robert Melville wrote about *Head I*, it has the "color of wet, black snakes lightly powdered with dust" (Met Museum 2020).
 21. John Richardson made the comparison between the linen side of the canvas and

- the stubble on Francis' face (Richardson 2009).
22. Photographs show Muybridge's images hanging in Bacon's studio, next to reproductions of his own paintings.
 23. Richardson watched Bacon apply make-up to his face: "[t]he makeup adhered to the stubble much as [sic] the paint would adhere to the unprimed verso of the canvas that he used in preference to the smooth, white-primed recto" (Richardson 2009).
 24. An Australian exhibition of 2012 showed a couple of paintings without glass. The bare paintings are filmed up-close and presented by the curator of the exhibition in an online video presentation (Art Gallery of NSW 2012).
 25. Sections of the catalogue raisonné are available in online form, on the official Francis Bacon website (francis-bacon.com).
 26. Peggy Guggenheim bought Bacon's *Study for Chimpanzee* the year it was made, in 1957 and hung it above her bed where it remained until she died (Dearborn 2004, 283–284). Guggenheim purchased many paintings on unprimed canvas during that period; in addition to the chimpanzee painting, she bought several Jackson Pollocks including *Enchanted Forest* and Mark Rothko's *Untitled (red)* of 1949 on raw canvas.
 27. Because of its irregular surface, light hits unprimed canvas in a different manner, physically. The small indentations of the weave reflect light diffusely; the canvas's "natural texture" tends to reflect light from individual fibers, in accordance with its woven structure (Komatsu and Goda 2018). Diffuse reflection means that reflection occurs in all directions and signifies a more matte and textured perception of the surface. Primed canvas on the contrary is more closely associated to specular reflection. Specular reflection means that light is mainly reflected in one direction and much less absorbed by the surface than when diffuse (Crowell 2004, 15–23), which enhances perception of brightness, sheen and opaqueness of primed paintings.
 28. The glass blurring of the all-over presence of the weave heightens possible confusion between the various weaves: that of the linen (coming through or left blank), that of other cloth imprints, and other grid-like patterns like comb streaks, all more easily identified on the bare surface.
 29. Bacon's statement to David Sylvester about waiting for adequate non-reflective glass has to be relativized. Anti-reflective glass only works properly when placed *completely against* the surface it covers. Given the relief of his paint matter on his canvases, such placement would have been in most cases impossible to approach. If a space is left between glass and surface, this tends to dull the perception of the surface, and would thus do away with the grain of the canvas either way. Additionally, to this day, it appears that the Estate of Francis Bacon has chosen to keep the paintings under reflective glass and to exhibit them this way.
 30. Besides protecting, a layer of varnish when the painting is almost complete unifies the painting and saturates the colors. (Dunkerton 2020).
 31. Discussion with Arie Wallert at *The Skin of Things* symposium, Rijksmuseum, November 2018.
 32. In "The Textility of Making," Tim Ingold puts forward the notion of "textility" to shed light on processes of making. Textility refers to making in general as a practice of weaving together materials through thinking and doing. He compares making to the "slicing and binding together of fibrous material." (Ingold 2010, 92).

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