

# Bacon 'n' Eggs

JOHN KELLY

Our festive season begins with a trip to Dublin as we are invited to dinner with friends. This is no ordinary dinner but a sumptuous feast cooked by Michelin starred chef Dylan McGrath, and our senses are aroused by the promise of an eight-course meal accompanied by a variety of champagnes and wines to suit each plate. Christina loves museums so we marry our gourmet gift with a visit to the Francis Bacon exhibition at the Hugh Lane Gallery – Bacon also enjoyed his food and drink. In between the exhibition and the meal we enjoy a sensual afternoon in a Dublin hotel before beginning our holiday reading. My book is *Opening Skinner's Box* in which Lauren Slater explores some of the 20<sup>th</sup> century's most famous psychological experiments including B.F. Skinner's famous boxes and Stanley Milgram's electric chair. The book's cover has several cuboid diagrams like the ones Bacon painted, and I begin to think about rooms, cubes, boxes and 'Eggs'.<sup>1</sup>

Bacon, Milgram and Skinner's lives spanned most of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, however their importance stems from their post-WWII work: Skinner and Milgram as psychologists, and Bacon the artist who revealed in paint what these other two would discover in behavioral science. However if you are looking for Bacon's screaming Popes or the great triptychs as you wander the Hugh Lane, you will be disappointed. Instead you will be presented with a far more technical and scientific exhibition consisting mainly of photographic material that influenced Bacon's mind: from Eadweard Muybridges's photographs to the photographic portraits and the magazine pages, to the film where Bacon revealed why he painted on the 'wrong' side of the pre-primed canvas. He never relinquished this technique, realising it gave him the 'tooth' he desired and also requiring him to get the image down quickly with minimal paint so the canvas's arteries would not become clogged.

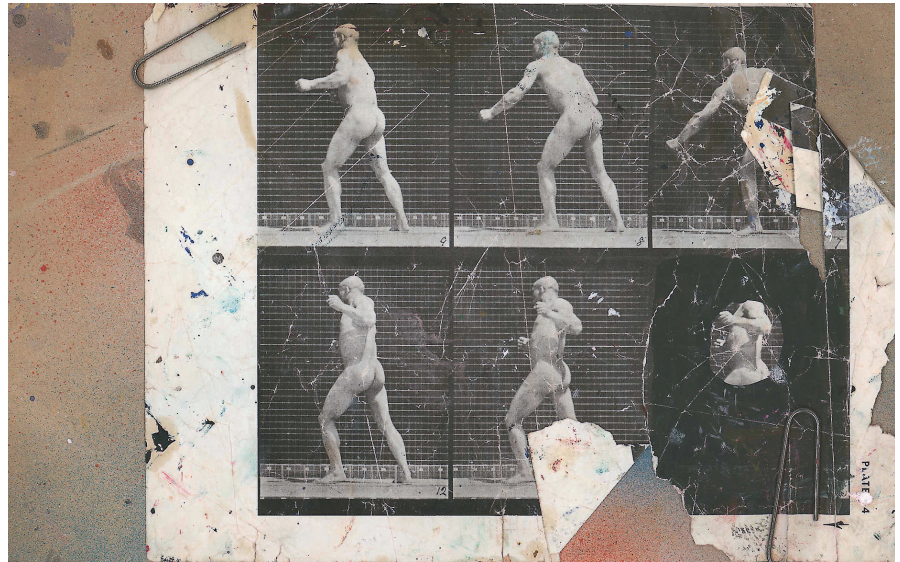
Bacon's studio, reconstructed in all its minutiae, is the fulcrum of the exhibition, a space recreated as if the artist had simply left the room in Dublin only to re-enter it in London via the adjacent video projection, whereupon coming through the door Bacon comically shuts it in the face of Melvyn Bragg as if he had forgotten he was there. I have seen this reconstructed studio several times and am always a little uneasy with it. The hermetically sealed room is a mad clutter of artist artifacts, which seems to have had all the air, along with the art, sucked out of it. It looks like a sealed crime scene or maybe some sinister chamber of death. A place where the artist might have killed or been killed, the blood/paint splatter forensic evidence on the wall. So is this box a mausoleum? A memorial? Is it something like Skinner's boxes, an ongoing experiment where the viewer becomes an unwitting participant like in Milgram's basement cell, where the scientist led 'nice' people to believe they were electrocuting an innocent?



Inside the studio the paint drips down the easel, the detritus of a painter who painted like the gambler he was, relying on organised chance in a room full of chaos which brought forth a screaming *Pope Innocent* – the stripped flesh of raw meat, his cum spattered portraits and his painted linear boxes that encased the lone figures who seem to be fighting to emerge from the embryonic paint. Both Skinner and Bacon knew something about gambling. Importantly Skinner revealed that: '... irregular rewarded behavior was the hardest of all to eradicate ... Skinner was able to systematically evoke and explain much of human folly, why we do dumb things even when we're not consistently rewarded ...'; i.e., why Bacon gambled, why one makes art, why one writes! It was all about this thing called intermittent reinforcement and he could show it, its mechanisms, the contingencies of compulsion.<sup>2</sup> In this exhibition you can see it in the room full of Bacon's 'destroyed' canvases, hanging like crucified and ultimately discarded works on the museums walls. But should they be there?

These 'destroyed' works bring to mind the venerable London art dealer Godfrey Pilkington<sup>3</sup> who told me this story back in the early '90s. Bacon was walking up Cork Street,<sup>4</sup> when he saw one of his paintings in a gallery window. The painting had been left with friends many years before in the south of France. Forgotten or left in lieu of rent, Bacon was horrified that a second rate work had come into public view so he entered the gallery, asked the price, pulled out a roll of cash, paid for it and then took the painting and kicked it all the way down the street. From this anecdote, I take it that Bacon was very particular about the way in which his work was shown publicly. This makes the most contentious part of the Hugh Lane show – not the long ago installed Bacon box<sup>5</sup> but its installation of these 'destroyed' canvases even





P43/ Photograph of Francis Bacon by John Deakin. Collection of Dublin City Gallery The Hugh Lane. © The Estate of Francis Bacon. All rights reserved/ DACS, London.

THIS PAGE: 1/ Francis Bacon, *Study for a Portrait of John Edwards*, 1989. Private Collection.

2/ Photograph of Isabel Rawsthorne by John Deakin. Collection of Dublin City Gallery The Hugh Lane, 2009 The Estate of Francis Bacon

3/ Example of Francis Bacon's source material relating to Eadweard Muybridge's photographic studies.

4/ Photograph of Francis Bacon's Studio at 7 Reece Mews, by Perry Odgen, 1998. Collection of Dublin City Gallery The Hugh Lane.

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while clearly contextualising them as historical artifacts in an exhibition that explores Bacon's source material and technique. The gallery's gamble rewards the visitor with a fascinating insight into Bacon's untutored methods in the same way Skinner's boxes now reside in Harvard University's archives as historical artifacts, reinforcing the importance of the art and the primary research respectively.

Skinner's boxes were heavily influenced by (Ivan) Pavlov's experiments with dogs, but rather than simply getting a gland to salivate, Skinner wanted to know whether the whole organism could be controlled by reward. He succeeded by graphing and quantifying his psychological experiments, placing animals and even his own daughter in real boxes where rewards were given for certain pre-determined behavior. 'His vision was to build a worldwide community where the government would consist of behavioral psychologists who could condition, or train its citizens into phalanxes of benevolent robots.'<sup>6</sup> In contrast to his controversial, some might think fascist vision, his quantifiable analysis of reward rather than punishment is also the reason the current paradigm of good parenting is to reward our children rather than to beat them.<sup>7</sup> Good and evil possibly intertwine?

Returning to Stanley Milgram, I read about his experiments in 1961 where he wanted to learn whether people would be obedient if asked to administer an electric shock to somebody by a credible authority. Milgram hired an actor and in a small cell-like room created an installation, which looked suspiciously like an electric chair, whilst an adjoining room contained an



electrical generator and a sign which read 'danger extreme shock'.<sup>8</sup> Milgram placed an ad and for four bucks people came forward to participate in what they were told was a Yale memory experiment. The experiment consisted of an actor strapped into the chair and when he failed to recall correctly a series of words, the unwitting participant was required to administer a shock beginning at 15 volts, then each subsequent one got stronger, going all the way up to a lethal 450 volts. What was really shocking was that 65% of people obediently shocked the man through the pleading and screaming stages until the man in the chair was for all appearances dead (they did not know he was acting).

Reading about Milgram's experiments I can't help but think of Bacon's paintings based on Diego Velázquez's *Pope Innocent X*, the one where Bacon fries him in his electric chair, painted a decade before Milgram's experiments. Bacon's Pope screams the epitome of fear itself whilst Milgram's experimental results shocked a post Holocaust world by setting up a quantifiable experiment that shows that most of us are potential executioners as long as the situation facilitates obedience to authority. It seems possible that Bacon's imagery may well have influenced Milgram's ideas.

Back in the Bacon exhibition we learn of his difficult formative years in Ireland: an unsettled childhood, a realisation of his homosexuality and a strict military father who did not understand why his effeminate son dressed in woman's underwear and so had 'the artist as a young man' whipped for doing so. From these early punitive experiences Bacon went on to paint some of the world's most 'shocking' mid-20<sup>th</sup> century imagery. He admits in the Melvyn Bragg film that he set out to shock, and that took some doing in a fearful, postwar nuclear world. His paintings achieved it, creating a beautiful, dark, sensual narrative of his personal loves and fears that we all shared.

'There is no fear just certain galvanic skin responses and involuntary muscle trembling that emit 2.2 volts of energy.'<sup>9</sup> Skinner's words bring me back to Slater's book and a quote by H.G. Wells: 'Wells stated that given the chance between saving the life of Ivan Pavlov or George Bernard Shaw, Wells would choose Pavlov, because science is more

redemptive than art.'<sup>10</sup> Ding a ling ding. With Bacon 'n' Eggs on our minds we head to dinner with Dylan McGrath. ■

1. Francis Bacon's nickname.
2. Lauren Slater, *Opening Skinner's Box: Great Psychological Experiments of the 20th Century*, Bloomsbury, London, 2005, p. 13.
3. London.
4. It might have been Old Bond Street.
5. The contents of Francis Bacon's Dublin studio at 7 Reece Mews were removed in 1998 and recreated in the Hugh Lane Gallery in 2001 as a permanent exhibition featuring the original door, walls, floors, ceiling and shelves and the Francis Bacon Studio Database which catalogues its 7000-plus items.
6. Slater, 2005: p. 6.
7. One might go even further and think the entire basis of capitalism is based on these principles as opposed to totalitarianism where fear of punishment and deprivation keeps society in order.
8. Slater, 2005: p. 35.
9. Slater, 2005: p. 14.
10. Slater, 2005: p. 9.

The exhibition *Francis Bacon: A Terrible Beauty*, commemorating the centenary of the birth of Dublin-born Bacon, is curated by Barbara Dawson and Martin Harrison. The exhibition is showing at Hugh Lane Gallery, Dublin, 28 October 2009 to 7 March 2010, and tours to Compton Vemey, Warwickshire, England, in 2010.

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