

First exhibition to explore dialogue and connections between Francis Bacon and Auguste Rodin opens at Ordovas



A gallery employee poses between a painting by British artist Francis Bacon entitled 'Three Studies from the Human Body' and a sculpture by French artist Auguste Rodin entitled 'Iris, etude avec tete' at Ordovas gallery in central London on February 7, 2013. Forming part of an exhibition titled 'Movement and Gravity Bacon and Rodin in dialogue' they are to be displayed from February 8 - April 6 2013. 'Three Studies from the Human Body', 1967, went on public display for the first time in the UK. AFP PHOTO / CARL COURT.

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LONDON.- At the beginning of September 1959, Francis Bacon travelled to Cornwall, seeking to escape the distractions of London, and took out a six-month rental on a studio in St Ives from the artists William Redgrave and Peter Lanyon. One evening at a party in St Ives, Redgrave noticed Bacon talking with Brian Wall; Bacon asked Wall what he did. 'I'm a sculptor', replied Wall; 'How interesting', Bacon retorted, before continuing, 'actually there are only three: Michelangelo, Rodin and Brancusi.' This provocative response not only confirms Bacon's high estimation of Rodin, but also coincides exactly with the period in which Rodin's sculpture was paradigmatic in his paintings. Movement and Gravity: Bacon and Rodin in dialogue is the first exhibition that has ever been dedicated to exploring the dialogue and connections between Francis Bacon and Auguste Rodin, and it is being staged at Ordovas from 8 February to 6 April 2013.

Three bronzes by Rodin are being shown alongside three paintings by Bacon, including Three Studies from the Human Body, 1967, which was last exhibited 40 years ago and has never before been publicly displayed in the UK. For Bacon, Rodin's dialogue with the human body, exaggerated limbs, fractured forms and the articulation of movement was of vital importance to his work in the 1950s and 1960s, but this is a topic that has attracted little comment, until now. Movement and Gravity: Bacon and Rodin in dialogue examines the profound effect of Rodin on Bacon's work, in particular, the modulation of the figure and the portrayal of movement and the body in space.

Bacon's interest in Rodin was documented as early as 1950; a reproduction of *Le Penseur*, 1880, was included among a selection of Bacon's pictorial sources at his Cromwell Place studio by photographer Sam Hunter. In 1953, Roland, Browse & Delbanco Gallery in Cork Street staged its first exhibition of Rodin's work in London and it is very probable that Bacon would have viewed drawings and bronzes there throughout the 1950s, especially as the gallery was a stone's throw from Marlborough Fine Art who represented Bacon. However, Bacon would have been familiar with the work of Rodin since the mid-1920s when he moved to London; he seldom lived more than a few minutes' walk from the Victoria and Albert Museum, where his uncle, Sir Cecil Harcourt Smith, had been Director. The Victoria and Albert Museum held Rodin's most extensive collection of works in England: eighteen sculptures gifted to the museum by Rodin in 1914, to which Bacon is said to have been a frequent visitor. In the 1960s Bacon became closely acquainted with several sculptures that his friend Lucian Freud had borrowed, including the three versions of *Iris* shown in this exhibition.

Many of Bacon's paintings attest that he was in a kind of dialogue with sculpture, evidenced either in the plasticity of his forms or in the way his figures occupy space. With *Lying Figure*, 1959, and the group of five paintings of reclining, lying and sleeping figures to which it belongs, the splayed limbs and exposed genitals are redolent of two of Rodin's sculptures in particular, both dating from 1890-91: *Figure volante* and *Iris, messagère des dieux*, and there is rare recorded evidence to support that Bacon specifically referenced these works as direct source material when painting these lying figures. *Miss Muriel Belcher*, 1959, arguably the greatest of the early portraits that Bacon made, was, like *Lying Figure*, also painted during the artist's sojourn in St Ives. Bacon began to paint head and shoulder portraits, at approximately life size, in 1958 and the vitality of brushstrokes and expressive handling of the materials in this painting are distinctly Rodin-esque.

Three Studies from the Human Body, 1967 is arguably the only painting by Bacon that can be described as depicting weightlessness. In this intriguing picture, unique in Bacon's oeuvre, three gyrating, choreographed figures defy gravity, suspended in a saturated black void. Apart from the lessons that Bacon had absorbed through his study of Rodin's works, there are numerous speculations as to his influences in making this work, as well as the identities and reading of the three figures he has depicted. The foetal position of one of the figures suggests that Bacon was depicting the three ages of man, and that this painting was his attempt at coming to terms with growing old. The head of the youthful, acrobatic figure, inspired by a photograph in *Paris Match* from 1959, hanging sloth-like on the horizontal bar, is also, paradoxically, that of an elderly man. The third figure, depicted in a splint, is thought to be a reference to a close friend who had been in a severe accident. Among contemporary events that may have triggered elements of this painting are the three American astronauts who died during a launch-pad test of their Apollo spacecraft in January 1967.