



POST-WAR &amp; CONTEMPORARY ART | AUCTION PREVIEW | APRIL 24, 2015

## *Lucian Freud: Naked Truth*

In this candid portrait, Lucian Freud demonstrates his mastery of the painterly medium and his intense examination and love of the human form, rendering every curve, fold and contour of his subject's body with evocative force

Commenting on [Lucian Freud's](#) mesmeric portraits of Londoner Sue Tilley, photographer, photo editor, and friend of the artist Bruce Bernard once quipped that the painterly achievement of the series might 'put the final stop to the classical tradition'. Certainly, *Benefits Supervisor Resting*, a remarkably candid composition of the government worker's ample figure, being offered at the Christie's New York Post-War & Contemporary Evening Sale on 13 May, is a stunning example of the artist's patient painterly practice.

Completed over a nine-month period in 1994, the picture of [one of Freud's most celebrated sitters](#) is an exhaustive examination of the human form, rendering every curve, fold, and blemish of Tilley's body with a disquieting, evocative force. Draped over a threadbare sofa in the artist's modest studio, 'Big Sue', as she was affectionately known, rests her arms on the seat's back and side, her legs crooked at a 90-degree angle. Although her head is tilted back, seemingly oblivious to onlookers, she opens herself up to an exterior gaze.

This painting is a triumph of the human spirit, showcasing Freud's love of the human body. The sitter, Sue Tilley, is calm and confident, relaxed and comfortable in her own skin. She is very much in control, taking on the artist and the viewer. A contemporary take on the Odalisque and the fertility goddess, with her head flung back, she exudes an intriguing ambiguity, implying ecstasy, defiance and the deep exhale of peacefulness.

In the work's softly rendered light Tilley's body becomes a rolling landscape: a labyrinth of shadows is cast in subtle skin tones; the patchwork of colours ranges from deep red, demarcating the silhouette of her feet, to pale pinks, mauves, and muted creams that convey the expanse of her breasts. Freud's brush explores every inch of his subject's body with a delicacy that results in what the writer Bruce Bernard, a longtime friend, called the artist's 'major [contribution] to the sum of Western painting of the nude.'

Although Freud painted a wealth of figurative subject matter throughout his career, the naked human body is the genre for which he arguably best known. 'I like skin,' he told Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth curator Michael Auping in 2012. 'It's so unpredictable.' That volatility led the artist to develop the complex palette with which he depicted his often-slumbering forms. 'I remix my colours for almost every brush stroke,' he explained. 'I don't want a single colour to dominate. I don't use colour symbolically. I use it to give the figure life.'



Lucian Freud (1922–2011). *Benefits Supervisor Resting*, 1994. Oil on canvas. 59 ¼ × 63 ½ in. (150.5 × 161.2 cm.)  
Estimate: \$30,000,000-50,000,000. This work is offered in our [Post-War & Contemporary Art Evening Sale in New York on 13 May](#).

Freud was introduced to Tilley by nightclub host and performance artist Leigh Bowery, another of the artist's recurrent subjects. 'Leigh was running a club in Piccadilly, and I was on the door, so he made Lucian come,' remembers Tilley of their first meeting. 'He remarked that my lipstick was the wrong colour; that it didn't suit me at all because there was too much blue in there. Then about six months later, he decided to invite me to lunch at the River Café. He just entertained me so much [with] ridiculous stories, ridiculous jokes... He said to Leigh, "Phone her up and say I want to use her".'

Most of the sittings began in the evening, lasting well into the night. 'Every Saturday and Sunday,' Tilley told private dealer [Pilar Ordovas](#) in 2008. 'And then usually [he] would bribe me to take a couple of days off work. [I had] to be there at half past seven... and then usually stay until about half past three.'

Because of the time each sitting required, Freud was careful to fix a pose his sitters could sustain for many hours. 'It's difficult to say how a pose comes about,' he admitted. 'I usually ask them to hold a pose based on something I see that seems new or odd to me. I suppose you might say we exploit each other. I am allowed to make a painting based on their presence in my studio, and they make that presence known in many different ways. They are communicating with their body. I look for those things I haven't seen before. Sometimes it takes a very long time to see it, but despite my slowness I will eventually see it.'

*Freud acknowledged that Titian taught him a lot about composition, particularly about how to convey a sense of drama*

Although some sessions were silently studious, sometimes Freud engaged his sitters in conversation or even sang and recited poetry. ‘Sometimes he was so hilarious. I don’t know how he could paint me because I was laughing so much,’ Tilley told Ordovas. Freud himself was more circumspect, admitting that no two sittings were alike. ‘Every painting is different and every sitter is different,’ he told Auping. ‘Some people are naturally more active and more physical in a performative way. I don’t think the people who just sit are less interesting. They have a different kind of presence, a different weight and countenance. Also, a certain kind of movement is inevitable, a vibration, if you will. Stillness in painting is an illusion, just as movement in a painting is an illusion. There is always a lot going on when you are painting a living person.’

Freud’s unusual, seemingly awkward posing of his sitters may be partially due to his admiration of Titian. He was a frequent visitor to the National Gallery of Scotland in Edinburgh where he spent hours, in the late 1970s, studying the master’s *Diana and Actaen* and *Diana and Calliston* (both 1556-59), works he described to William Feaver in 2002 as ‘two of the most beautiful paintings in the world.’ Beyond the basic narrative, Freud was captivated by the overall splendour of the charged details — the swathes of cloth, and abundance of flesh — which packed the canvas from edge to edge. Freud acknowledged that Titian taught him a lot about composition, particularly about how to convey a sense of drama by compositional means.



Sue Tilley in front of *Benefits Supervisor Sleeping*. Photograph by © Picture Alliance/DPA. Artwork: © Lucian Freud Archive / The Bridgeman Art Library

*Benefits Supervisor Resting* is the second of the series of four Tilley paintings, which Freud completed between 1993 and 1996. The first, *Evening in the Studio*, features the subject lying naked on the floorboards of Freud's studio. Another model, Nicola Bateman, is seated behind her, while the artist's whippet, Pluto, lies comfortably on an austere metal bed. *Benefits Supervisor Resting* is the second work, which was followed a year later by *Benefits Supervisor Sleeping*, which earned \$33.6 million in 2008 at Christie's New York, a then-record for the most expensive painting by a living artist to be sold at auction. The final picture is an elongated canvas called *Sleeping by the Lion Carpet*, in which Tilley slumbers in a leather chair in front of a richly decorated carpet. The quartet was a key inclusion in 2012's critically acclaimed retrospective of Freud portraits, organised by London's National Portrait Gallery.

The honesty with which Freud imbues every brushstroke is what distinguishes his work in the history of portraiture. Traditionally a genre used to flatter members of the elite class, Freud wields his artistic power to convey the true essence of the sitter. The stark candour of his nudes has the capacity to shock, but this is not the artist's avowed intent. 'I think the desire to shock has a self-conscious banality about it sometimes,' he told Sebastian Smee in 2006.

He later proclaimed to Auping, 'I never put anything into a picture that I don't see when I'm painting a subject. However, I'm not trying to make a copy of a person. I'm trying to relay something of who they are a physical and emotional presence. I want the paint to work as flesh does. If you don't over-direct your sitters and you focus on their physical presence, interesting things often happen. You find that you capture something about them that neither of you knew.'

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*Benefits Supervisor Resting* was executed at a particularly important time in Freud's career when, at age 72, his large-scale nudes came to define his career. The artist embarked on his project of naked portraiture after spotting Leigh Bowery at Antony d'Offay Gallery in 1988. Bowery, who regularly appeared in high heels, wearing latex body stockings and masks, fascinated him. 'I found him perfectly beautiful,' Freud told Jonathan Jones for *The Guardian* in 2000. *Leigh Bowery (Seated)*, 1990, was the first in this series.

This period also coincided with the artist joining the gallery stable of dealer William Acquavella, who burnished Freud's reputation as one of the greatest painters of his generation. 'When William walked into the studio, all the Leigh Bowery paintings were there; he was knocked out by them' Freud told Tom Vanderbilt for *WSJ* in 2011. 'You'd think a rather uptown, established gallerist would be slightly put off, but not a bit of it. He just thought these were remarkable paintings.' Unlike the traditional, historic nudes, which glorify the human form, Freud's realistic representation of the human body presents the vulnerability of nakedness, emphasising mortality.

A passionate observer of reality, Lucian Freud had the rare gift of being able to translate the life of his sitters into the medium of paint. His brushwork exhibits none of the flamboyant nonchalance of the Old Masters; instead he offers a precise and analytical dissection of the phenomena made through careful craft, painstaking observation, and deliberative action. Using brushes that almost comb the paint rather than absorb it and leaving the brushed material quality of the oil starkly visible on the surface, Freud builds his work slowly across the surface like a patchwork map.

Despite being the grandson of premier psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud, the artist professed that his paintings were not meant to provide any particular psychological insight into his sitters, just a reflection of what he saw before him. 'My work is purely autobiographical,' he said to Starr Figura in 2007. 'It is about myself and my surroundings. I work from people that interest me and that I care about, in rooms that I know... When I look at a body it gives me a choice of what to put in a painting, what will suit me and what won't. There is a distinction between fact and truth. Truth has an element of revelation about it. If something is true, it does more than strike one as merely being so.'

In works such as *Benefits Supervisor Resting*, Freud has taken this revelation of truth to its ultimate conclusion, resulting in a painting that becomes the definitive portrayal of the human body. As Bernard concluded in 1996, '...he must be one of the greatest portrayals of the individual human being in European Art — and therefore in the whole of painting.'

Main image at top: Lucian Freud seated with *Benefits Supervisor Resting*, and *Nymphs by a Fountain* by Sir Peter Lely. Photographed by Bruce Bernard, 1994 © Estate of Bruce Bernard