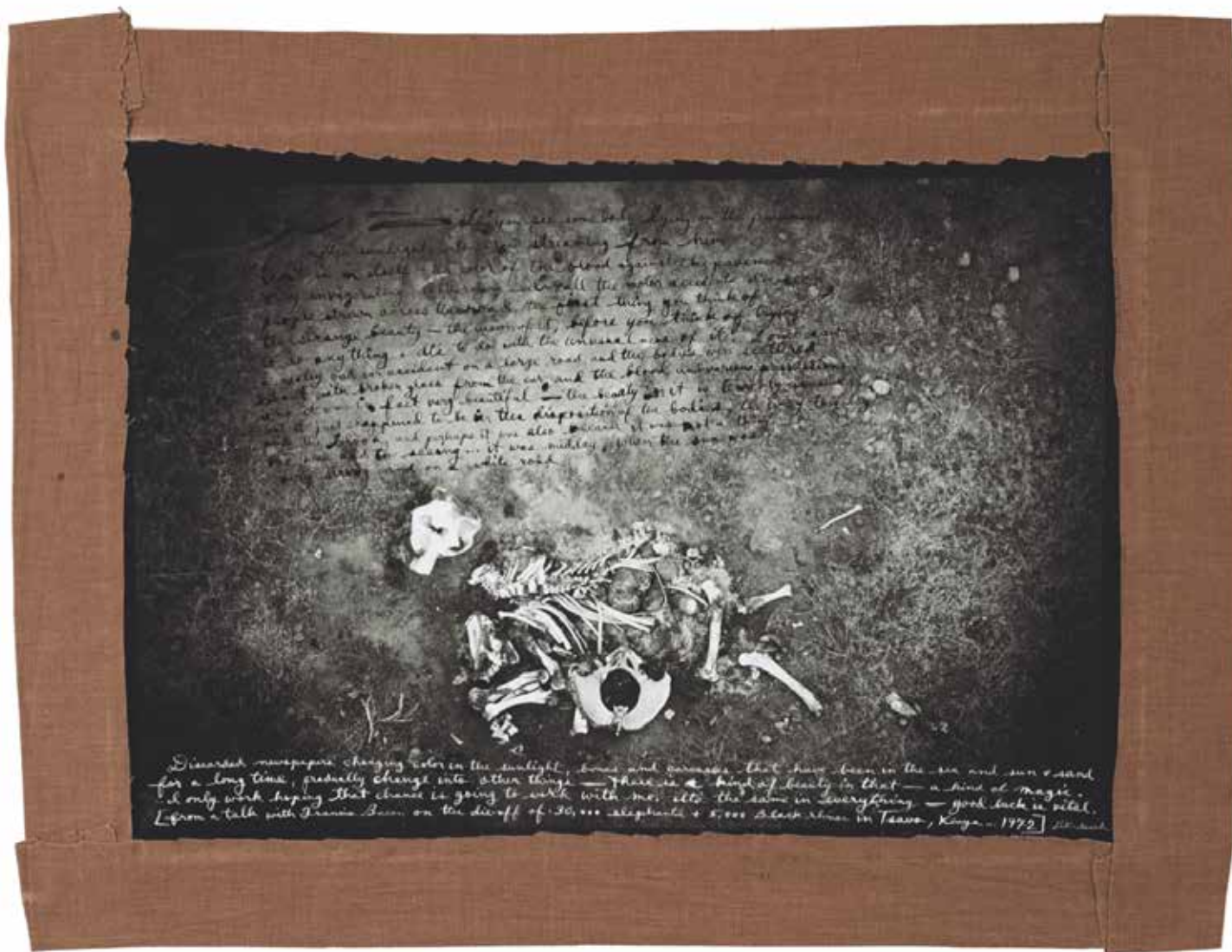


The Guardian

Art The horror safari: why was Francis Bacon so triggered by dead elephants?

When the great painter died, 200 macabre photographs of elephant carcasses were found in his studio. They were by Peter Beard - and they propelled the artist into the heart of darkness



▲ 'A release' ... one of Beard's photographs from the 1970s. Photograph: Peter Beard/Estate of Peter Beard



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If you look into the eyes of a portrait, especially a self-portrait, by Rembrandt, you seem to see a “soul”. Such religious ideas and readings have shaped the story of art from its very beginnings and continue to seduce us today. But Francis Bacon was the first artist to paint people as animals. His subjects are rendered without souls, as flesh and bone, as blood and brain - in short, as animated meat. This ruthless Darwinian vision of the struggle of life makes him one of the most unnerving of artists. And his radical eye for humankind’s natural history gives a certain resonance to his friendship with one of the most brilliant wildlife photographers of the 20th century.

After the Irish-born British painter died in 1992, more than 200 photographs of dead elephants were found in his London studio. They were given to him by Peter Beard, who took many of them from an aeroplane flying low over the grasslands of Kenya. The two would converse avidly about Beard’s images of these great, grey giants slowly rotting into monuments of white bone and ivory in the African sun. They inspired some of Bacon’s most pungent thoughts about art and life. “I would say the photographs of elephants,” he said, “are naturally suggestive.” What he saw was “a trigger - a release”.

Beard’s charged photographs of dead elephants are about to go on show at Ordovas in London, alongside a great diptych of the photographer by Bacon himself, called *Two Studies for Portrait* and featuring near-identical images. The black void in which Beard’s face is isolated invades part of his face. His left cheek has gone and his mouth is a gory mess. It seems likely that this double portrait, painted in 1976, was inspired by photographs of first world war soldiers with horrific facial wounds. It is a good example of how Bacon let photographs “release” his thoughts.



▲ Devoured by the void ... Bacon's portraits of Beard. Photograph: Estate of Francis Bacon/DACS/Artimage 2021

The work reveals Bacon's complicated feelings for a man he loves but cannot have, at least not physically. The photographer's renowned good looks are still there in the portrait, despite the disfigurement. The pair met in 1965 but their relationship intensified from 1972 onwards, as Bacon mourned and tried to recover from his disastrous relationship with small-time criminal George Dyer. In 1971, Dyer was found dead from an overdose in the toilet of a Paris hotel where he and Bacon were staying, just before the opening of a retrospective at the Grand Palais that would secure Bacon's reputation as the greatest figurative painter since Picasso.

Bacon's art in the 70s is one long howl at this loss, not just in his depictions of his lover's death, but with a string of despairing self-portraits, too. Then suddenly, in the middle of this anguish, he starts portraying Beard. And you see something like joy emerging. He's in love. A friend observed that Bacon had "a thing" for the photographer. But you don't need the gossip. The portraits say it all.

Beard was a nightclub regular who married model Cheryl Tiegs and is credited with “discovering” Iman, after spotting her on a street in Nairobi. Born wealthy, the New Yorker styled himself after Ernest Hemingway, but instead of hunting Africa’s big mammals, he reported their peril in his 1965 book *The End of the Game*. He died last year at 82, after vanishing from his Long Island home and wandering into woods, where his body was found more than a fortnight later. He had dementia.



▲ 'Complicated feelings' ... Bacon, left, and Beard in the 1970s. Photograph: Estate of Peter Beard

It wasn't just Beard's looks that inspired Bacon. The two shared an intense creative dialogue driven by a shared passion for animals, Africa and the macabre. In *The End of the Game*, Beard included pictures of living elephants as well as the rotting forms and desolate skeletons of creatures that starved to death due, he argued, to the mismanagement of wildlife reserves. With each edition, he added more shots of elephant remnants.

“ Dead elephants trigger off more ideas than living ones. They are suggestive of all types of beauty

Taken from above, these photographs home in on death with a raw honesty. There is what an elephant looks like when its insides have been eaten away. And here is what one looks like when it is nothing but a bleached structure of bone. Bacon found these much more memorable than the shots of live elephants. He explained why in 1972, when the two met in London to record a series of conversations known as The Dead Elephant Interviews. “Dead elephants,” he told Beard, “are more beautiful because they trigger off more ideas in me than living ones. Alive, they just remain beautiful elephants, whereas the other ones are suggestive of all types of beauty.”

It is a startling concept of the beautiful: Bacon clearly took a perverse pleasure in what some might call horror. “I once saw a bad car accident on a large road,” he says at one point in the conversations, “and the bodies were strewn about with broken glass from the car, and the blood and various possessions, and it was in fact very beautiful.”



▲ Grey giant ... a live elephant in a shot titled The Snows of Kilimanjaro, Mountain of Caravans, 1984/2008. Photograph: Peter Beard/Estate of Peter Beard

It sounds like he had been reading *Crash*, JG Ballard’s novel about a group of people who are sexually aroused by car accidents, except it wasn’t published until the following year. The Dead Elephant Interviews show Bacon as a man of that moment, chatting to the fashionable Beard, who was friends with the likes of Mick Jagger. In his apparently affectless claims that car crashes and dead elephants are beautiful, Bacon captured the darker side of early 1970s decadence.

Of course, he was not as wicked as he sounded. He gave Beard a full explanation of why death can be beautiful - and it's the oldest, most moral theory of art there is. He mentioned the Isenheim Altarpiece, the harrowing masterpiece of German Renaissance art that shows Christ covered with festering sores on his grey-green body, already rotting while still just alive on the cross. "But that is grand horror in the sense that it is so vitalising, isn't it?" said Bacon. "Isn't that how people came out of the great tragedies of Greece, the Agamemnon?"



▲ The horror, the horror ... another from Beard's Dead Elephant series. Photograph: Peter Beard/Estate of Peter Beard

In other words, a dead elephant is something on a par with Greek tragedy. Here are the remains of a creature so immense it's like a living world in its own right. And we are not the only animals impressed by the sight of elephant bones: the creatures themselves will recognise the remains of their species. They will stop by skeletons and fondle the bones with their trunks.

Bacon's admiration for Beard's art was interesting for another reason: it was a unique instance of him treating photographs as something more than raw material. He took medical illustrations, female nudes

and Eadweard Muybridge's famous motion studies and transfigured them - quoting them in new contexts, assimilating them into his nightmares of sex and death in orange rooms. But his friendship with Beard was that of two artists. Photography did not have the artistic status in the 1970s that it enjoys today. Bacon gave Beard confidence he was making art. Encouraged by this approval, Beard created collages and annotated albums of his nature photographs. It may be that Bacon helped Beard to see photography in a new way.

One of their shared passions was Joseph Conrad's 1902 story Heart of Darkness, which inspired the film Apocalypse Now. In the book, narrator Marlow skips a boat on the River Congo where he meets Kurtz, a supposedly idealistic imperialist who turns out to be a dying husk of moral nothingness. For Bacon, there was a bit of Kurtz in this last of the great white photograph hunters. One of the photographs Beard sent Bacon was not by him, but of him: it showed Beard with a shaved head, after he was arrested for assaulting a poacher on his ranch in Kenya. Bacon turned this photograph into a giant looming head in a large and spectacular painting called Triptych 1976, which he told friends was directly influenced by Conrad's story - as well as Greek drama. It also features a man cradling an elephant foetus in his lap.

Does Conrad's story also explain the black void that so encroaches on Beard's face in Bacon's other portrait of the photographer? It was painted the same year. The face that saw so many dead elephants seems to be literally consumed by, to quote the famous line from Heart of Darkness, the horror, the horror of it all. No other artist in recent times has created such a comprehensive personal mythology, such a claustrophobic theatre of tragic extremes. Despite Bacon's feelings for the photographer, he couldn't resist his own creative urge - to turn those impressive features into a ruin, a tragedy, another dead elephant.

● Wild Life: Francis Bacon and Peter Beard is at Ordovas, London, 12 April-16 July.