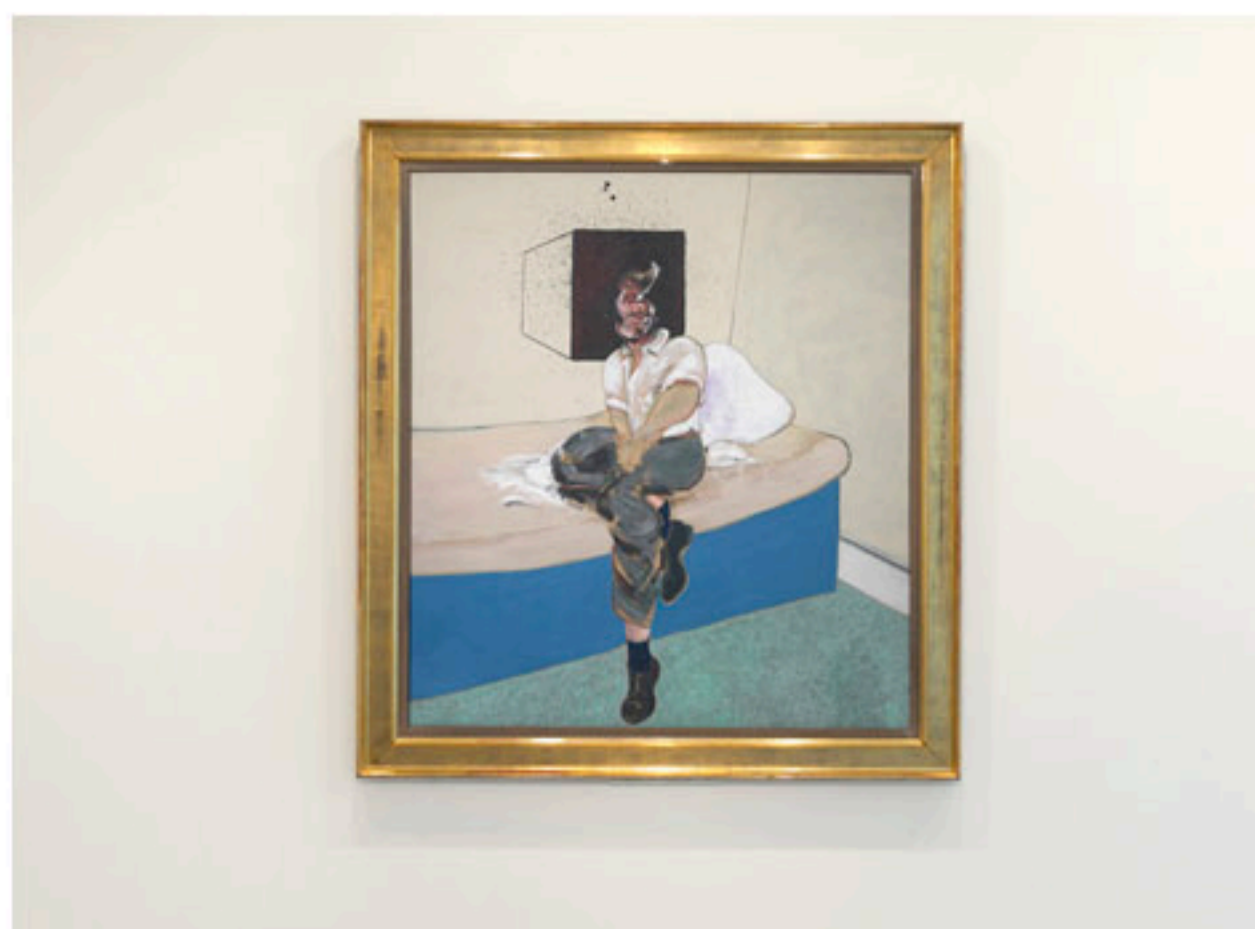


DARKNESS VISIBLE



Simon Willis explores Rembrandt's influence on Francis Bacon at "Irrational Marks", an exhibition at Ordovas in London ...

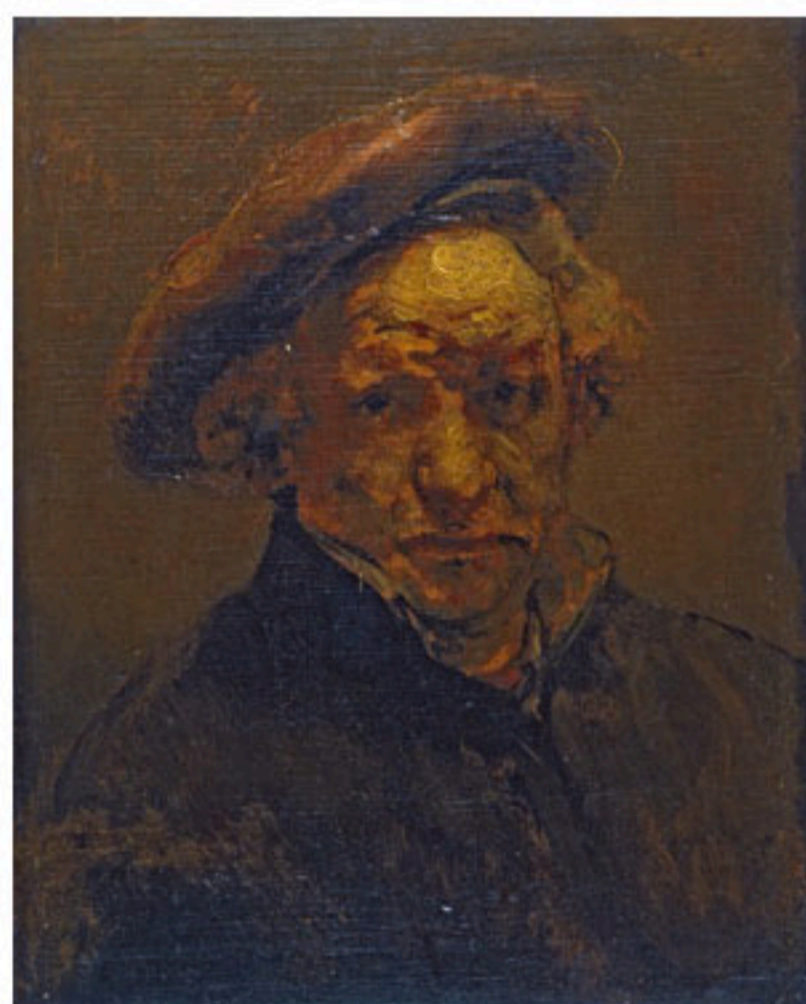
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In 1962 Irving Penn, an American photographer, went to visit Francis Bacon at his studio in London to make a portrait of him. The photograph he took shows Bacon clasping the front of his dark shirt and gazing up and away. Hanging on the wall behind his right shoulder, bent and creased and covered in paint, is a reproduction of a sombre, unfinished painting by Rembrandt, "Self-portrait with Beret" (pictured below), from about 1659.

Bacon's debt to Rembrandt's self-portraits is the subject of "Irrational Marks", the first show at Ordovas, a new gallery on Savile Row in London. Pilar Ordovás, the gallery's owner is something of an art-world wunderkind, responsible for the sale of Lucian Freud's "Benefits Supervisor Sleeping" for £21m in 2008. She has also managed Gagosian in London, and handled the estate of Valerie Beeston, who worked with Francis Bacon at the Marlborough Gallery. This exhibition shows intent: to put on contemplative considered exhibitions, as well as to be an art boutique with commercial clout.

The exhibition is tiny and tightly focused. On the ground floor there are just six works by Bacon, including two triptychs, along with the Rembrandt painting he liked so much and Penn's photograph. Downstairs in the basement are three working documents from Bacon's studio—all reproductions of Rembrandt self-portraits—and a short excerpt from "Sunday Night Francis Bacon", a film from 1966 in which the painter speaks to David Sylvester, an art critic.

Bacon revered "Self-portrait with Beret". It is an exercise in shadow and texture. The rough ruddiness of Rembrandt's ageing cheek is no more than a patch of vertical lines scratched into the paint; his coarsened and wrinkled forehead crafted from layers of thick impasto in pale yellow and mottled red. Sections are left unpainted, allowing the ground colour to contrast with the brown pigments in a play of light and dark.



But it was the eyes that fascinated Bacon. In the interview with Sylvester he says "If you analyse it, you will see that there are hardly any sockets to the eyes, that it is almost completely anti-illustrational."

Rembrandt made more than 90 pictures of himself during his life, from the early etchings of the 1630s, which show him gurning with laughter, anger and surprise, to the last self-portrait of 1669, the year he died. It is telling that Bacon fixated on an unfinished picture so spare in detail but so rich in character. What Bacon loved about Rembrandt's self-portraits was what he called the "tightrope walk" between the abstract and figurative. The paint remains paint. It doesn't disappear into what it depicts. Nevertheless, there is Rembrandt staring out implacably, sceptically. The feeling one has standing in front of the painting is that it is full of self-appraisal. This is a dialogue of a great painter with himself. If it could speak it would never use a long word, but each short one would go to the heart.

Bacon was a slicer and a dicer. The portraits and self-portraits on show here are eruptions of violence and damage. In "Study for Self-Portrait" from 1964 (pictured, top), the face is a mangle of red, white and black with dabs of green and yellow, thick swirls of impasto and striations made by pressing corduroy into the wet surface. On one side, the face has been carved away entirely. By the time he painted the triptych "Three Studies for Self-Portrait" in 1975, Bacon was depicting himself with great incisions in his cheeks and jaw, and with circular holes bored into his throat. These darkly beautiful paintings are dramas of flayed flesh and the frayed psyche, but he walks the same high-wire as Rembrandt, pushing appearance as far as it will go in pursuit of the inner life, but never beyond recognisability.

The paintings by Bacon are all from private collections. The Rembrandt hangs in the Musée Granet in Aix-en-Provence in France—it was last seen in Britain 12 years ago at the National Gallery. This exhibition is a rare chance to see these paintings, all shockingly compulsive and rich in psychological flare. In fact, they are so good you're left wanting more. It is a frustratingly narrow show, representing a 13-year slice of Bacon's work as a portraitist. In "Study for Self-Portrait" from 1973, a watch face in the bottom left-hand corner reads 7.20. Both Bacon and Rembrandt were fascinated by ageing and mortality. This exhibition would have been bolstered by earlier and later work showing the span of Bacon's changing conception of himself.

But despite its limitations, this show is wonderfully suggestive of Bacon's cannibalism as a painter. As Ms Ordovás says in her catalogue introduction, Bacon was a "magpie", pillaging from an astonishing array of sources. The most playful piece in the show is a document from Bacon's studio (pictured right), where he has pinned



together a fragment of Rembrandt's "Self-Portrait at the Easel" from 1660 which he'd torn from a book, with part of a photograph of "Papa" Jimmy Yancey, a jazz pianist. In the short film Bacon shows off a number of paint-spattered images—of Marilyn Monroe, of Hitler, of the gestures of chimpanzees and, lastly, of "Self-portrait with Beret". Every object in his studio was there to be used, and every image there to be digested. Rembrandt may have been Bacon's companion, but he had to elbow for room among many others.

"Irrational Marks: Bacon and Rembrandt" is on show at Ordovas in London until December 16th

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