

COURTESY OF THE ESTATE OF FRANCIS BACON



MUSÉE GRANET, COMMUNAUTÉ DU PAYS D'AIX-EN-PROVENCE



Francis Bacon's self-portrait from 1972, far left, is to be shown alongside Rembrandt's late Self-Portrait With Beret, left. Bacon, pictured right in his studio, said that his painting bore technical similarities to the Rembrandt



## Self-portraits shine spotlight on Bacon's debt to Rembrandt

Ben Hoyle Arts Correspondent

Born 300 years apart and sharing a self-destructive streak, Rembrandt van Rijn and Francis Bacon took self-portraiture to the brink, painting their own raddled, ageing faces with unflinching fascination and technical daring.

But, perhaps because Bacon never quoted obviously from Rembrandt's work as he did from both Velázquez and Van Gogh, the debt that he owed to the Dutch master has never been properly appreciated — until now.

A new private art gallery opens in London next week with a free show that aims to redress that curiosity.

*Irrational Marks: Bacon and Rembrandt*, which is at Ordovas, in Savile Row, from Friday, is the first exhibition devoted to exploring the connections and influences of Rembrandt's late self-portraits on Bacon's work.

It is a small show but will have cost a fortune to insure: the star attractions are six Bacon paintings and the late Rembrandt self-portrait that he apparently loved above all others: *Self-Portrait with Beret* from the Musée Granet in Aix-en-Provence. It will also include all the material relating to Rembrandt from Bacon's studio in South Kensington, including a paint-splattered photograph of the Rembrandt self-portrait.

Bacon consciously measured himself against the greats of the past and once said that his pictures "were to deserve either the National Gallery or the dustbin, with nothing in between".

While other artists fascinated him for specific periods, Rembrandt exerted a powerful grip on Bacon's approach to painting throughout his career, Pilar Ordovas,

the gallery's founder, said. "He was absolutely as important to him as Velázquez and Van Gogh, there's no doubt of that," she added.

Bacon considered Rembrandt's looser late self-portraits to be the artist's greatest works. In London he often crossed Soho to view the late Rembrandts at the National Gallery and also made regular pilgrimages to Kenwood House, on Hampstead Heath, to see the self-portrait that Rembrandt made during his final years.

But it was with the Musée Granet self-portrait that he developed a particular "obsession", according to Ms Ordovas. He spoke about it to the critic David Sylvester, telling him that he loved the painting because of the way that Rembrandt had composed "a very great image" from a "coagulation of non-rational marks", creating a representational painting from apparently abstract blobs of paint.

"Abstract Expressionism has all been done in Rembrandt's marks," he said. "But in Rembrandt it has been done with the added thing that it was an attempt to record a fact and to me therefore must be much more exciting and much more profound."

Ms Ordovas said that one of the Bacon paintings in the show, a self-portrait from 1972, shows this influence very clearly. Just as in the Rembrandt there are, in Bacon's words, "hardly any sockets to the eyes, it is almost completely anti-illustrational".

Ms Ordovas had the idea for the exhibition in 2006 when she was head of the Contemporary Art department for Christie's in London and helped to sell the estate of Valerie Beston, Bacon's gallerist.

Pilar Ordovas is showing the works at her gallery

