

# Rogue's Gallery

Michael Peppiatt's remembrance of the painter Francis Bacon is neither tribute nor apologia.

By JOHN REED

WHEN MICHAEL PEPIATT, at 21, met Francis Bacon, the 53-year-old artist was already all artifice, well spoken when well rehearsed, his bistro doctrines applauded by clinking glasses. Peppiatt, having taken over a student arts journal at Cambridge, had shown up in London's Soho. It was 1963, and Peppiatt laid claim to but a tenuous introduction to the renowned painter he sought. At the bar of the French House, the youth was

## FRANCIS BACON IN YOUR BLOOD

A Memoir

By Michael Peppiatt

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handled by the photographer John Deakin, who loudly advised: "My dear, you should consider that the maestro you mention has as of late become so famous that she no longer talks to the flotsam and jetsam. . . . I fear she wouldn't even consider meeting a mere student like you!"

Deakin's proclamation turned the heads of the patronage, and a man called back, offering Peppiatt a chair. It was Bacon; Deakin had made an artful introduction, and Peppiatt, however accidentally, had found his apprenticeship. Over the next 30 years, Peppiatt would emerge as a critic, curator and publisher, and ultimately Bacon's biographer. Joining Bacon for his nightly rounds, from restaurants to clubs, Peppiatt would ply Bacon with "interview" questions — a writer challenging the bromides of his celebrity subject. "Francis Bacon in Your Blood," arriving some 20 years after Peppiatt's seminal biography, "Francis Bacon: Anatomy of an Enigma," is the result, a gouache découpé of a friend, against a background of art history.

As of the 1960s, and Peppiatt's arrival in Soho, the landscape of Cold War painting had been thoroughly mapped; Pablo Picasso's new way of seeing had been assimilated; Surrealism was as familiar as an old show tune; Abstract Expressionism had been packaged for global export; and Existentialism had been offered in abridgment, Jean-Paul Sartre advising that we act and Jack Kerouac advising that we be. In its historical place, Bacon's aesthetic was both courageous and compromising. His paintings nestled in the between — not quite abstraction, Surrealism, Cubism or representation. At the same time, Bacon vociferously objected to the direction his contemporaries had taken. "Jackson Pollock?" asked Bacon. "Oh are you talking about the old lace maker?"

If Abstract Expressionism saw Bacon as timid, Bacon's response was sanguine.

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Francis Bacon and Michael Peppiatt in David Hockney's studio in Paris in 1975.

His life's mantra, which he might have proclaimed almost brightly, was: "Nothing. Nada. Just nada, nada." With their spooky appeal, Bacon's images summoned carcasses on hooks like the ones that prompted him, after a bloody meal of chops and trotters, to tell Peppiatt: "Life's just like that. We're all on our way to becoming dead meat. And when you go in that restaurant . . . you see the whole cycle of life and the way everyone lives off everything else. And that's all there is."

Peppiatt catalogs Bacon's presumed vices — cruelty, avarice, debauchery. But in Peppiatt's rendering, the deaths of Peter Lacy and George Dyer, Bacon's lovers, evidenced Bacon's penchant for self-destructive people, not cruelty. "Everyone I've ever been really fond of," Peppiatt quotes Bacon, "has always been a drunk or a suicide." Bacon's avarice — drink and sumptuous meals — is a last gasp of Western Empire, which, in the context of today's pressboard furniture, is tempting to recall with nostalgia. "I think I'll move into a hotel like this just so that I have a place to die in," Bacon pondered. "I love the atmosphere of these luxury hotels, though I suppose with the way the economy is going and everything else, they won't exist for much longer."

Bacon's debauchery is patiently questioned by Peppiatt's devoted telling. Bacon gambled, usually losing, and his sexual escapades, mostly in retrospect by his late 50s, tended to the rough stuff, the violent couplings of his paintings. But 60 years later, the criticism of Bacon's homosexuality is uncomfortably anachronistic, especially in counterpoint to Bacon's contemporary and onetime friend Lucian

Freud, who fathered 12-plus children out of wedlock. But Bacon himself was disposed to midcentury intolerance. His maxims about sex and art are his own, but also the bluster of cafes; Peppiatt portrays Bacon as a man of his times. As with Alberto Giacometti, who opined, "One day perhaps I shall reach my goal," Bacon had a creative attitude, forged in an era of pervasive repression, that was dogged and fatalistic: "I would like to make images that bring you closer to what being human is actually like. . . . Of course, after all these years, I don't know whether it's ever worked."

Bacon's entourage, which included Sonia Orwell, was no cheerier. The influential critic and editor Cyril Connolly casually remarked to Peppiatt, "The very idea of Sonia being happy is obscene." Orwell, among Bacon's gallery of rogues, is a highlight of Peppiatt's memoir; after their near sexual incursion is foiled by Connolly's lurking presence, Orwell asks Peppiatt how Connolly can still be lustful for her "after all these years."

With the arrival of the 21st century, Bacon's works have fetched exorbitant auction prices, drawing fire from critics, who call for reappraisal. But Peppiatt's remembrance is neither tribute nor apologia. "Francis Bacon in Your Blood" is a candid portrayal of a famous man who could be very generous, even with his foes, and very petty, even with his friends — and Bacon, to his credit, was acutely aware of his own frailties. When Peppiatt, always anxious about exciting Bacon's temper, ventured that "people only have the despair they can afford," Bacon conceded, "You've just said something very profound." □